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Introduction. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Visual Literacy

Visual literacy is notoriously hard to define. As Peter Dallow noted in 2008, »[t]here is no *single* fixed definition of what is meant by visual literacy, or even a prescribed set of objectives for it, or what the essential visual skills are« (DALLOW 2008: 96, original emphasis). The only aspect that a majority of authors seems to agree on is that some kind of visual literacy is a desideratum. There is a general sense that »[h]uman experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before« (MIRZOEFF 1999: 1) and that students should be prepared for a world that is characterized by the ever increasing importance of images in all wakes of life.

But is the term *visual literacy* even a useful metaphor for the skills and competences required to navigate the sphere of the visual? Or does it suggest a misleading analogy with linguistic skills? Obviously, the term *visual literacy* inherits each and every of the enormous problems posed by the traditional dichotomy of the verbal and the pictorial. And our definition of *visual literacy* (as well as our assessment of its descriptive suitability) will depend on our understanding of the domain of writing, on one hand, and the domain of images, on the other:

(1) As James Elkins remarks in his *Visual Studies. A Skeptical Introduction*, »[v]isual studies has a lot invested in the notion that the visual world and the verbal world really are different« (ELKINS 2003: 128). In this context, *visual literacy* appears less like an interesting metaphor and more like a convenient conceptual shortcut: »I hope that *visual literacy*, paradoxical and old-fashioned as it is, can be a useful expression for a very pressing problem« (ELKINS 2008: 3). The problem in question is a reform of the academic curriculum that would, among other things, introduce interdisciplinary visual studies courses for first year students (cf. ELKINS 2003: 127). In a way, this approach

has dismissed the ›literacy‹-metaphor from the beginning, but what remains to be determined is what kinds of representations ›visual‹ literacy should refer to. Elkins stresses, e.g., the need for »non-western visual competences« and the ability to understand images from different sciences (ELKINS 2003: 147; cf. 159ff.). The question remains whether these phenomena can really be encompassed in a generalized notion of *visual literacy*: do all kinds of images require the same kind of literacy? Or will different visual literacies ›add up‹ to a transferable skill set?

> Here, then, is the paradox of visual literacy: it is crucial to begin thinking of the common pool of images that a university wide program of visual studies might want to share, and at the same time it is entirely misguided to construe such a collection as an emblem of some general visual literacy. (ELKINS 2003: 195)

(2) From the perspective of social semiotics, *visual literacy* appears, by contrast, as a viable metaphor, e.g., in the title of Gunter Kress' and Theo van Leeuwen's well known work *Reading Images*. Kress and van Leeuwen do not, of course, advocate a wholesale assimilation of visual communication to the domain of linguistic communication: »[We] do not import the theories and methodologies of linguistics into the domain of the visual« (KRESS/VAN LEEUWEN 2004: 17). But while they do see language and image as fundamentally independent media, they also suggest that these media tap into the same cultural resources:

> [W]hat is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and semantic structures, is, in visual communication, expressed through the choice between, for instance, different uses of colour, or different compositional structures. (KRESS/VAN LEEUWEN 2004: 2)

In this way, »[v]isual communication is always coded« (KRESS/VAN LEEUWEN 2004: 32), and so there is *some* analogy between the analysis of images and the analysis of language. A term like *visual literacy* seems well suited to reflect the rule-based skills implied by a semiotic approach of this kind.

With the authors cited above, Kress and van Leeuwen share a preoccupation with the didactic implications of the analysis of visual communication. In 1996, they had already expressed a similar sense of urgency (albeit a very different vision of the ›literacy‹ in question):

> We believe that visual communication is coming to be less and less the domain of specialists, and more and more crucial in the domain of public communication. Inevitably, this will lead to new, and more rules, and to more and to more formal, normative teaching. Not being ›visually literate‹ will begin to attract social sanctions. (KRESS/VAN LEEUWEN 2004: 2f.)

(3) For others, the dichotomy between the verbal and the pictorial itself has become more and more problematic: different types of representations ›between‹ writing and image, such as diagrams, have become the focus of recent work in semiotics (cf. STJERNFELT 2007), and the ›mixed‹ nature of all visual representations (cf. MITCHELL 2008) as well as the visual and iconic aspects of writing systems (cf. KRÄMER 2005) have been recognized. If »[m]edia are always mixtures of sensory and semiotic elements« (MITCHELL 2008: 15),

how can we define a notion of *visual literacy* adequate for the corresponding—broad and heterogeneous—field of studies? Where are the limits of specific practices of understanding? To what extent do different media require different practices of understanding and different cognitive strategies? How and at what level should these be reflected in the curricula of schools and universities? Such an approach will change not only what we expect from a notion of visual literacy with regard to the understanding of images, but also what we expect with regard to the understanding of writing systems. Thus, W.J.T Mitchell asks (referring to writing systems other than Braille): »To what extent, in other words, does verbal literacy involve, and perhaps depend on, some sort of visual competence or even visual literacy« (MITCHELL 2008: 14)?

The aim of the present volume is a modest one: We have collected some of the papers presented at our panel on »The Semiotics of Visual Literacy« at the 14th International Conference of the German Association for Semiotic Studies (September 23–27, 2014, University of Tübingen). They all contribute to a discussion of the questions raised above, without pretending to offer a general solution for the problem of *visual literacy*. But they can certainly give an impression of the diversity of phenomena and of theoretical perspectives that a definition of *visual literacy* would have to take into account

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