

Plenary Address

The Gnarly Problematics of Vision and the Visual

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I thank both Lance Strate and Paul Soukup for inviting me here even though my time at this conference will be cut short by family obligations in Michigan tomorrow. This is my first MEA conference. My lack of attendance, however, should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in media ecology studies. My first publication while still a graduate student was a 1967 article, safely buried away in *The Ohio Speech Journal*, on Marshall McLuhan. It grew into a book chapter in 1971, and something more substantial for “The Living McLuhan” number of the *Journal of Communication* in 1981.

Then in the 1980s, I was invited to head up an editorial team including Tom Farrell and Paul Soukup to prepare a *festschrift* to Walter Ong. As I got to London, where SLU’s Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture then was housed and where an Ong library had been assembled, I figured out why a Lutheran was brought in for the project: The Jesuits needed someone to start supper and set up the bar and cigars during evening prayer. A Protestant who could cook and knew his liquor was perfect for the job. So thanks to that month in London in 1987, I became not only a minion for the Society of Jesus but also much more deeply immersed in media ecology studies.

I must emphasize, however, that I have not been particularly interested in media ecology as a communication theory per se. Long ago, my M.A. adviser, rhetorician Douglas Ehninger, told me to stay out of theory—both my writing and thinking, he observed, went to hell when I tried to argue theoretically. I moved to historical-critical rhetorical studies. My interests in matters visual and performative came by teaching students how to analyze speeches, then television, film, and the idea of publicly massed bodies as rhetorical texts. I’d not yet read Roland Barthes’ *Elements of Semiology* (1964/1977) nor had Stephen Heath yet pulled together Barthes’ great essays on film and photography (*Image—Music—Text*, 1977/1988). The visual and the visualized were pretty well treated among rhetorical critics as unproblematic, as non-oratorical texts, or simply celebrated by fans of McLuhan. Ah, the good old days.

But, the 1970s and 1980s were witnessing revolutions in visual studies and my reading expanded. Raymond Williams’ 1974 book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, encased textual analyses in studies of media technologies, organizational practices, and the political and cultural contexts within which television as message, medium, and practice operates. He embedded texts within multiple frames.

A doctoral seminar on communication and culture in 1972 drove me back into readings I had done too casually in the '60s, especially Edward Hall's *The Silent Language* (1959) and Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1954/1964). As well, the alarmist themes of Ellul were taken, if anything, further in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1970), available in translation in 1970.

I will forego discussing the rest of my '70s and '80s reading routines even though it's tempting to discuss Erving Goffman and dramaturgical performance, the journal *Screen's* revolutions in film theory and criticism, Michael Shapiro's point-on discussion of *The Politics of Representation* (1988) and a decade later, Stuart Hall's *Representation* (1997). I only wish to make two points for now: First, a rich literature on vision and the visual has poured into our libraries and book shelves with such variety that each of us can find material relevant to our own particular bailiwick in communication studies. And second, my own obsession with rhetoric, with discourse that is radically situated and contextualized, governs what became for me the gnarly problematics of vision and the visual. And, I take the rhetorician's drive for contextualized understandings of public meaning-making as harmoniously resonant with the media ecologist's desire to articulate conceptualizations of media, consciousness, and culture.

You'll be happy to know that this morning that I will not deal with all nine of the gnarly problematics that have invaded my nightmares and critical practices over the last 30 years. Rather, I'll sample from three aspects of visual communication studies: conceptions of visual communication, the arenas or genres of visual communication, and on-the-ground problems in analyzing visual communication processes. I will supply illustrations from the kinds of visualities I spend my time worrying about. I want to concretize the problematics given how badly Ehninger said I talk about them abstractly.

