VISUAL CULTURE AND VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The fact that groups of people reflect different cultural traditions and economic and social backgrounds should begin to challenge the myth of universality of human experience and the social relationships, cultures and values that emerge from it. An intercultural communication process, developed to foster and support a positive approach to globalization would foster sensitivity and care between peoples in a potent, reciprocal process.

Each culture creates its own universe of symbolic meaning that structures and shapes the perception of reality which members of a specific clan or society experience. It is already a yeoman's task to decipher the complex web of interactions between anthropological, sociological, historical and cultural forces. This becomes exponentially exacerbated in multicultural communication and intercultural discourse. Modernist approaches to communication design do not support intercultural communication as they ignore the culture-destructive forces of globalization, by infiltrating and eliminating languages, removing customs and ceremonies, changing indigenous cultural values and social relationships and forms of expression. This article critically examines the limitations of communication design as currently taught and practiced.

VISUAL CULTURE

IT'S NOT WHAT ONE WANTS TO MAKE IT; IT IS WHAT IT IS

Linguistic globalization has existed as long as missionaries of powerful religions and emissaries of dominant governments have brought their social and cultural beliefs to others and tried to persuade them to abandon the particularities of and commitment to their own culture and transfer them to the virtues of another, or when it was in the interests of all parties to avoid conflict. Each culture has developed concepts of truth, value and merit, power and taboo. These socially constructed beliefs are honed, refined and sharpened, evolving over the culture's existence and are embedded in everything that the culture needs to maintain its inner equilibrium, establish its identity and present itself to other cultures. When in the intercultural exchange, messages do not tightly fit within the framework of indigenous value systems, the exchange is not only one-sided, but also not mutually beneficial; it is destructive.

Traditionally, verbal and textual communication have been recognized for their elaborate intricateness and complexity, even more so within intercultural communication activities, especially since most languages behave as closed systems, depending on indigenous cultural roots in religious and philosophical thought, technical evolution, specific potentialities facilitated by emancipation, quality of dependencies, interdependencies, independence from leadership, etc. Communication science primarily explores the dependencies on spoken and written languages, and the problems between oral and document dependent traditions. At court, oral and written testimony obtained from witnesses is notarized and forms the basis for initial declarations of fact around which truth is negotiated and established. When it comes to signed treaties, they are as dependable as the ethics of a culture is to its self-image in relation to another. In many parts of the world a contract is still sealed with a handshake, signaling the integrity of parties. Although visual or pictorial testimony is allowed, most is restricted to scientific presentations of facts. Because of western dependencies on textual contracts at court, within government and most academic institutions, understanding information processing within images (seeing, reading and interpreting) has been grossly neglected.

'Globalization,' the amalgam of interactions of a complex group of social phenomena that evolve in particular social contexts and settings, is assigned a very cursory and opaque nomenclature. This veils the magnitude of negative impact on small and fragile cultures, namely the greater unilateral gain of control by powerful cultures, and an unfortunate change in cultural characteristics from diversity to sameness. The quality of globalization depends on sensitive human dialogue and exchange, attached to specific areas of discourse like intercultural diplomacy, sophisticated forms of multilateral barter in commerce and economic negotiations, as well as the exchange of cultural goods embedded in artistic and ritual objects as well as ideas. In view of the steady decline in the use or complete erasure of indigenous languages, and the additional repercussions of the threat of impending loss of indigenous cultural legacies demonstrated by customs, rites and histories, it is urgent to review the present state of visual communication, specifically the quality of image and icon encoding, and the development of the necessary skills to aid intercultural communication.

The heritage of 'Modernism' and 'International styling' did not prepare visual communication designers well enough for the looming problems of globalization. When communication images, standing alone or in groups, or supporting text messages are constructed on the basis of limited cultural understanding there are great opportunities for breakdowns in the quality of discourse. Worse, insensitivity may create dangerous confrontations. Present-day education in visual communication design is still a very narrow pidgin language, mired in hundred-year old principles of formal construction, which even in their heyday did not deal with psychological, social and cultural communication factors, and therefore were far removed from successful intercultural communication. It was about primacy, compression of complexity, elimination of cultural distinctions and imposition of central European values – unfortunately –on cultures with long indigenous histories of visual expression. This needs to change.

