Pervasiveness of the visual and importance of visual research

The United States of the 21st century is often characterized as an image-saturated society, a society bombarded by images, a society with an intense image flow (Becker, 2004; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As Fleckenstein (2007) argues, though our society has taken a “linguistic turn” where linguistic practices determine the direction of phenomena such as science, gender, ethnicity and technology, at the same time our culture is visually “migratory, fragmented, and diasporic.” She largely attributes this state of our visual culture to the ease of mechanical, electronic and digital reproduction citing Gombrich (1956) that “never has there been an age like ours when the visual image is so cheap in every sense of the word.” Indeed, over 50 years after Gombrich’s statement, visual images are continually becoming easier to create and distribute with cell phone cameras and online photo sharing applications like Flickr. This digital world requires a different approach to studying images as Baudrillard (1988) points out, the digital “world of cold communication and its indifferent alterity, seduction, metamorphoses, metastases, and transparency requires a new form of response.” Images do bombard us daily, through television, film, architecture, the internet and personal style. Due to the importance of identity formed through style, Brummet (2008) even frames style as both a form of communication and a template for social life. That the digital world provides our society with more images does not mean that all scholarly analysis of our society will demonstrate a dominance in the visual. For instance, Hess’ (2004) study of web memorials found that the most important difference between web memorials and traditional memorials is that web memorials offer “the ability to create vernacular interpretations of history which surpass the time and space constraints of offline memorials.” Where the vernacular had once been lost due to time and space, online it could be recovered.

Furthermore, when envisioning a plastic world dominated by visual images, most assume an environment mediated by the computer or television screen. Recently however, some scholars point out that our offline world is becoming increasingly modular as well. “A modern supermarket reveals another realm in which sight has been given priority over the other senses” and, “modern suburbs are essentially odorless, flavorless, and textureless compared to the residential environments of most human history” (Adams, 1998, p. 100). The dominance of sight within the offline world is another significant issue for the visual researcher to consider when making comparisons with the offline world.

Yet observing an incipient dominance of the visual does not automatically imply that scholars have previously ignored the visual. On the contrary, Aristotle points out that men “desire to know” and prefer seeing to accomplish this since “most of all, the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things” (980a26-27). Fleckenstein uses Giambattista Vico’s 1744 New Science to illustrate historical attention to the visual also making evident that though image making was essential to learning the image did not function alone. Instead, both word and image were fused together in the “communal human activity of shaping a material reality.” Similarly, Clark (2004) explains that the rhetorical symbols we counter and exchange are not limited to language. He uses Burke to support his argument saying that for Burke the relational counter was the simplest form of persuasion rather than the rational argument. And that there is a full range of symbols that constructs a person’s communal and cultural experiences. He cites Burke (1973), ‘Participants in a common situation encounter the rhetorical not only in ‘the words one is using’ but also in ‘the nonverbal
circumstances in which one is using them’ (p. 263) … together these words and circumstances provide those who share them with common ‘resources of identification’ (p. 267) (p. 3).

Appreciating that images are increasingly pervasive and inextricably woven into our everyday life, the study of distinct visual research methods have emerged over numerous disciplines within the humanities and social sciences including art history, film studies, comparative literature, anthropology and museology, as well as regional and cultural studies (Heywood & Sandywell, 1999; Barnard, 2001). Even rhetoric, a field wholly identified with the written and spoken word for the past 2,000 years officially expanded its object of study in 1971 at the Speech Communication Association’s Wingspread Conference. Sloan et al.’s report stated, Rhetorical criticism may be applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact which, in the critic's view, may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior.” Studying the visual became imperative to many disciplines because images express a range of human experience sometimes not articulated as unambiguously in verbal discourse “spatially oriented, nonlinear, multidimensional, and dynamic” human experiences (Foss, 2004). In fact, the power of the image to plainly communicate occurs not “in spite of language’s absence but also frequently because of language’s absence” due to images’ abilities to connect with different cognitive understandings and emotions (Ott & Dickinson, 2009).