Gnarly Problematics in Conceiving of Visual Communication

The first conceptual problematic that must be dealt with is the one mentioned in my title—vision vs. the visual. This distinction is grounded in a dispute rehearsed by Anthony Woodiwiss in his book *The Visual in Social Theory* (2001). Therein he accuses Stuart Hall of propagating a theory of vision, that is, a theory wherein sight is taken to be a natural faculty that privileges observation—what Woodiwiss terms “naïve empiricism”—and that understands verbal and visual signs as both standing for concepts and referring directly to things. Hall is said to have advanced a theory that “regards concepts as pre-linguistic, mental pictures or real or imagined worlds that are communicated through language” (p. 91)—and, thus, a referential theory of vision. Seeing is not only believing but knowing, a view termed empirical representationalism. (That seeing is not only believing but also knowing in a truth-referenced sense was also important to Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*, 1637/1960. He appended treatises on optics, meteorology, and geometry in order to illustrate the utility of that method: “the arguments follow one another in such a way that, just as the last principles are demonstrated by the first ones which are their causes, so these first ones

are reciprocally demonstrated by the last which are their effects. . . . [T]he truth of the hypotheses is proved by the actuality of the effects,” Sixth Part, p. 55. The optics appendix treats vision and modes of both distorting and correcting it—empirical representationalism in full, a complete correspondence theory of meaning.)

In contrast, Woodiwiss suggests that he himself privileges not vision but the visual—socially and politically constructed ways of seeing and being seen, what Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes* (1993) called the “scopic regimes of modernity.” This I will term the culturalist’s corrections to semiotic-structuralism, all built around the fundamental principle that the venues within which individuals live are understood and empowered by discursive formations. What we “see” when we “watch” something is less a matter of eye-information than culturally conditioned meaning-systems, what Foucault calls “regimes of truth” (qtd. In Woodiwiss, 2001, p. 151). (Yet, regimes of truth or not, many 19th-century researchers were fixated on attempting to account for visuality as a scientific basis for knowledge, including studies of attention, perception, and spectacle. See Crary, 1999, 1990.)

What is at stake in this problematic is the very idea of semiology or coding. It calls up Roland Barthes’ assertion in his famous essay on photography that a photo is a message without a code (1977/1978, p. 17). That’s because it is but an analogue to that-which-is-seen, a straightforward denotation at least until one starts talking about the “art” of photography and the mechanics of lens effects, film stocks, development processes, etc. On the contrary, argues Woodiwiss, how we understand photographs is the product of complex social relations governed institutionally by familial, economic, political, philosophical, and religious structures and even of theories of intentionality answering the question, Why was it taken? (Cf. Gronbeck, 2005.)

The problematic of vision vs. the visual, of eye-information vs. social information, leads to a second gnarly question—the metacritical foundations of visual communication. I’ve mentioned two of them, semiotic-structuralism and culturalism. Let me add a third: hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry.

Rather than examine those three theories abstractly, let me do a show-and-tell with pictures by Jacob Riis and their public presentation. Jacob Riis was a Danish immigrant who arrived here in 1870, and became a New York newspaper reporter who worked the slums of the Five Points district of lower Manhattan. The more he saw of late 19th-century slum life, the more indignant he became in the face of poverty, urban decrepitude, immigrant victimage, and the roles of environment in degenerating the quality of life. As he grew more distraught with the police and sanitation beats that he covered, he was motivated to start taking pictures of the squalor and to offer lectures with magic lantern slides of his pictures. His reputation exploded with the publication in 1890 of *How the Other Half Lives* (1890/1904), and he spent the rest of his life writing and working the lecture circuit urging slum reform. (For Riis photos, see <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/Davis/photography/images/riisphotos/slideshow1.html>.)

With his glass slides of nighttime photos projected unto a screen—from which he said “there is no appeal” (Riis, 1901/1935, p. 177)—he believed that he had imagaic evidence that powered his arguments for tenement reform, playgrounds, and public sanitation projects. His was a naïve theory, yes, of empirical representationalism that accepted photos as analogues to life. That view was maintained by no less a photographic artist than Ansel Adams, who did the preface to the 1974 coffee table edition of 82 of Riis’ photos. Adams beatified Riis as a photographer whose pictures “are magnificent achievements in the field of humanistic photography” because of their “intensity, [their] *living* quality.” He went on, “[I]n many of these the subjects are looking at you—you are there with them, you may almost speak to them. Because of this intimacy, reality is magically intensified, another dimension of response is added to the dimensions of statement” (Alland, 1974, p. 6).