PREAMBLE

A couple or more years ago, at a colloquium dealing with electronic global communication and visual culture, Donna Cox was at that time a colleague and senior graphic design professor at the School of Art and Design of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Cox studied electronic art before it entered the academic course menu as a subject, and had achieved the highest academic rank not through artistic experimentation, i.e., not through studio trial and error in the arts or in communication design or aesthetic theory, but as an outstanding visual programmer of scientific data for the National Center for Super-Computing Applications. She presented some very aesthetically interesting images. They were data-driven, using only fragments of the expressive classical visual vocabulary. Limited to the representation of specific data, they were very predictable. Although quite beautiful, they were not emotionally charged communication images. They were synthetic, scientific visualizations of data about arrangements of planets for planetariums, simulations of hurricanes or Internet webs, correlating the technical data gathered by various satellite probes and computers.

A vigorous debate ensued.

THE BONE

OF CONTENTION

Donna Cox suggested that her images could be magically metamorphosed from science into art, even into visual poetry, through the mere trick of giving her purely technical and scientific visualizations provocative Duchampian titles, and in that way move them instantaneously from their cool scientific context of logic into the emotive realm of art.

In opposition, a question was posed: if a communication-image bound to a specific context is moved from one context (science) to another (art), will it retain its value? For communication designers the question expanded into the problems of visual literacy in the service of globalization, as well as into the global failure of Internationalist and Modernist visual communication.

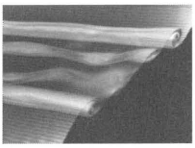
Figures 1A and 1B
Visualization of large-scale three-dimensional swirling strength, indicating speed of local fluid rotation in gravity current simulations. Image by David Bock of the (NCSA) National Center for Supercomputing Applications with simulation by M. Garcia, M. Cantero, University of Illinois and S. Balachandar, University of Florida, reproduced with permission.

Figures 2A, B, C, D and E
Visualization of a binary neutron star collision simulation using a variety of data representation techniques. Density is represented as a volume (surrounding cloud region in Bock 2.a image), transparent surfaces representing the boundary region between low and high density values, and as slice planes through the middle of the volume. Image by David Bock of the (NCSA) National Center for Supercomputing Applications, with simulation by A. Calder, E. Wang, and D. Swesty (formerly of NCSA), reproduced with permission.

Figures 3A, B and C
Visualization of the simulation of the formation of a galaxy. Image by David Bock of the (NCSA) National Center for Supercomputing Applications with simulation by M. Norman, G. Bryan (formerly of NCSA), reproduced with permission.

Figure 4
Visualization of rainwater distribution in an evolving thunderstorm simulation (the rainwater is represented as a volumetric region varying in intensity from dark to light).
Image by David Bock of the (NCSA) National Center for Supercomputing Applications with simulation by R. Wilhelmson of NCSA, reproduced with permission.

Figure 5a, b, c and d
Frames from an animation visualizing the development of a simulated hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico .Image by David Bock of the (NCSA) National Center for Supercomputing Applications with simulation by R. Wilhelmson of NCSA, reproduced with permission.



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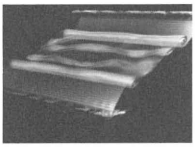

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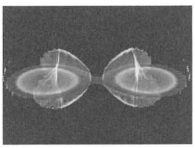

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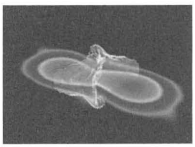

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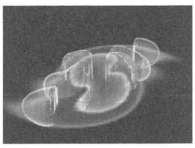

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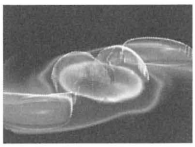

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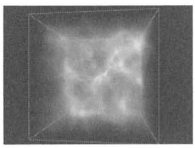

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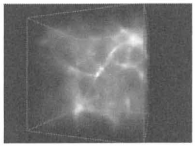

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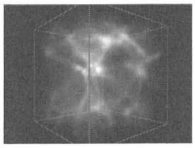

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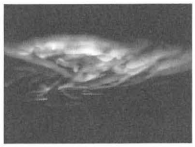

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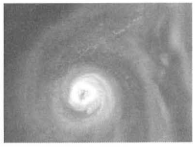

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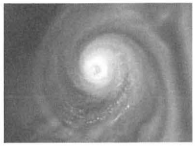

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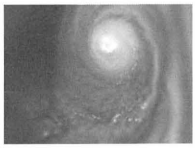


5C

5D

SCIENTIFIC

VISUALIZATION

'Scientific visualization' refers to any traditional technique, applied for information explication through graphics in maps, charts, graphs or diagrams, used before the evolution of fast, high-performance computers and other contemporary digital techniques. Donna Cox uses digital graphic animation and immersive techniques for constructing virtual realities or simulations of natural processes, transforming data into visual presentations. She uses accepted, well-understood and reproducible processes. Her work's characteristics depend on using computer graphic techniques to explore results from numerical analyses with the purpose to extract scientific meaning from complex, mostly multi-dimensional sets of data. In her work, visualization is directly connected to understanding the features and trends represented in the large data sets encountered in the gathering and analysis of data, which is then simulated with high-performance computers. The impetus and momentum for her work depends on three conditions: 1) scientific, and therefore dense, 2) researched and verified information and 3) a professional scientific audience interested in furthering the understanding of phenomena. The public as an audience experiences the data presentations as a windfall at cursory educational and public relation levels.

