

Visual culture and the style of college textbooks: a critical study

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It would be a truism to say that postmodern Western culture is largely a visual culture, where people live in an image-saturated media world with visual communication rivaling written and oral communication in some domains (Kellner 1995). Visual culture is not new: the visual, more holistic, display of information of earlier epochs was displaced by the advent of print culture with its linearity and fragmentation (Tufte 1997), and it could as well be said to have started displacing it for a change. Thanks to media technologies that enable cheap and easy production, distribution and access to visuals, the ways of viewing and watching have been changing. So have the ways of reading. Admittedly, it is harder and harder to imagine a leaflet, a morning paper, a school textbook, a business report, a university lecture, or a press conference without some kind of visual element involved in the presentation. This article concerns itself with the bearing of contemporary visual culture on one genre of academic discourse, namely university textbooks. Since the diversity of visual designs currently available in college textbooks has proved in a pilot analysis (Molek-Kozakowska 2013) to be too wide to attempt an identification or quantification of any specific tendencies or directions in design, this study focuses on an assessment of the implications of visual enhancements and textual arrangements that have proliferated in educational publications as a result of the popularity of visual culture. As a result, this paper has been designed primarily as a qualitative and critical discussion illustrated with systematically analyzed

properties of designs found in a selection of textbooks, rather than a descriptive report on “typical” properties of textbooks derived from a large-scale dataset.

1. Visual culture and visual literacy: contextualizing the study of a print medium

The advent of visual culture into some domains of academia and tertiary education has provoked ambivalent reactions, mainly because the (dis)advantages of visualization have not been fully explored (Hart 1997: 6–8). On the one hand, since the sight is humans’ most developed sense, we tend to learn and remember much from visual input, emotionally react to what we see, and make sense of the reality mainly on the basis of what we can see. And yet, the human biological capacities for vision have been evolving and responding to the requirements of specific cultural contexts. We are often reminded (cf. Lacey 1998: 98–112) that, unlike for animals, for humans seeing is always interpreting. What we perceive is processed and made sense of by resorting to a large pool of cultural meanings and codes we have been socialized into. In a way, we cannot escape from the cultural relativism of our visual experiences. Moreover, forms and practices of visual culture are not equitable – they are often tied to power relations in society, which is, for example, evident to anyone critically reflecting on how the female body is generally presented in popular Western culture to cater to “the male gaze” (Barker 2000). Hopefully, the technologies and formations of visual culture also evolve to make power relations more democratic (Kress 2003).

In the humanities, particularly Cultural Studies and Literacy Studies, the visual mode has often been put in opposition to the verbal mode. The current oculo-centric preferences are said to contrast with the traditional logocentrism of the Western culture, at least as it was being conceived of by the mid-20th century (McLuhan 1962). The abstractions of language, the rationality of thinking, the properties of argumentation and the literacy of populations in the West are linked to its civilizational, scientific and technological advancement. As a result, the dominance of the image over the word that followed the advent of the mass media in the late 20th century has been thought of as a decline of “higher” cultural standards by its critics (e.g., Postman 1985). This debate is slightly reminiscent of the polemic that ensued Walter Ong’s (1982) publication on the cultural differences amongst societies that ensue from orality or literacy

being the dominant modes of cultural expression. Since oral tradition is characteristic of pre-industrial societies, literacy has been subsequently identified as culturally superior to orality. In fact, no literate culture could have evolved without a substantial oral tradition that preceded it. The two modes do indeed foster different patterns of thinking, communicating and interacting (Ong 1982: 29–43), but the differences do not have to translate into hierarchies. In this vein, the loss of some cultural practices characteristic of orality by the so-called highly advanced literate cultures may well be interpreted as detrimental to social cohesion. Undoubtedly, the modes of visual culture applied in many domains of culture, also in academic discourse, may offer new possibilities of expression, help develop new skills, and enhance new ways of learning. However, this does not mean we should not be cautious about the effectiveness of visualization (cf. Trumbo 1999), or alerted to what can be lost in the process of unabashed embracing of visual communication in all spheres.