Similarly, Vivian Sobchack (1992) argues that photography’s decontextualization permits a union of the picture and its viewer at some transcendent point in time and space, accompanied by the subjects of photos because “Although included in our experience of the present, the photograph transcends both our immediate present and our lived experience of temporality because it exists for us as ever engaged in the activity of *becoming*” (p. 59). Both Adams and Sobchack work within a semiotic-structuralist framework, with photography’s technical characteristics comprising a set of signs carrying objects to us, reproduced in Barthes’ vocabulary (1957/1972) as first-order significations of those objects but also as second-order cultural or mythic dimensions of social relationships themselves.

A second theory of the visual also explains Riis’ pictures if we think about how he actually used them in his magic lantern shows. His early public work suggested a hermeneutic phenomenology of the visual. When stacking up his slides, inserting them one by one into a magic lantern, and offering descriptions and opinions centered on particular slides, Riis essentially was drawing upon experience-based memory traces (see Levin, 1998, on Merleau-Ponty [esp. 1968] and Levinas) to construct the objects of pictures, or figures, within experiences that served as fields, or grounds.

To understand subjectivity as a kind of negotiation between one’s consciousness and the sensory fields of individual experiences helps us explain, particularly, Riis’ employment of pictures in his lectures. The pictures cued memories and positioned those memories within particular perceptual fields, what Shutz and Luckmann (1973) term zones of experience. Notice what Riis says in the 1891 lecture on “The Other Half and How They Live” when loading a slide of what we now call the Italian rag-picker (for the photo, see <http://students.washington.edu/karamck/gallery1.shtml>):

If you want to understand just what [the struggle to keep children alive] means, come with me at three o’clock some morning in July or August when these stony streets are like fiery furnaces, and see those mothers walking up and down the pavements with their little babes trying to stir some breath of God’s air to cool the brows of the sick child and hear the feeble wails of those little ones! Then tell me they have no cause of complaint, that they ought to be content. Here (shows the pictures of “Home of the Italian rag-picker”—Italian woman with child in her arms) is one of them, an

Italian baby in swaddling clothes. You have seen how they wrap them around and around until you can almost stand them on either end and they won't bend, so tightly are they bound. It is only a year ago that the Italian missionary down there wrote to the city mission that he did not know what to do with these Italian children in the hot summer days, for "no one asked for them." They have been asked for since, thank God! Christian charity has found some of them out.

Notice the subjective flow of scenes in this object lesson of engaged ghetto motherhood. Riis recalls from memory his sensory experiences of sweltering summer nights, peripatetic mothers walking the streets to get outdoor air into their children's lungs, an envisioning of how babies are swaddled, and a story about a frustrated church worker but with a seemingly happy ending, thanks to the generosity of people like those in his audience. Notice, too, the actual picture—her Madonna-like upward glance, her basement dwelling filled with bags of rags and her stove for boiling them, even the ladder that presumably was her way in and out of the basement with its dirt floor. That picture is neither described nor made specifically relevant to what Riis is saying. Rather, the figure cues Riis' memories of zones of his experience—from his nighttime reporting work, his observations of child care, his efforts at providing settlement houses for needy women and their children. He thus places the figure within grounds from his own life work. And so, Riis's own subjectivity is engaged, demonstrating what Heidegger said about re-presentation: "To re-present means here to present before oneself, to bring before oneself and to master, to attack things. . . . [T]o apprehend . . . means to let something come to one not merely accepting it but taking a receptive attitude toward that which shows itself" (qtd. in Levin, 1999, pp. 186, 193).

Generally, a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to pictures produces not an analysis of signs but an analysis of consciousness and subjectivity, where the perceiver and not the visual object is the text to be understood, rationalized, and interpreted. The *materia* of that-which-is-seen is not the focus of analysis; the seers are.

That leaves us with culturalism. To cultural representationalists, human beings are born into a perceptual field, into pre-coded or conventionalized understandings of the world and their relationships to it. For example, "horses" were named and valued long before you were born, and an important aspect of growing-up was to learn both the linguistic sign and the significations at multiple levels or orders that have been attached to that linguistic sound-image. Horse? Thanks to primary uses in your family, in secondary institutions such as agriculture, the sporting establishment, or the drug culture, and in a variety of other ways as when signifying an oafish or hard-working man, a tool used in barrel-making, a youngster's toy, and a line to stand on when trimming a sail, "horse" is a linguistic sign with a full range of positively and negatively valenced significations that can be evoked whenever you employ that sign in speaking or writing.

