

Ágnes Veszelszki

Preface

In the beginning was the image... The main title of the sixth volume in the Series Visual Learning (VL) was borrowed from William Horton's *The Icon Book* (and also appears in Shlain's book). The slightly altered Bible verse was cited in the workshop presentation *Forgotten Theories of the Image* delivered in June 2016 by Kristóf Nyíri, co-founder, with András Benedek, of the workshop and the series. In this presentation Nyíri argued that "there are not many famous authors whose works are, so to say, must-reads for their contemporaries, and there are not many sub-disciplines whose professionals naturally – for their own good and as an obligation – make reference to each other. VLL members do not constitute such a sub-discipline; but they might as well put their efforts in a somehow convergent theoretical direction." This aim is pursued by the events of the Visual Learning Lab (VLL), organised by the Budapest University of Technology and Economics for seven years now since 2009: the monthly seminar-like workshops and the annual international conference. A peer reviewed selection of such conference papers is published every year in the Series Visual Learning by the Peter Lang publishing house.

In honour of the traditions, the main title of the November 2015 conference was again a triple alliteration: **Time, Truth, Tradition**. The editors of the current volume selected 16 of the 30 papers presented in the conference. The papers can be divided into four major thematic groups: the theoretical questions of visuality; visual rhetoric; online visuality; and visuality in teaching and learning. Using a fashionable way to visualise keywords, the full content of the book can be compressed into the following word cloud (W1) which reveals the main points of contact:



The keynote paper of the book is authored by Kristóf Nyíri, and titled: *Towards a Theory of Common-Sense Realism*. In his paper he aimed to “outline a specific philosophical strategy for the defence of common-sense realism and the rejection of relativism. The strategy is specific in that it is based on the assumption that the human mind is a visual one – indeed [...] fundamentally a kinesthetic or motor one. The primary contact we make with reality is not verbally mediated; rather, it is direct, kinesthetic, perceptual, visual”. The paper distinguishes common sense, common-sense realism and scientific realism from relativism and from each other as well. Referring to, among others, Gombrich, Arnheim and Gibson, the author makes a case for (common-sense) realism in connection with visuality. In this regard, Nyíri concludes that “contemporary common sense does not have room, just as common sense never had room, for relativism. Common sense believes that it relies on the best available sources of knowledge. It understands that it might hold erroneous views, but trusts that progress will correct them.”

The same aspect, **Truth**, is reflected in Sybille Krämer’s paper *Truth in Testimony: Or can a Documentary Film ‘Bear Witness’? Some Reflections on the Difference between Discursive and Existential Truth*. An Austrian with Bosnian roots, director Haris Bilajbegovic filmed a documentary about the cruelties committed by Serbian militiamen in a Bosnian village in 1992. The mass execution had only one survivor whose testimony provided the grounds for the Hague Tribunal to convict the perpetrators years later. The 2012 film, which also cites statements from the testimony, was presented as a documentary. This provides the setting for the author to examine the dilemma of eye-witnessing, making reference to, among others, Derrida and Søren Kierkegaard’s concept of “Existential Truth”: “The dilemma associated with eye-witnessing can be expressed this way: speaking the truth constitutes the foundation and function of witnessing, yet at the same time nothing is as fallible and prone to error as witness testimony.” Going back to the film *Svjedok – The Witness*, he establishes that it “can be understood as not only a documentary film but also a form of ‘testimony’ because the medium of film instantiates a social relation between the survivor witness and the filmmaker”.

Referring back to the Krämer text in the fourth volume of the VL series and her own paper, Valeria Giardino presents her “hypothesis about the existence of a human capacity labelled diagramming”, and connects it to a philosophy of mind. Thanks to the capacity of diagramming, “humans are able to recruit a variety of cognitive systems – spatial perception and action systems – that are already available in other contexts, with the specific aim of reducing cognitive loads for memory and assisting problem solving”. The diagramming hypothesis can be linked to the moderate approach to embodiment. The author’s hypothesis is based

on evidence brought from experimental psychology and philosophy of mathematics: gestures in mathematical explanation (as “gestures show that spatial and motor elements might help comprehension”), formulas in algebra and diagrams in topology. Giardino says that “spatial cognitive artefacts act as multi-recruiting systems”.

Daniel L. Golden focused on the visual management of **time**, and examined what tools of visibility (sundials, clockworks, time lines, calendars and time tables) help to put the flow of time under control. Such tools are “built upon visual components in order to make the abstraction conceivable, communicable, and operable for the human mind”, he says. The “main driving force behind the requirements on timing, tracking, and synchronizing human activities” was the set of events called *taylorism*, which is connected to industrialization and free competition, and resulted in the increasingly fashionable concepts of *time management* and *time economy*. Golden presents the most important concepts of time (including the dichotomies organic vs. mechanical time; public time vs. private time, linear vs. cyclical time), as well as the traditional and novel tools of visualisation.