A problematic aspect of the preponderance of visual culture, particularly relevant in this article, is connected with the primacy of the visual in producing knowledge (Berger 1998). The human brain takes the visual input seriously, as it has evolved to do in order to, for example, subconsciously scan the environment at all times, react to visual stimuli, or recognize signs of danger (Potter 2012: 67–69). Also, visual mediated culture extends our senses: it enables us to see more than we would ever be able to (McLuhan 1964). In an epistemological sense, humans are prone to taking what they think they see as true. It requires effort to critically reflect on alternative possibilities – of images being constructed or manipulated. That is why it is important to study how the technologies of visual culture bear on our sense of reality and truth; how the visual designs of contemporary texts are used to produce, organize or hierarchize our knowledge.

Given this, what is striking about communication in the context of visual culture is a relative shortage of visual literacy instruction: visual communication is either thought of as something anyone is good at or considered a dominion of artists only (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 17–18). On the contrary, since visual communication resources (e.g., images, shapes, patterns, textures, symbols, colors) can be used to represent all kinds of knowledge, one should be able to acquire the skills of visual interpretation and expression. Visual communication is as purposeful, sophisticated and strategic as verbal language. Hence, visual literacy is “an active and analytical process of perceiving,

interpreting, and producing visual messages, an interaction between seeing, imagining, and drawing” (Brumberger 2007: 381). Anything from simple gestures to works of art requires visualization, imagination and visual literacy. A shortage of visual literacy skills, an absence of visual pedagogies, and a relative lack of instruction in visual rhetoric have been a concern of specialists in varying fields: from business communication (Brumberger 2007), to scientific communication (Trumbo 1999), to language arts (Dyduch 2010). Scholars point to the fact that, even though immersed in visual culture, many students lack awareness of such categories as iconography, composition, framing and perspective, colour semiotics, proportionality or even typography (cf. Van Leeuwen 2005). And even if they are fairly competent dealing with the realist convention (Lacey 1997), they are often unable to fully take advantage of information encoded according to other conventions of visual representation, much less to design documents or presentations that would be appealing and effective without resorting to pre-existing templates.

2. Multimodal analysis: a categorial and functional framework for the study of textbook designs

Since meaning can be effectively rendered in a variety of modes and modal combinations, the most systematic approach for the analysis of textbooks from the perspective of visual culture seems to be the framework of multimodal analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001, Kress 2003, Machin 2008, Machin and Mayr 2012). Multimodal analysis does not treat the visual content of a discourse as discreet or subsidiary to verbal content. On the contrary, it considers visual display as inherent and integrated element of any type of communication (cf. spoken language together with gestures/facial expressions; print materials with their supra-textual variables such as page layout, font colour, image size and framing). It draws its conceptual framework from semiotic analysis (Barthes 1977) on the one hand, and systemic-functional linguistics on the other (Halliday 1978). For multimodal discourse analysts, each mode has distinct affordances, i.e., meaning potentials delimited by the material and semiotic properties of the medium in which the mode is constituted. In addition, they take into consideration the long-lasting socio-cultural conventions (systemic functional preferences or constraints) in the use of a particular mode. For example, the range of possible gestural expression in

face-to-face encounters is fairly broad, but the cultural conventions of a given speech community may significantly restrict it. One more advantage of this perspective is that multimodal analysis allows for a critical exploration (cf. Machin and Mayr 2012). Criticism, however, is not tantamount to condemnation or rejection, but is rooted in a systematic interrogation of pervasively applied semiotic resources that may reproduce or perpetuate unequal power relations under the guise of “convention” or “common sense.”

In the multimodal analysis the notion of design has become a more frequently used descriptive category than the notion of style, which is typically related to the clusters of preferred linguistic resources realized in the verbal mode. In this article, the term *design* refers to the higher order of textual organization than *style*, and in multimodal communication is used to denote both visual and verbal choices that have been made to construct textual representations. In other words, since both modes are materially, semiotically and culturally delimited resources for representing and communicating meaning, a text’s design is the representation that is fashioned from available media resources, according to their affordances, and with the aim to most effectively achieve the communicative purpose. The notion of design highlights “a deliberateness about choosing the modes for representation, and the framing for that representation” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 45) in order to provide for “the organization of what is to be articulated into a blueprint for production” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 50). While *design* is about the choice of the modes of representation, *style* is how the resources of the particular mode are consistently appropriated in a given text. For example, photos may be published in color or in black-and-white; typeface may be chosen to connote authority or playfulness; glosses and annotations may be placed alongside the text for clarity. Various visual and verbal devices may thus be selected and arranged to fit together in what we recognize as a style of a particular publication (cf. Molek-Kozakowska 2013).