And so, culturalists insist that you and I can encounter, comprehend, and value the world—at least the world we share with others—only through the linguistic and performative conventions that are a part of the society within which we dwell. Indeed,

because those conventions pre-exist our encounters with others in life, they serve not only as tools for collectivization but also measuring rods for collective judgments, and therein lies culturalism's characteristic scopic regimes.

Thus, as Jacob Riis' photos circulated publicly, they came under the scrutiny of cultural historians who read them through a variety of sociocultural and political conventions. E. T. O'Donnell (2004), like Ansel Adams before him, focused on the eyes of Riis' subjects but argued that they were glaring at us, relying on their direct, face-to-face orientations together with facial displays that most would interpret as frowns, as cultural markers of displeasure, even class consciousness. Stange's (1989a) interpretation of Riis' "politics of surveillance" was based explicitly upon a cultural assumption that "many of the photographs Riis showed represented imagery already current in urban visual culture, and his text rehearsed familiar responses to such scenes" (Stange, 1989b, p. 2). Stange even suggests that Riis's photos were pre-coded so as to play upon "middle class fears and concerns" (1989b, p. 6) as "the representation of 'Gotham's crime and misery'" (p. 13). Stange's binary culturalist position, of a 19th-century overclass and underclass, offers an argument similar to Trachtenberg's that "To outsiders like Riis, the slums seemed a chaos of alien tongues, strange costumes and customs, foods, habits of child-rearing—a frightening caldron of poverty and despair" (p. 171). Gandal's (1997) charge of a kind of Christian voyeurism at work in Riis' photography is another culturalist echo. (New York City was the site of slum reform throughout the second half of the 19th century; various movements are documented in Yochelson & Czitrom, 2008. Riis was stepping into a flood of reformist politics.)

Culturalists thus are narratively rehearsing late 19th-century American urban culture, with Jacob Riis and his photos as exemplars, rather than actually studying the man and his labors. "Culture" in a sense becomes the text, with human actions and products ripped from their original contexts and then placed into an interpretive, remanufactured perspective on events, one with personal and collective motives and viewpoints rearticulated in the writing of an enlightened, storied cultural history. Viewing Riis' pictures outside of his understanding of secular or Progressive slum reform and religious or social gospel commitments radically rematerializes them.

I've spent considerable time on the semiotic-structuralist, hermeneutic-phenomenological, and culturalist conceptions of visual communication because, taken together, they represent a trinity of clearly distinguished theories—one object-centered, one perceiver-centered, and one context-centered. They force you, I think, to pick your theoretical entry into visual communication and to live within its perspective.

I could go on to talk more about the problematics we must wrestle with when considering varied approaches to contextualization and to multiple theories of representation, but I must move on. The matters of vision vs. the visual and different theoretical portals into visual communication studies are enough for today.

The Arenas or Genres of Visual Communication

My second set of problematics features genres or arenas of visual communication. To consider what I'm about to problematize as genres is to recognize anticipatorily that we are dealing with types of discourse or discourse formations, dropping into the '70s to contemplate the Foucauldian vision in *The Order of Things* (1970/1971), where the epistemes or habitual ways of knowing in any given time and place are characterized by patterns when talking and writing in ordinary situations.

A first categorical system of arenas is best thought of through Barthes writing in *The Elements of Semiology* (1964/1977). I find it easy enough to break down visual communication into four arenas or semiological codes: the material, the inscribed, the performed, and the pictorial. So, awe-inspiring mountains or fear-inducing tornados are material phenomena to which humans have appended signifieds; the material world also can be enclosed within a defining boundary such as a national park or turned into walls, floors, and ceilings arranged in an architectural style and thus coded. Or, material can be inscribed: drawings are scratched on cave walls, planks are painted and hung on a wall, the body is pierced, coiffeured, and clothed. Inscriptions of the material colonize it for human use and value in signifying practices.

The body-in-action also becomes a semiological system, whether in purposive movements (e.g., dance), situated placements (e.g., sitting in church), or positions (e.g., head bowed). And of course the pictorial is clearly a semiological system, even if Barthes raised questions about the codability of photographs. The material, the inscribed, the performed, and the pictorial comprise four basic systems of visual communication, each with its own coding practices and modes of comprehension and of use.