In the following chapter, Javier E. Carreño examines, on the basis of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, how static images can “apparently ‘without a time’, strike us as having a ‘right’ timing”. This issue is raised in the phenomenological analyses of image-consciousness, time-consciousness, and aesthetic consciousness. He says: “the awareness of the ‘right timing’ of an image is a temporal awareness that an image triggers by intensifying the awareness of the depicted subject in a particular time-phase”, and “in the case of a ‘perfect timing of images’, the viewer will be drawn towards the ‘image now’ phase in its completeness to a degree that can even disengage further phantasy continuations”.

Petra Aczél – for the sixth time in the Series Visual Learning – argues for the need to rediscover the visual in the rhetorical tradition. As a recent development in scientific discourse, the importance of visibility is now accepted in the fields of human cognition and communication, and “the prevalence of images has apparently won over the scepticism of science towards the non-verbal”. By contrast, in rhetoric, which is considered as a mainly verbal field, the role of visibility has still not been rediscovered (except for the topic of “visual tropes”). Following a consistent logic, this time the paper focuses on the “persuasion as visionary in suatory discourse”, with particular respect to “the function of wonder (thaumazein), the connection between the verbal and visual and between the visionary and the persuasive-charismatic”. In this regard, the connection between rhetoric and visibility can be concluded this way: “rhetoric and the rhetorical style is persuasive because of its visionary – making audiences to see, to feel, to enact – potential that is rooted in the speaker’s visual-sensual encounter with the world.”

Timothy Barney's paper adopts a rhetorical approach as well in examining the rhetorical lives of (Cold War) maps. The rhetorical life of a map, in his views, means that "a map has a particular lifespan in which it exists as a communicative practice, as it works through the intersections of public and private spaces, institutional and popular contexts, and artistic and scientific modes of collection, synthesis, and expression". According to this concept, maps are linked both to the immediate document-level context and to the historic context. Using the concepts of Denis Wood and John Fels, Barney calls this context (which involves dedications, inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, notes, illustrations, and advertisements for the map, reviews, production information) *paramap*. This way, "a map is never just a map, but a confluence of social forces that constrains a culture's sense of its relationship to, and in, the world". To support his theory, the author analyses an American map taken about the Gulag in the Cold War era.

In her paper *Paintings and Illuminated Manuscripts as Sources of the History of Childhood: Conceptions of Childhood in the Renaissance*, Orsolya Endrődy-Nagy gives insight into a larger qualitative research project. Her goal is to "describe how the conceptions of childhood changed in a specific period during the 15th and 16th centuries", with the help of Renaissance paintings and other visual documents (manuscripts, old-prints and wooden-block prints), using qualitative analysis methods of semiotics, iconography, visual anthropology and visual sociology.

With a big leap in time (but without departing from the topic of visibility) we arrive to our present days and our focus is shifted toward the online world. All the papers in this bigger unit are connected to digital communication: online reading and online media; selfie as a special type of image shared over the internet; and hashtags, that is the labels attached to images.

Krisztina Szabó analyses digital and visual literacy from the perspective of the role of visibility in contemporary online reading, and states that "visual elements are neither just illustrations, nor just explanatory additional elements, nor secondary qualities beside texts, but they have at least an equal or even dominating role over text in the online reading processes", in fact, "in some cases [...] the text is subordinated to the visual". Her aim with this examination is "to help create and develop online reading literacy surveys of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), by making the methodological framework more adequate".

Gergely Havasmező's paper is, in a way, a continuation of the previous one, as he presents the findings of an empirical research conducted on images published in the Hungarian online press. He distinguishes between two media groups based on whether they are published online or offline: "traditional" media which have a print version, their online versions thus being of secondary importance, and

“new” media, which exclusively have an online form. His hypothesis, that there are significantly more visual elements in the articles of the “new” media, gained confirmation. The other thesis “that significantly more visual elements have self-standing contentual value in the ‘new’ media and the images appear in roles that does not exist in the ‘traditional’ media at all”, got confirmed too, though less strongly.

These papers are followed by another tightly connected pair of works, both dealing with the *selfie* phenomenon, and both making reference to Lev Manovich’s Selfie-City project and Instagram studies. Trischa Goodnow’s analysis, which also relates to the rhetoric session of the book, focuses on the rhetorical implications of digital self portraiture for contemporary culture and states that “selfies reflect cultural perceptions about narrative, time, and values”. She highlights three main values which make the selfie culture even more powerful and perceivable: adventure, popularity and attractiveness. Goodnow describes the relationship between selfie and time that “this type of image communicates the ‘presentist’ nature of contemporary culture”.