A key element of design is *composition*, since it enables an analyst to hypothesize how the text is bound to be read “properly,” or, in other words, what is its most likely taken *reading path* (Kress 2003, Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). Reading designs, unlike linear verbal texts, requires navigating and constructing coherent meaning by imposing salience and order on some holistic, synthetic, amalgamated and dynamic visual representations. For Kress, texts involving visual elements are bound to be more “open” to interpretation and

more likely to foster “creative” reception (2003: 55), which, nevertheless, must be matched with sufficient visual literacy skills. If this is not the case, reading of some multimodal designs means accepting the imaginations of designers in following the conventionalized reading paths (e.g., from top to bottom, from centre to periphery, from large to small, from left to right). It seems fair to posit then that some visual designs, as well as some texts, are not too open to individualized interpretations.

At this point we need to not only recognize the affordances of the two modalities, but also to understand how they relate to each other, how they complement each other, and what happens when one dominates the other. The pioneer of semiotic analysis Roland Barthes (1977) discerns three main relations between image and text: that of *illustration* (image supplants text), *anchorage* (text interprets image) and *relay* (text and image mutually reinforce each other), but his conclusions were derived from analyses of print materials mostly. The multimedia messages that we are offered at almost any webpage or interface now give the possibility of various constellations of meanings being generated by images accompanying texts. For example, Bednarek and Caple (2012: 110–112) note that in online and print news reporting images may play the role of mere *illustration* and, as such are attached to the more important verbal descriptions. But they also function as *evidence* to prove the claims posited in the text, or as *sensation* to attract attention to texts. Images also have the ability to function as *icons*, symbolic representations of important aspects of social reality. In addition, they have lately been demonstrated as “functioning *evaluatively* (carrying emotional appeal) and *aesthetically* (showing concern for composition)” (Bednarek and Caple 2012: 112). We will refer to this typology to organize the subsequent discussion of the functional applications of visual images in our surveyed college textbooks, as we believe that the popularity of multimedia and hypertext is reflected back on the design of current print textbooks (e.g., with designs featuring window-like boxes, screenshots and cross-references).

In the academic textbook context, it is valid to narrow the discussion about the implications of specific designs to three aspects, namely, the role of the visual/verbal mode in presenting and objectivizing a “scientifically viable” description of reality, the function of the two modes in the construction of the line of argumentation (exposition), and the extent to which the two modes can be applied as pedagogical tools that foster autonomous learning. The

importance of visual designs for constructing a credible and authoritative version of reality has been so far extensively examined in the case of news discourse (Machin 2008, Bednarek and Caple 2012), and educational discourse (Buckingham 2003, Kress 2003). Some of this scholarship has been inspired by the debates about the lowering of standards of exposition, or manipulating recipients, in these two domains on the one hand. On the other hand, the productive use of visuals for the activation of “the whole brain,” particularly in schooling, has long been advocated by educational theorists (Gardner 1993). The question of pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of both modes, as well as of gains and losses offered by the dominance of any of the two modes is likely to be continued (cf. Trumbo 1999: 410).

In the critical vein, the problem of how knowledge is produced does not depend on the modes themselves, but rather on the conventions of representation that transcend mode distinctions. The problem how to engage students cannot be reduced to offering captivating images or richly illustrated expositions, but should be tackled by fostering reflective and critical thinking. Another problem is how to ensure that students are literate enough to read increasingly complex multimodal designs critically and to recognize the interests behind designers’ preferences for given resources and conventions. In the context of this study, for example, one could wonder how the designs of the academic textbooks may conceal the interests of commercial publishers that advertise their visually-enhanced textbooks as innovative, up-to-date and reader-friendly to students who tend to be immersed in visual culture. One could have an intuition that the interests of students, who could profit from a more complex and nuanced and less flashy presentation, as well as the interests of educators, could be sidelined here.

