

Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Visual Communication: More than meets the Eye
Author(s) / Editor(s):	Harry Jamieson
Publisher / distributor details (see note below):	Intellect
Publication / release date:	2007
ISBN number (if applicable):	978-1-84150-141-7
Technical details (if software – see note below):	
Price:	£14.95
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishing details: include the name / address / email / URL link to the publisher or distributor • Technical details: include the version number, platform suitability, technical description and hardware requirements where relevant 	

Review:

This text purports to offer a new means of understanding visual communication. The author, Harry Jamieson, has worked in a number of distinct fields: advertising, art education, as a research scientist for the Medical Research Council and as an academic at the University of Liverpool. In the text he obviously draws upon these different careers and produces a complex and original approach to the study of visual communication.

The text consists of a brief introduction, seven chapters, concluding remarks and a surprisingly short bibliography. The general premise of the book is to offer an alternative approach to visual communication. This approach draws upon the philosophical information and language theories of Gregory Bateson amongst others, and the whole book has a decidedly 'philosophical' feel to it as opposed to the more semiotic tendencies one might expect from a text with this title. The text seems roughly divided into three sections; the first section, consisting of the first three chapters, offers a model of perception, understanding and meaning. The second section, consisting of chapters four five and six, examines a number of related topics:

aesthetics, 'framing', and intuitive factors. The last section, chapter seven, poses a challenge to the idea of a visual language.

Chapter one offers a multi-level account of perception. This links together biological, psychological and socio cultural stages into a single model. It is interesting to note that Jamieson makes use of a very biological notion of the mind and this is linked through a philosophical account of meaning and perception to what he terms the 'social dimension' (p.29). This social dimension is extended in chapter two and explores how meaning is established through semiotic practice. The author examines how semiotics can be used to understand how we deal with visual imagery. However, it is noted that understanding mediated images requires acts of perception and while the meaning of images cannot be divorced from individual interpretation, perception is still very important. This is a key point and this prioritising of the individual perception over the social is a key feature of the book. Chapter three completes the basic model of perception by examining how meaning operates. Here use is made of ideas and concepts drawn from information theory. Information is "that which 'in-forms', or modifies a mental set" (p.59). Thus, meaning is regarded as a process, a continuous action changing and re-establishing itself through perception. This process is made easier by the use of codes and styles that allow information to be categorised and comprehended. It is in the details of these codes, the relationships between the elements, that meaning is made.

Chapter four moves onto the related concept of the 'tacit'. By this the author is referring to a form of knowing that occurs implicitly, the tacit dimension, that which is below the discursive level of consciousness. It is argued that some meanings can only be known at this level. Through the processes of connotation this tacit knowledge is brought to bear upon the perceived world, indeed it is tacit knowledge, the knowledge that we possess but do not always have 'to mind', that makes the process of connotation possible.

In chapter five the author focuses upon what he terms the 'aesthetic dimension'. This is regarded as "the place of feelings, feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, of pleasure or pain" (p.91). Jamieson, borrowing from Bateson, who was in turn borrowing from Freud, sees aesthetic activity as being firmly seated in the pre-conscious, the pre-processing stage of mental action. Thus aesthetics allows us to experience the visual without, or even prior to, discursive consciousness.

Frames and framing are the topic of chapter six. Here Jamieson examines three instances of how visual imagery is framed: by the mind, by society and by the media. It is noted that it is not simply how visual elements are grouped together that is important but the spacing between them also has a considerable impact. Jamieson borrows the idea of the syntagm from linguistics to explore how such spatial relationships can be understood.

In the final chapter Jamieson proposes that the act of visual communication should not be considered a language per-se, rather it should be regarded as a system of communication that sits alongside verbal communication. The chapter concludes by highlighting the problems of using verbal metaphors, such as 'reading an image' in visual communication. The book finishes with a short conclusion that covers the more salient points raised in the text and a call for more attention to be given to visual communication.

This is an interesting text and its area of application may veer more towards the artistic than media; the subjects covered, the terms used, authors cited and general feel to the book orientate it not so much within the cultural studies sphere but within the a subsection of the creative and artistic practice arena. However, as the publisher Intellect claim on their website, they do not publish text books and it may be hard to

use this text for undergraduate teaching. This is primarily for two reasons neither of which are critiques of the book but of its use as a teaching aid: first the style is challenging, many sentences require multiple reading to grasp their meaning and in many instances terms that have quite distinct meanings are used metaphorically – this conflates and confuses the issue at hand. Second, the text attempts to, and succeeds in, offering a new means of understanding visual communication. In setting out this new pathway the text does not offer grounding in existing approaches or theories. This means it is only of limited use in bringing students up to date with the state of the art in their subject.

Overall, this is an interesting book but its definite contribution to the field may be too original and specific for undergraduate teaching. It would serve well as a supplementary text for postgraduate courses in art theory and other artistically-orientated disciplines.