On the other hand, while reports on the status of image-based research acknowledge an explosion of visual interest in many disciplines, scholars still hold that it remains marginal to the field of media and traditional communication studies (Prosser, 1998; Becker, 2004). According to Finnegan (2006), the field of communication still “ignores vision; at worst, it excoriates it” (p. 60) and communication theory suffers from iconophobia even though many of its theories actually depend upon it. Speculated reasons for this marginalization include communication researchers’ perceived threat to traditional literacy and learning, and Western society’s ambivalence to the intensified image environment. Interestingly, the root of this ambivalence is often attributed to the increase of images within the digital era. The upsurge in images has also made Western society less likely to trust the authority of those images (i.e. the digital photograph and its representational authority) while maintaining a fear of their influence (i.e. images as they relate to an increase in violence on television, in the news and in advertising). Then again, because society presumes a images have such power and influence, this provides a rationale for more image-based research and a thorough analysis of the various types of visual research already taking place.

Problem: Why visual communication research methods should be an option

According to Dr. Keith Kenney of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of South Carolina, more disciplines are requiring students take courses in visual communication and more professors are being hired to teach those courses. However, these visual communication professors have nowhere to go (in the United States) in order to become prepared to teach and conduct research in visual communication. They enroll in programs in journalism and mass communication, linguistics, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, etc. Then, they either adapt what they learn from these other fields to the field of visual communication or they teach themselves about the methods, theories, and literature of visual communication. Students at universities, both undergraduate and graduate, also suffer from not receiving enough critical feedback and scrutiny about their visual work in courses. As Piper and Frankham (2007) argue, “young people’s images should be subject to the same processes of deconstruction as other texts” and also suggest that the “crisis of representation familiar in most interpretive genres is sometimes absent from what tends to be an uncritical celebration of representation.” Having faculty well versed in visual research methods
and analysis would help teach students look at visual communication critically, including their own visual work.

Not only is the present situation where scholars investigate visual images from varied disciplines with separate and distinctive methods difficult for beginning researchers and students, but it is counterproductive and some argue will eventually be unsustainable. Stafford (1997), claims, it seems infeasible, either intellectually or financially, to sustain multiple, linear specializations in art, craft, graphic, industrial, film, video, or media production and their separate histories. Instead, we need to forge an imaging field focused on transdisciplinary problems to which we bring a distinctive, irreducible, and highly visual expertise (p., 10).

The lack of interdisciplinary studies of the visual hurts this body of research because theories cannot evolve to their full potential. Their analyses remain surface level and their theories transparent. Like Stafford, Elkins (2003) argues that in visual studies it would be advantageous to, “see visual studies that is denser with theories and strategies, more reflective about its own history, warier of existing visual theories, more attentive to neighboring and distant disciplines, more vigilant about its own sense of visuality, less predictable in its politics, and less routine in its choice of subjects. Why not work to condense the many disparate kinds of visual competence in the arts and sciences into a single place? Why not expand localized studies of the visual so that they can begin to intersect and merge? (p.65)

Currently, there is no course or text that compares and contrasts the wide breadth of visual research methods, discusses the most appropriate method(s), given various kinds of research questions/goals, and explains how a study may benefit from particular or multiple methodological and theoretical approaches based on those questions/goals. Most students and researchers, no matter the discipline, are introduced to one specific type of visual research method or school of thought (i.e., visual rhetoric, visual studies, visual communication/empirical) at the expense of others. If students or researchers do eventually encounter other methods, there is rarely the opportunity to learn how these visual schools of thought intersect or can speak to one another.

A recent text that seeks to address the need for a practical comprehensive guide concerning visual research methods is Visual Communication Research Designs. Keith Kenney wrote Research Designs to provide functional guidance when conducting visual communication research. However, this book does not include visual research methods traditionally found outside schools of journalism and mass media/communication. Kenney covers methods such as content analysis, interviews, diaries, case studies, focus groups, etc. but the book is limited in that it never considers methods such as visual cultural studies or visual rhetoric. These latter approaches are very important to many disciplines including Design, Communication, English and Business to name a few. Furthermore, the empirical visual methods used in journalism and mass media/communication studies may benefit from the insights these alternative schools of visual study provide.