3. A critical analysis of designs in selected college textbooks and some implications

This paper is based on a survey of popular introductory Cultural and Media Studies textbooks for university students published (and even republished) between 2003 and 2012¹. The books are listed in the Primary Sources section of

¹ The selection was motivated by (1) the fact that the publishers specialize in Communication and Social Sciences, and have a wide offer of textbooks which they market vigorously (although circulation figures could not be found, two of the books have been reprinted already), (2) the fact that the books were commissioned to

the bibliography and will be referred to (by their numbers) in order to illustrate general tendencies that recent college textbooks instantiate. The textbooks are advertised as providing broad, current information and easy-to-digest practical instruction for students. The newest ones are accompanied by open-access online materials for students or teachers. What is underlined in their promotional materials is that they enable students to achieve a “deeper understanding of the issues” (3), provide “cutting edge thinking” (2) and offer a “critical perspective” (1).

The textbooks analyzed here are diversely designed visually and their linguistic styles vary considerably. For example, Anderson (2012) is a comprehensive and detailed overview of Media Studies methodology with careful examination of advantages, procedures, implications and limitations of various research methods. By contrast, Stokes (2003, republished 2013) resembles an instruction manual in its format and style, which guides the students step by step through subsequent stages of doing research in Cultural and Media Studies. Both Longhurst et al (2008, revised edition of a 1999 book) and Walton (2008) are introductory textbooks that offer a panoramic overview of research orientations and classical studies in Cultural Studies, but they do it in radically different ways: while the former is a thematically organized book with an expository line of development in paragraphs, the latter is based on presenting information in fictional dialogues and polemics (or notes and letters) between historical figures, contemporary scholars, literary protagonists and typical students. Potter (2012) is an elaborate template that presents various types of media effects categorized into two broad spheres: individual effects and social effects, and further classified into subtypes and cross-referenced to various combinations of effects.

This survey does not aim to offer an in-depth analysis of the specific designs and styles of the above textbooks (for such an approach see, e.g., Molek-Kozakowska 2013), but to generalize certain observations that transcend their individual styles and pertain to the larger trend of college textbooks’ designers aligning themselves with the requirements and preferences engendered by visual culture. The following are analytic insights regarding various levels of textbook multimodal design, together with a critical discussion of the im-

various authors, intended for various audiences and diversely designed, so that they do not represent a single (house) style, (3) my experience of teaching various courses in Cultural and Media Studies for almost a decade with these and many other textbooks, and of finding some of them less useful than expected.

plications of particular compositional and semiotic choices. The presentation begins with the most conspicuous features of design (typography, figures), proceeds to the analysis of supra-textual aspects of textbook design (sections, headings, page-flow), focuses on the schematic (horizontal/vertical) structure of a textbook chapter, and concludes with a functional analysis of the role of visuals (including not only pictures but also such designs as lists, diagrams or tables) with reference to their illustrative, evidential or aesthetic functions in textbooks.

One of the striking things about contemporary textbooks is that they are distinguished for typographic variations. The use of bold or italicized print within the paragraphs (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), a range of fonts (5) in larger or smaller sizes (4), as well as coloured print/shading (1, 3) is meant to attract attention to specific information and thus to provide guidance in readers' task of imposing an order on presented information, hence signposting a convenient reading path. The printed text as a visual unit is also designed to look good (consistency of typographic choices, balance of the composition, light between sections, wide margins) not only to inform well. The connotative potentials of typography have been best researched (Van Leeuwen 2005, Machin 2008) on the basis of advertising copy and newspaper front pages, but it may well be generalized that slimmer and slightly slanted letters will connote modernity while blockier and wider fonts imply tradition and authority. In our sample, typographic choices and font variability tended also to be used to signify various levels of generalization (cf. titling of sections and subsections in 1, 2, 3, 5) or presentation techniques (cf. exposition vs. exemplification in 4), as well as to enhance page composition aesthetically. In 5, for example, stylized typefaces were used to imitate either handwriting or official documents. Obviously, typeface variation is not an original device (and is used extensively in literary/artistic genres), but the extent it has started to be applied in college textbooks requires (critical) scrutiny. Apparently, the value of the book is increasingly dependent on the complexity of its design: in a sophisticated visual culture, plain books do not sell well any more.