A second categorical system for thinking about visual communication parallels Aristotle's distinctions among the lyric, epic, and dramatic arts: radicals of presentation. To Aristotle, lyric was sung, epic was narrated, and drama was performed—three different radicals of presentation (Frow, 2006). Similarly, we can think of graphic pictures, photographs, and moving images or the screen arts as the products of three different radicals of presentation: graphic pictures, as manually reproduced or represented in various mediums; photographs, as chemically or, now, digitally reproduced or represented images; and screen arts, as rapidly sequenced chemical or electronic images creating a dynamic re-presentation thanks to what Gestalt psychologists call the Law of Continuity—the sustaining of visual comprehension across gaps in time and space.

The idea of graphic pictures embraces everything from paintings and drawings to tables, decorative stickers, and clipart. Let me illustrate a rhetorically important problematic of graphic pictures with a well-known painting—Picasso's "Guernica." Fans of Barthes' essay "Rhetoric of the Image" (1977/1978) will remember his argument that an image can be layered into four sign systems: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, a non-coded iconic message, and an aesthetic message. So the label "Guernica" is a linguistic sign calling up a small village in Spain's Basque coun-

try. The coded iconic signs are the arrayed people, animals, objects, and actions included within the 11 x 25.6 foot frame. The non-coded iconic message brings us to a specifically rhetorical dimension of graphic pictures: the presence of the arrayed signs in their twisted and broken state in a painting called “Guernica,” completed less than two months after German warplanes attacked and destroyed the village during the Spanish civil war. Non-coded messages, therefore, are matters of situational inference drawn from knowledge of time and place. And, at the fourth level, the aesthetic messages come from another kind of knowledge—knowledge of Picasso’s position as a founder of Cubism. No, he was not suffering from a detached retina; he was working from an art theory committed to three-dimensional representation by showing multiple surfaces at the same time and to geometrical shapes such as cubes.

To Barthes, therefore, the linguistic and coded iconic sign systems provide what he calls anchorage and relay, grounding signification in signs that denote. But, knowledge of context, style, and other interpretive points of view creates connotations, symbolic forces—ideological, mythic, or other cultural imperatives for comprehension and judgment. To Barthes, therefore, meaning-making is neither merely representational nor paternalistically culturalist; rather, the text dwells in between sign systems and cultural directives for how to understand them, yea and indeed, as a site of struggle. (See Shapiro, 1988, for a discussion of Barthes’ contributions to our understanding of photography.)

What, then, of photographs? Barthes’ four-layered sign systems certainly are operative in photographs as well, though of course the coded iconic signs now have more the feeling of presentation rather than representation, given what we often think of as the naturalness of photographed objects. As Stuart Hall notes, the “‘camera eye’ was considered to be like a ‘mirror held up to Nature’” (1997, p. 83), and thus as Barthes argued does not create coded messages. But of course the argument dies when one takes the receiver of the photograph into account—the receiver’s relationship to the subject of the picture, the photographer, the scene or background as well as the place of viewing. And so, Hall contends, there is a double process of construction in the photograph—one process of making the picture and another of where and how it is circulated and consumed (pp. 85-86). And that is why Shapiro (1994) says that to Barthes “no text can signify without the complicity of the reader” (p. 128). Recall Jacob Riis’ picture of the Italian rag-picker, which evokes the Madonna that arose during the late medieval period of the Cult of the Virgin and so has been a part of western aesthetic traditions and Christian pieties for some 800 years. The Italian rag-picker was photographically signified by Riis, but second-order significations and their uptake ride on the complicity of the reader who envisioned the Madonna when viewing the photo.