Computer simulation is as complex as necessity requires for a single or a network of computers to provide, instantaneously or over long periods of time, insight into dynamic operations and behaviors of specific systems and their subsystems, whether abstract or natural, observed or invented/conceptualized. The fairly new discipline of computer simulation has stepped into the shoes of traditionally abstract, mathematical modeling of complex systems found in the physical, biological and social sciences and various related technologies.

A COMPARISON:

DONNA COX AND RON HAYS – SCIENCE AND ART

There is nothing wrong with Cox taking a stance opposing traditional art in her work, as all artists must, to understand, evolve tools and methods with contemporary technologies and to inevitably mature with them. But there are differences between science and art.

In the early 1970s, at the WGBH Educational Foundation, Boston, the New Television Workshop under the direction of Fred Barzyk was supporting the development and creation of experimental video art. The initial motivation came from, among others, Ron Hays, a very ambitious electronic experimenter who connected synthetic images to the music of Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. He worked with a synthesizer developed for video and performance artist Nam June Paik by Shuya Ab, Paik's video engineer. Ron Hays catalogued the various feedback patterns from the oscilloscope into a cohesive as well as expressive visual vocabulary from which he chose the elements to construct qualities and personalities for electronic doppelgangers constituting his visual interpretation of the opera. (Unfortunately, there are no images available, as the technology of that time has vanished.)

However, the differences between Cox and Hays are substantial. Artists control the total creative process from beginning to end. Many visual results of scientific research are aesthetically intriguing, like Harold Edgerton's Milk-drop image, or Benoît B. Mandelbrot's fractal sets, but they are not art. Even Edgerton would always make clear that he considered himself not a fine-arts photographer but a scientist. In Cox's projects, the data and the visualization of the data are there for purely scientific purposes, not for artistic expression. Scientific researchers, specializing in the various academic disciplines, generated the data for her work. She depended on those who developed and synthesized the data to form the outline for the specific function of visualization to allow for understanding of processes, and those who developed the programs to visualize the data. Also, many of the time-consuming visualization processes depended on other members of the visualization team. If other researchers would take the same data sets for visualization and filter them through the same specific visualization processes, the results would be more or less identical.

THE DIFFERENCES

IN CONTEXT BETWEEN SCIENCE, ART AND COMMUNICATION DESIGN

But there is a distinct difference between scientific visualization and artistic expression; the efforts of science contributed over centuries to a reservoir of true statements about the world for the purpose of human physical survival; it fulfilled the needs for knowledge about phenomena. Meanwhile art contributed to the social and cultural mythology of society, massaging nonscientific truths embedded in personal, social and cultural values through filters of vision, philosophy and worldview, in which the aesthetic experience became a cultural catharsis, a spiritual release brought about by the best objects of art. Meanwhile, in the context of globalization, communication design diplomatically negotiates between one or more cultural languages. *Negotiation as such is not a requirement in science or art.*

It is true that contemporary art can be characterized by the fact that there is no clearly defined common ground, and therefore a wide range of modes can be and are delivered by artists. But art has never been about technology itself even during the time of Futurism when artists, architects and thinkers embraced technology to make statements about the unfolding world. Art has always been about object/image/performance-encapsulated concepts that function to emancipate the human spirit, or advise, lead or warn. Sure, artists are still concerned with visual perception, visual languages and visual literacy, traditional and contemporary technologies, tools and methods, but they are much more concerned with dealing with how social sensibilities are expanded and refined. Producing works of art or designing for intercultural communication is clearly quite different from Donna Cox' contributions to the scientific understanding of the universe. Even under the most liberal aesthetic conditions, her design of one of the first diagrams about the universal connectedness provided by the Internet does not frame an artistic statement. To accept her thesis confuses the process of isolating and mapping cool statistics with creating emotionally sensitive statements in the service of cultural communication. Not every intellectual makes a Duchamp. Artists struggle for decades to define the purpose and content of their work. Therefore it is hard to accept the concept that all work, scientific or artistic, is interchangeable at the flip of nomenclature.