Another conspicuous property of textbook design is the sheer number of figures, tables and visuals inserted in the presentation. Various kinds of tables with numerical data (1, 2, 3), boxes with definitions of terms and biographical details of scholars (3, 5), graphs and flow-charts representing relations and processes (1, 2, 3, 5), lists of important points and examples (1, 2, 3, 4, 5),

binary oppositions displayed symmetrically (2), as well as visuals (photos, screenshots, drawings, cartoons) (1, 2, 3, 5), break the continuous flow of print leaving hardly any pages with no visually enhanced material. Much of what is displayed visually could be (and often has been) presented verbally, so some of the information is repeated or reinforced through visuals and figures. This seems to be quite common in academic writing (Lemke 1998), and might be advantageous to students with highly developed spatial intelligence (Gardner 1993). Some visuals are indeed justifiably included for the purposes of efficacy of illustration or evidentiality (discussed below). A clearly laid-out diagram is likely to appeal to many readers more than a descriptive paragraph. However, it is also possible to conclude that a number of visual images in the surveyed textbooks are superfluous: they are placed to make the page composition of the publication multilayered and visually sophisticated (e.g., two-column tables and lists in 4). Some images may be said to work iconically to encapsulate information in relation to a familiar, stereotypical or representative visual form (e.g., uncaptioned photos in 3). Some may be used as sensation – not in the sense of provoking strong emotions or reactions – but in the sense of stimulating the right hemisphere and enriching visually the experience of reading of the textbook (e.g., listings in 2, cartoons in 5).

In a similar vein, chapter and section titles, captions and headings function primarily to anchor attention and organize knowledge. With headings, the presentation is divided into separable units of information. Importantly, there are hardly any sections that last for more than two pages (1, 2, 3). This means that there is an assumption of students having little appreciation (or critical reflection on the validity) of longer lines of argumentation. On the one hand, the frequent divisions are instrumental in delimiting identifiable themes and facilitate scanning and searching for specific desired information within the fairly panoramic contents of many an introductory textbook (1, 2, 3, 5). On the other hand, headings also hierarchize themes (cf. templates of media effects in 3). Heading structure is used to bring vertical, not so much horizontal, order in the material (most evidently in the extensive tables of contents: 13 pages in 1 and 4, 8 pages in 2). Meanwhile, question-answer formats (2, 5), which are to facilitate smooth progression, also minimize reflection (if a good answer is given, why search for an alternative explanation?). Captions are necessary to limit the variety of interpretations of visuals (cf. anchorage) (2, 5), while uncaptioned photos add symbolic, generalized quality to information (3).

In many academic textbooks, the chapter seems to still be the main unit of visual display (basing on each chapter's constituting a numbered item in the contents, its separation from other chapters by blank pages, and the similar schema/length of each chapter in a given book), but this survey indicates that a growing trend is to treat the section as the main building block of the presentation (1,2,3,4). In other words, a chapter should now be treated as "an aggregate" of thematically related sections. This can be traced back to the visually determined page-flow typical of many school textbooks and worksheets, where two neighboring pages are to constitute a delimited unit of composition (ideally to fill in a lesson period). Meanwhile, in the "traditional" print paradigm, a sentence used to inhere a proposition, a paragraph developed an argument, a section cohered thematically, while a whole chapter was a comprehensive and exhaustive exposition drawing on data and examples to build an argumentation to substantiate a given thesis. The chapter's function was to take the reader from initial premises and assumptions, through individual arguments and illustrations to a conclusion or generalization to be made with regard to a given claim. Hardly any aggregated sections, even if enhanced with diagrams, photo-stories, lists or tabulations, can do that.

In addition, the majority of surveyed textbooks have a stable and schematic chapter structure (1, 2, 3, 4). Almost all of them include separate previews or outlines, review points, practice tasks or questions to consider (as well as suggested answers), or further reading lists, which adds to the complexity of their visual display. As a result, each chapter involves a fair degree of repetitiveness, which is a pedagogical tool that seems to have displaced the "old-fashioned" college requirement of note-taking. Likewise, visually prominent glossaries of key terms (1, 2, 5), biographies of influential scholars (2), case studies presenting results of classical research projects (4) or summarizing tables (3) diminish students' motivation to consult alternative sources, lexicons and resources or to go back to the original works.