Smith, et al.’s (2005) Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media represents the first endeavor to create a comprehensive collection of visual research methods in one text, including visual rhetoric approaches and methods of visual cultural studies. Each theory behind a visual research method is discussed separately and then followed by exemplar studies. The editors explain that the purpose of the book is “to display the wealth of methodologies available to visual communication scholars.” The handbook admirably accomplishes this goal, but for scholars interested in learning how to select and then use a visual research method, the handbook provides little direction.
Other resources for studying visual research methods do exist but usually focus on one perspective such as Van Leeuwen and Jewitt’s (2001) *The Handbook of Visual Analysis* that offers a guide to those working in a range of disciplines including: media and communication studies, sociology, anthropology, education, psychoanalysis, and health studies but the theoretical perspectives remains wholly within the social sciences. In short, scholars from many disciplines would benefit from a comprehensive examination of the three major schools of visual research methods followed by explicit practical guidance on implementing some of the most commonly employed of those methods.

**Visual research in communication programs and other disciplines**

In the communication discipline, assessing visual elements generally focuses on two areas: visual communication studies and visual rhetoric. Visual communication research most often refers to photography, television, film, advertising drawing, illustration, etc. The purpose of these studies is to help provide understanding of the creation, presentation, preservation and support of media works. Visual rhetoric, can involve elements of semiotics, visual semantics and visual logic, and explores the connection between reflection and interpretation, historically situated ideas and practices of design. Visual rhetoric considers images as rational expressions of cultural meaning and examines the relationship between images and text. It also assumes human beings are not passive recipients of product messages but are active participants in shaping meaning. Instead of the sole art of interpretation, visual rhetoric also involves the art of persuasion and invention – somehow moving an audience to action, teaching, or exhibiting certain values.

Visual research methods and theories studied outside of Communication departments are often referred to as “visual studies” or “visual culture” and examine society’s access to images and their entanglements in systems of meaning and power. Visual studies scholars ask questions such as: How do images work to support political regimes, religious systems, or institutions? How do they assist in the consumption of goods? To what extent do they condition our understanding of people, races and ethnicities, gender and sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities? (www.cca.edu).

Design educators and researchers use all three schools of visual research methods. Design scholars often identify theoretically with visual studies because its examination of meaning and power are relevant to Design. Some of the most important writers for visual studies scholars include: Benjamin, Baudrillard, Barthes, etc. Another reason for the connection between Design and Visual Studies is that more recently researchers from both investigate ways to intersect with cognitive studies, neuroscience and emotion—all budding areas of study. “Design studies” programs will consider the history of Design, Design Thinking, History of Aesthetics and Material Culture.

Just as this rationale has observed and articulated, a recent review of visual research literature found three approaches to the visual were most prevalent:

- Studies that take a primarily rhetorical approach consider images and designs key occasions of persuasion...studies that take primarily a semantic approach consider the visual as text in much the way that linguists look at language...studies that take primarily a pragmatic approach consider the visual a practice (Barnhurst, Vari & Rodriguez, 2004, pp. 629-630).

This rationale also identifies and suggests using the three visual schools identified above. The studies that take a primarily “rhetorical approach” are the visual rhetoric methods, the studies that take a primarily “semantic approach” are typical of visual studies methods and studies that take a pragmatic approach are representative of the empirical visual communication study
Methods at NCSU
According to communication faculty at NCSU, the National Communication Association does not recommend specific methods courses for communication departments. Instead, the faculty of particular programs determines the research method curricula. However, the public relations field strongly advises undergraduates take at least one methods course. The Commission on Public Relations Education Report (2006) report (available on the PRSA website: http://www.commpred.org/2006members.html), the results of a long series of meetings between academics and public relations professionals, contains a list of suggested curricula for undergraduate and masters programs. Currently, the communication department minimally requires that undergraduates take COM 240 (Communication Inquiry) that gives students a sense of the discipline, the kinds of questions asked and the various ways data is collected and analyzed (qualitative and quantitative). The department has offered COM 486 Communication Quantitative Research Methods for the last decade but has not offered a qualitative counterpart. The COM 486 course is required for majors in the undergraduate Public Relations/ Organizational Communication concentration. An informal survey of communication faculty at NCSU revealed that faculty think the ideal undergraduate program would minimally expect students to have a course like COM 240 as well as a minimum of one course in quantitative methods/statistics, qualitative methods / techniques or rhetorical criticism.