Like the work of her colleagues, who simulate as accurately as possible, the dynamics of tsunamis and hurricanes, the effects of soil erosion after flood damage, or forest damage through insect infestation, the process is so closed and well defined, that no matter who the persons appointed to the task of organizing the visualizations, whether computer visualizer or scientific illustrator, they would to a very large extent be constrained by the material provided by the data banks and the conventions through which digital media accumulates information and offers ways to describe location, motion or depth.

In the scientific visualization of the stellar systems, unlike in poetic and metaphoric expressions, the concept of the universe has to be frozen and linked to the early visualization skills of Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei and other astronomers. Variable expressions are no longer welcome as they have to fit a hardened scientific vision and definition of the universe, its arrangements and complex and

highly precise structured interrelationships. No longer is there room for interpretation, imagination or poetry. Instead, plentiful space is opened by dazzling technology to model movement of objects in time rather than through a retrospective two-dimensional Gutenberg legacy.

Did Marcel Duchamp spin in his grave? May be. Projecting his intelligence forward by a hundred years, he would have hoped for art to be something much smarter by now than a mere nomenclature change. He had hoped for art to be culture building and mind challenging, definitely not for fulfilling the needs of cheap public relation vulgarities. At the same time the slight-of-hand cleverness of Cox made it urgently obvious that if visual communication design, in relation to art and technology, wants to accomplish its true mission of communication, namely to facilitate negotiations between culturally diverse social groups, it cannot allow itself to become haphazard or cavalier in dealing with social complexity bound by dual or multi-polar contexts. It can't be metaphorically stimulating or specific for one communication participant, while flat or casual for another.

REVISITING

THE TOWER OF BABEL

This colloquium at the University of Illinois, mentioned initially at the beginning of this paper, brought together a very diverse group of academic experts, each with a very specific stake in the discussion grounded in computer science or software engineering, robotics, linguistics, museum curation, art and communication design, among other disciplines. A multi-polar discourse ensued about what could or would be culturally more important, art or design, design styling or communication design, visual poetry or science. No matter how loud, energetic or chest thumping and posturing it became, or how it tried to justify or denigrate Cox's latest cavalier Duchampian interpretation, discussions turned harshly territorial and became from the standpoint of communication irrelevant.

All arguments avoided dealing with the true reality of 'visual communication,' namely that its degree of functionality, even in a single culture, is exceedingly complex, and bound to a myriad of specific needs, contexts and contents. These inadvertently will enter even more heightened stages of complexification in the context of coping with globalization. Most of the ideologists also forgot that communication relates to human biology and behavior, qualities of physical environments and the bias and value systems that emerge from cultural evolution and successful survival over time. It seemed useless to talk about 'visual culture' without considering a wider taxonomy of 'visual language,' including the audience (reader/viewer/user/thinker/decision-maker/citizen) shaped by culture and civilization.

Instead the discourse continued to look at the homeostatic traditions of object and image-makers, and the institutions that support them: publishing houses, museums, libraries, universities, art and design schools. The new groups of scientists charged with defining the complexification of invisible dynamics of interactions, those things that can't be directly seen by the eye – too atomic, molecular, too far away or gigantic and processes that must be described in object and image metaphors so that non-scientists can grasp and understand the concepts behind the discoveries – were also considered.

There was at least one benefit in this freewheeling discourse, even if just for that specific moment, it had to open up and let 'scientific visualization' in as one relevant part of 'visual language' and 'culture.'

VISUAL CULTURE:

IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW ONE CAN MANIPULATE IT;IT IS WHAT IT IS

Unfortunately, Cox's simplistic approach shifted the discussion away from pressing the fact that the scope of 'visual language' or 'visual communication' is much larger than the domains of art, design or science. It seemed unfortunate to just call attention to mind bending Dadaist axioms or one-directional principles of communication, using a professional jargon, that artists and designers use in conversation among themselves. The user-public can no longer be ignored. A true investigation of 'visual language,' therefore 'visual culture,' must be equally concerned with the sociology and psychology that surround audiences and users, and their preference for and ability to see/read, interpret, comprehend and retain information. Most importantly, to understand how they respond to and use images and objects in their daily life experiences, and how these go through dynamic changes during their application and use, vacillating from functional to nostalgic to symbolic.

Visual language cannot be separated from culture, as everything is connected and interwoven with culture. How do we understand the dynamics of a form, a concept or an idea? When is it aggressive or benign, passive or malignant? Can the Bauhaus or Constructivist languages of form and shape, or the dynamism of composition be truly understood and even felt, unless they can be paralleled with physical and emotional human experience? Visual language has aggregated and accrued over eons, a recorded and organized compendium of visual signal configurations to build a sturdy, somewhat dependable and useful language reservoir.