With respect to the capacity of some visual designs and stylistic properties of academic textbooks to actually discourage critical and alternative readings, it is important to mention the role of page layout and listing. It can be hypothesized that page composition influences the level of acceptance of meanings of the text. Positioning within a page caters to conventional cultural expectations, such as with the case of grammatical thematicity (Halliday 1978). For example, information on the left hand-side is likely to be treated as "accepted, given"

while information presented on the right is likely to be interpreted as “new” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, Machin 2008). Similarly, the items at the top of the list will be considered more important than the items placed towards the bottom. In college textbooks much information is presented in graphs, bullet points or tables; however, this differs from information inscribed in sentences and paragraphs. For example, presenting information in points, lists or bullets is likely to impress as higher in importance, more official, and worthy of attention: “bullet points are [...] ‘fired’ at us, abrupt and challenging, not meant to be continuous and coherent, not inviting reflection and consideration, not insinuating themselves into our thinking. They are hard and direct, and not to be argued with” (Kress 2003: 16–17).

Among various applications of visual images in textbooks, the function of illustration seems to be one of the most frequent ones. Illustrations usually come in the form of photos and graphics (2, 3), but sometimes there might be drawings and even cartoons (2, 5). These are always subsidiary to the verbal exposition, and are needed if the text itself refers to artifacts that need to be visualized (e.g., in cultural geography, film studies). In the majority of cases, such illustrations present images which totally overlap with the information in the text. However, sometimes visuals are placed not to denote, but to connote certain issues. When an image lacks a caption (3), when it is placed as an “opener” to the chapter (2), when it presents a specific case of a larger, abstract and variable phenomenon (e.g., tourism, media effects, IT) (1, 2, 3, 4), there is a chance that it is placed to frame the exposition in a particular way, to visually break the continuous flow of the print, or to redirect attention.

To give a specific example, in many academic textbooks information is presented by reporting on the work of individual scholars. This can be done by quoting, reproducing and adapting original work within the text (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), or by breaking the text visually to include notes on scholars (2, 5) or case studies (4) on their work. Indeed, portraiture and biographical details of scholars in textbooks is a means of humanizing abstract science and diversifying the flow of information. However, for many instructors these might appear as superfluous and irrelevant additions to research reports or argumentative passages, because such visually prominent details might distract students and divert their attention from the useful information. That is why students should be aware that the informative status of some of those details ought to be treated as merely contextualizing, not expository, knowledge.

As regards the illustrative role of diagrams and flow-charts, it needs to be reiterated that these visual representations of abstract concepts, relations or processes are just modeling, not reflecting, them. Admittedly, the two-dimensional spatial imaging that print textbooks allow (2,3,5) is indeed a very limited way of modeling abstractions, and may in many cases amount to reductionism. Take, for example, such classical reductionist representations as the “delivery” model of verbal communication, the “flow” model of media influence, the “pyramid” model of social classes/human needs or the “circular” model of culture, with its core and peripheral values. In addition, a visual representation of an abstract concept is essentially a “subjective construct”, even if it is publicized in an academic source (Trumbo 1999: 412).

The evidential function of visuals in academic texts should not be underestimated; however, it also raises issues. Since images are epistemologically committed, then in a photo of “Christmas celebrations” only one specific ritual can be shown, in a schema representing “social structure,” specific volumes, colors, vectors and spatial relations must be chosen to represent various social classes. These choices in academic textbooks often work to naturalize and objectify a version of socio-cultural reality. Since their function is to provide evidence of existence of certain entities, processes, relations, they are treated as mirroring reality as it is. The evidential function of images is even more entrenched if they are representations in the “realist” mode, namely photographs. However, image realism is but one convention that, despite pretenses to the contrary, only constructs reality from a particular perspective, not reflects its essence (Lacey 1997). Students should be made cautious of images supplanting fairly generalized and abstract information, since these images push them into imagining concrete instantiations rather than delimit the boundaries of possible types.

Finally, academic discourse is basically an argumentative discourse. In Cultural and Media Studies it is inappropriate to claim objectivity in a description of socio-cultural reality. The strength of an argument lies in the paradigm’s intersubjectivity, in the scholar’s persuading the others (readers/students) to adopt a particular perspective, notion, or scope of interest. Research is always done from a particular position and within a particular conception of epistemology, of what can be studied with which methods and of “good” scholarship practices. By contrast, images have the capacity to obscure a debatable issue and naturalize a contested representation.