Complicity plus public circulation. It is the circulation especially of everyday photos, for example as offered to us in newspapers, Internet blogs, news magazines, or television reports, that represent most emphatically what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) calls the “pictorial turn.” In the everyday photo, the *classe populaire*, that circulates in mass-mediated outlets, we find the most ordinary, taken-for-granted, numerous

pictures. As Hall (1997, p. 101) rightly notes, we comprehend news photos as *universal* (their human emotions are readily identified by everybody), as *historical* (they're a product of specific times and places), as *quotidian* (they show us everyday or "real" happenings), as *empathetic* (we understand the feelings shown and resonate with them), as *common* (the feelings can be shared by any culture mate going through whatever is happening in the photo), and (most of the time) as *monochromatic* (a depiction in the black-and-white of reportage processes). Universality, historicity, quotidianity, empathy, commonality, and monochromicity are Hall's six non-codic iconic dimensions of news photos that allow us to understand their psychological, social, and even ideological dimensions. The rhetoric of the photograph lies in its circulation and consumption. Or, as John Hartley (1992) says in *The Politics of Pictures*, "Pictures are objective traces of socio-semiotic struggles (conflict), allegiances (consensus), and ideologies (sense-making practices), right across the spectrum from big-deal public politics to intimate personal culture" (p. 29).

All of Hall's characteristics and Hartley's objectifications are illustrated in Napalm Girl, nine-year-old Kim Phuc from the central Vietnam highlands village of Trang Bang as she was photographed by Nick Ut in 1972 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Th%E1%BB%8B_Kim_Ph%C3%BAc). The universality and pathos of nakedness and fear, the historical climax to the Vietnam war being staged in mid-country, the viewers' daily televisual exposure to battle and death, the increase of empathy when war ravages children, the commonality in that time of civilians caught in the crossfire, and the literal and metaphorical power of black-and-white images in the press all are illustrated in Napalm Girl. So are Hartley's focus on conflict, the ideological struggle of East-West warfare, and the place of this photo in amplifying the anti-war sentiment in America. Together, Hall and Hartley give us metacritical starting points for photographic analysis. (For the best study of Napalm Girl I have seen, see Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, Chap. 6.)

And the third genre of iconic visuality is the mechanically or digitally reproduced moving image—the screen arts such as films, TV programs, streaming video, digital games. Catherine Caha Waite [now Phelan] (2003) has argued convincingly that what makes the screen arts unique is that the camera's and the editors' abilities to manipulate time, space, and duration of motion radically alter figure-ground relationships, driving us within what she terms a variable-flex perceptual matrix to experience the world in wholly new subjective and social ways. In offering a phenomenological reading of the screen arts, Phelan returns us to McLuhan's interests in relationships between the human sensorium and our experience of the world, but with a more disciplined approach to how the screen arts' flexing of our perceptual matrix affects both the social tempos of daily life and individuated connections between our inner and outer lives.

Phelan's (Caha Waite, 2003) humanistic analysis of how we experience the screen arts is usefully supplemented, I think, by Manovich's (2001) technical analysis of digital media such as the Internet, computerized multimedia, virtual reality, and the rest. My time is short, so I'll only say that Manovich is documenting computeri-

zation's use of *numerical representation*, making media programmable; *modularity*, allowing some aspects or modules of an object to be manipulated while others are held constant; *automation*, programming objects' actions formulaically; *variability*, permitting multiple interfaces between features of objects or varied objects; and *transcoding*, allowing translation or substitution of one set of characteristics for another. I don't have time to explain this vocabulary further, though I can say that if you were to look carefully at a piece of digital art such as one called "Concept Art—Digital Painting" (Scotdrake.imagekind.com, 2008), you'd see clearly illustrated Phelan's variable flex of time, space, and duration of motion as well as especially modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding as Manovich defines them. Furthermore, what he (Manovich, 2001, pp. 46-47) calls the "computer layer" of transcoding, that is, the digital translations of objects into other objects, can have direct effects on what he calls the "cultural layer"—such traditional categories of screen art elements as character, plot, and story—most obvious in the use of computer graphics in film and music video.

The point? Such visual communication genres as graphic visuals, photographs, and screen arts are comprised of sign systems distinctively different from each other, and thus each genre demands that an analyst or critic acquire different tool kits when attacking each of them.

Visual Communication Processes

Even as my time here is drawing short, I'd like to at least signal some additional gnarly problematics associated with the processes of actually breaking down or analyzing visual communication messages. Three such problematics come to mind.