Brief Description of Course Idea
Like all communication programs across the United States, a visual research methods course, that compares and contrasts a variety of methods, has not been offered at North Carolina State University. Most visual research methods courses focus on one kind of method (i.e. visual rhetoric, semiotics, aesthetics, cultural studies, etc.) depending on the discipline. This course, an upperlevel undergraduate course (also could be designed as a graduate level course), would allow students to survey a number of visual methods, compare and contrast, and determine that which they find the most appropriate for their analysis. Because communication students also need to receive instruction about how to create strong visual arguments themselves, they will be evaluate on their own visual arguments throughout the course as well as their visual argument assignment.

STUDENTS WILL
• Develop an understanding of the various concepts and methods used to visually analyze and interpret (an) artifact(s)
• Demonstrate ability to engage in visual analysis of artifacts
• Demonstrate an understanding of various strategies employed in primarily visual forms of communication including photography, visual art, advertising, public commemorative sites and online environments
• Be able to construct a visual argument
Visual argument:
(rationale for why students will be asked to create a visual argument)

Critics of visual argument say that visual images do not function as argument because they are 1) “vague and ambiguous” and 2) arguments must have propositional content, and visual communication does not. These critiques assume that visual images are less precise than verbal language. Visual images can be vague and ambiguous but so can words and sentences (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996). Scholars in argumentation studies argue that “ambiguity” does not distinguish visual images from verbal messages and have continued to explore the question of how visual images function as arguments. Also, not every case of ambiguity or vagueness is considered a flaw in a verbal argument or in communication in general. “Vagueness, far from always being fallacious, is necessary for efficient communication” (Blair, 2004, p. 46). Secondly, not all arguments must be propositional. Visual images can offer reasons for people to change attitudes and this does not have to be propositional. Furthermore, political cartoons are a great example of visual imagery actually making a propositional argument (Blair, 2004).

Some scholars propose a theory of visual argument while others instead focus on specific cases and identify distinct types of visual arguments and their communicative functions. Shelley (1996) identifies two functions of visual argument in images depicting human evolution, “demonstrative” and “rhetorical.” Again, critics of visual argument say that if a person opposing a position articulated in a picture he or she can simply deny that the picture ever articulated that, or any other position. According to Birdsell & Groarke, these critiques make little sense in the context of the prevention advertisements because the visual elements provide a stance that could even be “doubted, contested and improved upon”.

Assuming that people can make visual arguments the question becomes why would anyone choose to do so over verbal arguments? Some of the advantages of visual arguments lie in their evocative power. An enormously high number of images can be conveyed in a short time (p. 51) and there is a deeper sense of realism that it conveys. Kenney & Scott (2003) point out, “It is equally valid (and more common) in other cultures to use pictures to evoke or depict other realism, such as the spiritual and the fictive (p. 20). Blair (2004) also provides three other reasons why someone would prefer to argue visually. First, using the European medieval cathedrals as testament, visual images give the argument permanence. Second, a person can communicate visually with much more force and immediacy than verbal communication allows. Third, the arguer does not have to rely on the audience or its powers and evoke an involuntary response. For example, for most adults, images of puppies and children evoke caring emotional responses. These involuntary responses are not necessarily from exposure to an argument but the point is the visual image has caused an involuntary reaction.

Visual argument studies also include the concept of a “visual culture”. In this literature “visual culture” may be defined as a populations’ collective way of seeing or a set of cultural conventions of vision that shift and change over time (Finnegan, 1996). Cultural conventions of vision in this sense include what it means to see, or to represent seeing, as well as changes in the meaning of particular elements of visual vocabulary (p.3) The way in which visual communication is created and used provides insight into the “values” and “habits of interpretation” of a culture. The quality or artistic level of visual communication is not what is important but what is commonly accepted practice helps provide a clear depiction of a particular culture. Without an awareness of the visual culture, a weak visual argument is inevitable.
References