4. Conclusion

It is perhaps too soon to draw ultimate conclusions about how the changing design of university textbooks will influence the process of teaching at the tertiary level. As shown above, there are undoubtedly many potential advantages in bringing the academia closer to the mindset of a generation of students immersed in visual culture and largely unaccustomed to print-only materials. The aim of this study is to problematize the issue rather than to offer either-or recommendations. It must be made clear here that the insistence on print-dominant materials might well hamper academic learning/teaching process by forcing students into designs they find difficult to handle. One recommendation for instructors that can definitely be offered here is to assess not only the content, scope or style of a college textbook, but also its design before placing it on the reading list. As shown above, some textbooks are designed to facilitate self-study (with extensive annotation, visual illustration, recapitulation, practice exercises) and might be rather awkward to use in the classroom.

Another purpose behind this project has been to exemplify how to examine and assess the compositional features of college textbooks – from typography and page layout to the structuring of the text and the inclusion of visual material. This particular study of selected textbooks has allowed us to observe that textbooks are often designed to meet aesthetic (rather than purely educational) priorities and are characterized by visual sophistication. For example, long stretches of text are broken into shorter sections (rarely more than two pages long), with lists and tables inserted to diversify the page composition. However, on a close analysis it often transpires that such figures have little more to offer besides the repetition of the information already given in the paragraph. This doubling of information is common in some academic genres (cf. Lemke 1998) and might indeed be a useful pedagogical tool to appeal to some types of visual learners. What needs to be noted, however, is that information in tables, lists, diagrams and boxes is harder to engage with critically. Since such forms involve nominalizations and phrases rather than clauses, the detailed representation of relations and processes between the entities is obscured and the impression of objectivity and neutrality is achieved (Machin and Mayr 2012 125–140). In addition, such lists do not include any transition words, so the prevailing logical relation between the points is that of aggregation. A more nuanced sense of relation, causality or interdependence,

which would transpire in a well-constructed paragraph, is lost if the bits of information are simply listed. At the other extreme, some flow charts and diagrams designed to represent relations could simplify them and imply causality (conventionally represented as vectors), where – in fact – there is none.

The pedagogical implications of the number and role of visuals in academic textbooks are also difficult to ascertain. What is striking about some recent publications is that visual material is included for no specific purpose other than breaking the continuity of print. Since much of the information in college textbooks tends to be rather abstract, the aim might be to bring the exposition closer to the lived experience of an average student. However, since some visuals should be read as symbolic renderings (e.g., uncaptioned photos), or contextualizing information (e.g., biographical notes), students need a sufficient degree of visual literacy not to treat them as epistemological anchors (Barthes 1977) of their knowledge. The purposes behind including drawings and cartoons in college textbooks seem even more contradictory. On the one hand, such visuals impress as contrived devices to attract attention, or to inject a sense of “fun” in the context of “serious” academic reading; on the other hand, they make students reflect on academic publications as an order of discourse that is rooted in fairly stilted conventions.

Educators’ awareness of what can be gained and what can be lost in the process of re-designing university textbooks is instrumental to their using textbooks reflectively and selectively. One thing is quite sure: without devising ways to enhance students’ visual literacy and critical dispositions with respect to visual culture, educators risk producing a generation of technically proficient but uncritical consumers rather than reflective and discriminating participants in visual culture.

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Visual culture and the style of college textbooks: a critical study

This article aims at exploring and problematizing the role of visual designs, as applied in a selection of five popular recent college textbooks that introduce students to Cultural and Media Studies. It can be observed that academic textbooks are increasingly produced in alignment with the properties of contemporary visual culture. The article reviews some of these properties, focusing on the growing need for enhancing visual literacy. It presents the framework of multimodal analysis, as the textbook is co-constituted by verbal and visual modes, which are integrated through a common design. The analytic categories of multimodal analysis allow for a qualitative, yet systematic, examination of some compositional and semiotic resources that have been applied in textbooks. The analysis focuses on textbook typography, supra-textual organization, the number and choice of figures/tables/lists, the layout of pages, structure of chapter/section, and type and framing of visuals. This is followed by a function-oriented critical discussion of these stylistic properties and of the implications of certain compositional preferences for teaching/learning. The study identifies designs that result in diversifying and aestheticizing textbooks visually, as well as hierarchizing and objectivizing knowledge. While both advantages and disadvantages of currently popular designs can be found, attention is drawn to the fact that visually-enhanced designs might fail to engage students in critical reflection, simplify the issues, and divert attention from the merits of exposition/argument, particularly if students lack skills in visual literacy.

Keywords: *visual culture, multimodal analysis, visual literacy, textbook design.*