One that I won't analyze is the difference between spectacle and specularity, that is, between approaching a visual experience from the point of view of that which is seen versus from the ways in which an audience is conditioned to watch it. This is a problematic for me because it is about more than analyzing viewing from the vantage of the seen vs. the seer. That is because we are conditioned through personal and social experience to watch different things in different ways. We watch tennis matches, poetry slams, presidential debates, and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in very different ways. Each of those viewing episodes comes with both personal and social rules for what to watch, how to react, and what judgmental criteria to apply to a match, slam, debate, or movie. One cannot define "specularity" without articulating specific rules-for-watching.

But I won't deal with that. Nor will I say much about a second difficulty in analyzing visual communication processes, subject-object relationships. To explicate the dynamic relationships between you and what you're looking at, psychologists have talked framing, psychoanalytic critics have discussed the gaze or subject positioning, and culturalists have attempted to assess culturally sustained viewing habits that Jacques Lacan then Christian Metz (1982/1986) termed scopic regimes. Framing emphasizes the ways the object controls comprehension; subject positioning, again,

the object; and scopic regimes, culturally sanctioned interpretations of meaning and value. I'll have to leave your choices among such subject-object relationships to another time.

But I will take up a third problematic: multimediation. A gnarly factoid that any analyst of visual communication must face is that the visual, that-which-is-seen, is never merely an experience of that object. That object may be styled, framed, shown in daytime or nighttime, staged, slapped on a museum wall or the A-train in New York City; it always enters now rather than then, here rather than there, when you're awake or sleeping, young or old, joyous or depressed; it may stand as itself on the wall, come to you with an audio track or a caption, a story or an argument, in color or black-and-white, edited, pixilated, decoupage, or remade in bas relief. It is affected by the personal characteristics or experiences of the viewer, and it is always, always contextualized.

Let me illustrate multimediation with one of my favorite ads, the first advertisement of a compact car, Chrysler's Neon, during the 1994 Super Bowl. The spoken verbal text was built around hi-tech talk: "extrasensory perception," references to "platinum, rhodium, and newly formed materials," a shielding dry powder-based finish, an awe-inspired clincher, "And no one has ever seen anything quite like it." The imagaic world gave us 39 shots in the first 49 seconds, with a transition to three shots in the final 11 seconds. The first section ran by at 1.25 shots per second: running people, media press conferences, police cars and motorcycle cops, helicopters shot from below and at night, trucks carrying satellite dishes, war rooms with wall-sized computer screens, close-ups of tall hangar doors, bleachers filled with journalists, photographers, scattered others lit only by flood lights, and the boy filled with wonder. Shades of *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* (1977), though the hurry and panic could have come out of many 1950s sci fi movies. And then in the last 11 seconds, the Neon comes out of the hangar, facing us head-on with the friendly word "Hi" printed on it, and we get auto dealer discourse—"MSRP" and "nicely loaded."

The soundtrack worked with the verbal and imagaic texts. Chrysler went with reporterly female narrator, though tonally adding a sexual dimension as the reader moved through the script. Behind her, a string orchestra played aggressive, exciting music, with suggestions of chase, of danger-yet-excitement, of exploration. In the final sections we clearly were switched to synthesizer music that was bright, funky, and cute enough to resonate with the smiling car saying "Hi."

And so, the verbal text was propositional, suggesting a car with adventure, good sense, morality, and economy; the visual text was narratological, carrying us emotionally from excitement and danger to wonder and pleasure. And the auditory or aural text reflected culturally encoded stereotypes of adventure, authority, and suspense morphing into sexual pleasure and self-indulgence.

The good reasons for buying the car advanced in the verbal text were dramatized musically and narrativized imagaically, making unstated claims (Gronbeck, 1995) about driving a Neon that never could have been spoken aloud in so many words. Rather, the multimediation exhibited in the first Neon ad was a matter of articula-

tion—of a kind of forcing-into-relationships the significations coming at us in different semiological systems (Grossberg, 1992).

I use “articulation” as Grossberg (1992) defines it, as “the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices” (p. 42). This is a useful concept, I think, because the literate, visual or imagaic, and acoustic semiological systems are articulated in Grossberg’s sense by the viewer-listener-reader. Emphasis certainly can move from one system to another, as when an ad turns up the sound, a monster leaps into the screen shot, or when words scroll down a picture. Yet, most of us, most of the time, experience a multimediated message as an articulated whole.