James E. Katz and Elizabeth Thomas Crocker interpret selfie as a form of interpersonal communication, and they “see selfies as often filling an important conversational role”. “As symbolic representations of self” selfies “are signs that evoke or provoke variegated meanings, and thereby are communicating ideas that competent viewers can discern”. The authors examined the selfie phenomenon on the basis of frequency of making self-portraits, sharing them publicly or privately, staging/spontaneity dimensions and the motives of making selfies. They concluded that “the power of the facial image, containing as it does so much information and meaning, will doubtless remain an important feature of the way we interpret the world visually, emotionally, and psychologically. Truly, we live in a world of images.”

Ágnes Veszelszki’s paper deals with a new, image-bound, minimalistic type of text, the so-called hashtag, which can be attached as metainformation to (even selfie-like) pictures on social networking websites and microblogging services. She examines the relationship between image and text (e.g. Instagram photo and hashtag) on the examples #time, #truth, #tradition. Hashtag as metadata has the ability to append linguistic signs to an image, to facilitate its classification, archiving, retrieval and indicate authorship. With their sorting and searching function hashtags “not only connect different content or thematic blocs, but also connect users having similar fields of interests”. Hashtags are deictic, indexical and are also used to abbreviate messages and to add some kind of a stylistic touch to what is being said. In its broader sense, the hashtag may be taken as the marker of epistemological modality in relation to the text.

The last large thematic unit is comprised by three papers expressly reflecting on the relationship between education and visuality. Matthew Crippen deals with the works of John Dewey who “understood aesthetic experience as a dramatic process”. The author discusses “how visual experience is imbued with narrative and therefore temporal structure, and the importance of this to understanding and learning”. “Dewey favoured concepts of experience articulated by Plato and Aristotle, albeit giving experience more value than his predecessors.” These issues are discussed by Crippen in a modern knowledge approach, with particular focus on the classical *tekhnē* vs. *theōria* distinction which suggested that *tekhnē* is a “lesser form of knowledge than *theōria*, that is, theoretical or contemplative knowledge”. Dewey thinks that science and knowledge can be taken as a form of art. And what are the pedagogical implications of all this? “[...] we change the world and produce outcomes that change us. Thereby we learn.”

Almost as a continuation of this train of thought, András Benedek argues for the active involvement of students and the importance of visuality in learning, and presents the software *SysBook*. The online framework was developed by a research group of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. “Higher education has always been a unique laboratory for education-related innovations, concentrating significant research and development potentials with excellent subjects for experiments aiming at modernising education, i.e. students.” In the light of the findings of Benedek et al., the requirements of knowledge- and ICT-based society is best reflected by curricula in which “verbal and visual elements are presented in a one-to-one ratio, and where knowledge elements are organized into a network, would be scale-independent and structured as a graph”. The main criteria for such new type of (higher education) curricula can be expressed in six points: open online content; continuous synchronisation; automatic updating; content sharing and data security; unlimited memory (cloud services); a new creative learning environment.

The micro-content – *Micro-content Generation Framework as a Learning Innovation* presented by János Horváth Cz. – also forms part of this system. In essence, micro-content means that information is well structured, the units have limited volume, “while the validity of the information contained therein is guaranteed by the involvement of named authors, feedback by the community and proofreading provided by teachers”. The author briefly overviews the history of micro-forms from postcards to text messages, Twitter and Snapchat messages, and also makes reference to *SysBook*. On the basis of what we know about the information collection habits of current higher education students, it could prove an efficient means

of knowledge transfer to split content into smaller, more manageable chunks, and to let students create such information units for themselves.

The **tradition** of the Visual Learning Lab continues: our international conference will be held in 2017 as well, this time focusing on the three concepts of *virtual – visual – veridical*. It is also part of the tradition that the editors have checked all online references in the book before publication, so the date of last availability is not indicated after the URLs (but a note is made where the content is no longer available).

From 2016 Kristóf Nyíri will be replaced by Ágnes Veszelszki in the editorial of the series, but to maintain continuity, they will work together with Prof. András Benedek in the future. In order to ensure the solid theoretical foundations of the VLL workshops and the international conferences, Prof. Nyíri continues to take an active part in the implementation of these events. The editors are highly grateful and indebted to Kristóf Nyíri for his role in founding the research group, launching and editing the series, and for his outstandingly accurate work.

References

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