One last point: the actual relationships between coding systems in multimediated discourses are not simple to chart. For example, Mitchell (1994) creates the neologism “imagetext” to suggest a cognitive-emotional merger of visual and verbal coding systems in readers, while Gross (2009) employs Dual Coding Theory to cleanly separate coding systems and thus offer an interactive view of visual-verbal coding relationships.

The problematic of multimediation, in sum, returns us back to where we started—the distinction between vision and the visual, between eye-information and text-based information, except that now we must recognize that most texts are multisensual and composed of several semiological systems (see Gronbeck, 1995, 1993) that work in consort. We even are sneaking up on Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) speculations about the sensorium and the varied ratios between and among the senses that are stimulated by different media and outered by any given medium’s sense data. And then we get to brain research, and heaven help us all, for then we’ve left the symbolic world for physiological territory, where few of us can play the game convincingly.

Living with Gnarls

In conclusion, as I have just suggested, I don’t think we can untangle the intellectual gnarls that have grown up in visual communication studies by the reductionist move to the physiological. When Rene Descartes appended essays on optics, meteorology, and geometry to his *Discourse on Method* (1637/1960) in hopes of demonstrating that his methods could explain both the unity and the diversity of the universe, he was on a fool’s errand because material regularities ultimately simply cannot be accounted for syllogistically in a journey from first principles to empirical life. Nor can empirical accounts explain well human valuing, moral perspectives, appetites, and desires—all of which are too idiosyncratic to be exhaustively catalogued.

And this suggests my first conclusion about how to live with gnarls: *1. The problematics that I have reviewed are not fights over what-is, but over how-human-beings-engage-what-is.* If I might return to the founding father of semiology, Saussure (1916/1959) from the start argued that a sign is the union of a sound-image and a concept; and of course, as C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923/1946) urged seven years later, concepts are grounded in personal and collective experience—

mucky ground, indeed, for comprehending accurately “what-is” from a human perspective. Visual communication studies, I humbly must conclude, will never get it right even in the world of what Manovich (2001) calls the information culture because, ultimately, our interest as visual scholars is not in essence but in use, not in material but in how it works.

And that prompts a second conclusion: 2. *The dimensions and oppositions suggested in the problematics should be seen not simply as conceptual options and dialectics, as important as they can be, but as decision points for how you want to engage the visual world.* Do you think of the world around you as an environment, a bounded territory, a space within which objects are arrayed or even organized physically or perceptually? The idea of the world as environment led Jacques Ellul (1954/1964) to posit technology as *la technique* and Neil Postman (1992) to finish Ellul’s central arguments 40 years later in *Technopoly*. For Edward Hall (1959), the idea of territory and territoriality was understood as an orienting system for all collectivities, which had to understand themselves as being *somewhere* in order to stabilize their internal relationships and external boundaries. And, as we have seen, Caha Waite [Phelan] (2003) prefers the term “space” because her interest is in how the screen arts flex or manipulate our sense of it and ourselves within it.

Vocabulary is never merely referential—a rose is a rose is not just a rose, and we all know that a pipe is a not pipe, after all. Culturalists and critics, and especially rhetoricians, are in the business of understanding vocabularies as portals into the perspectives we all use to enter, dwell in, value, and assess the world, seen from where we are, captured in graphic, photographic, or screened images, chiseled into material environment, displayed on our bodies, or performed by one human being to others. Even the seen ultimately must be discursified to be shared.

I conclude with a sentiment from Roland Barthes (1964/1977): “A *language* is . . . at the same time a social institution and a system of values” (p. 14). Therein lies part of its rhetoricity. That rhetoricity, that sense of discourse in the service of influence and power, is operative in the very socially sanctioned and valuing languages that we use to access visuality. Those same commitments drive media ecology studies. In the words of Christine Nystrom, penned in her dissertation, “Media ecology takes as its primary goal . . . to increase awareness and understanding of the processes of communication and of the effects of complex communication environments—including media, techniques, and technology—on human perception, value, and behavior” (1973, pp. 120-1, qtd. in Sternberg, 2001, p. 31). Nesting inside those relationships are multiple perspectives, concepts, types of messages, and situations within which we communicate. And so I return to the gnarly problematics that I dream about again and again.

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