One also cannot separate present-day human experience from factors such as stages of human evolution or behavior in relationship to environments. Sophistication and emancipation through education or the dependence and independence of humans from the control of economies, as well as the cultural, social traditions of community need to be understood. In the same way, 'visual literacy' cannot be isolated or separated from any of the other languages or literacies. 'Visual literacy' is just one subset, making up the amalgam of aural, oral, tactile, spatial, verbal, written, social, behavioral, cultural, ethnic and other cultural sensory survival literacies. 'Visual literacy' is neither more nor less important. It is just one of the communication devices biology has evolved in the species over millennia.

ALL COMMUNICATION

IS ACTIVE DIPLOMACY IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

All communication, in many ways, deals with negotiation for conflict resolution, especially if the initiator of the message and the receiver inhabit different psychological, behavioral, educational, economic, social, political/ideological, religious or cultural environments. Philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, Marshall, 2005) believed that a fusion between two or more horizons is always necessary to aid in any communication process.

In "Le Ton Beau De Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language" (Hofstadter, 1998), Douglas Hofstadter explored the difficulties of translating poetry from one language to another, and not just because of rhyming difficulties. His explorations go deeper than simply translating between factual encyclopedic languages, including between cultural and social frames of reference, i.e., vernaculars of languages, modes of expression, puns, hierarchical and social etiquette, class, caste, culture, references and self-references, structure and function and artificial intelligence.

Hofstadter also reflected on his translations of *Gödel, Escher,* and Bach (Hofstadter, 1998) into a variety of languages, whose process led him organically to the translation of poetry. He termed translation of poetic material an "art of compromise," when too general or simply a word-by-word translation in contrast to *"poetic lie-sense,"* when trying to reflect the context and the contents of the poem in the culture and experience of the speaker of the language. For him, any translation/interpretation results in a lie; he claims no dictionary word is perfect and no sentence can capture all of the truth embedded in the original. In poetry, he hoped that a work is translated or *"poetic lie-sense"* is taken with grace and care, getting the overall 'sense' and the overall 'tone' of a line across, doing so with an elegant rhythm and a high-quality rhyme. Rhyme, sense, and tone do matter. Throwing any of them overboard would be destroying the quality of the poem.

DECIPHERING

A CULTURE

Translating

Properly translating requires knowledge of a culture's intricate interrelationships between anthropological and sociological aspects, its language and behavior, the roots and make up of its values that create identity and cultural distinction. Yet even further, sensitive skills of conversion of vast cultural information into the conventions of another culture in an easily understandable form that avoids distortion, is necessary (Hall, 1973, 1976, 1984, 1990). Communication design tries to explain the meaning of sentiments and conditions through a purely visual vocabulary of stance, gesture and gaze, as well as perspective (provided by the image author's position: looking up, down, through; panning, zooming in/out; and the selection of contrasts, light/dark, harsh/fine textures, passive/dynamic motion, sensitive/coarse color; etc.) to fortify understanding with text. The problem is that most visual communication designers know little or nothing about the use of images and icons in other cultures.

Interpreting

Moving a concept from one culture to another and establishing significant meaning and understanding may require a complete change of conditions, through the selection of analogical metaphors that position the concept more closely to the other culture's value scale and help bridge the sometimes enormous cultural gaps and ideological gulfs.

Invisible barriers, invisible incentives

Cultural differences establish invisible barriers in the process of decoding inter-cultural information. But it would be wrong to assume that pictures cannot produce limited cues about a reality. However, it cannot be assured that these cues are universally read, interpreted and understood.

As with all gestalt-related aspects, gregarious members of a culture will not be held back from trying to connect sets of nearly incomprehensible clues. Their skills are feisty and survival oriented. Through trial and error they advance their understanding and ability to follow and massage components into a cohesive whole - correctly or in error, i.e., at the end of WWII, formerly untouched cultures were shocked into contact with technologically sophisticated cultures (Mead, 1966; Lindstrom, 1993). In Melanesia, the tribes maintained that spirits of their ancestors had manufactured cargo-goods intended for the local indigenous tribal descendants. To attract the flying cargo-planes from overhead, tribal members built wooden plane decoys in the hope to lure one to land. They imagined a Christ-like missionary figure would alight, carrying a refrigerator or sewing machine. For another example, consider the seemingly impossible to solve puzzles like mathematician Erno Rubik's 'magic cube.' Even though absent of explicit rules, it provides entertainment and intellectual challenge as well as intuitive stimuli. For more reluctant, protective traditionalists and conservatives, the task becomes daunting. For the intimidated and frightened, the complexity becomes a negative challenge – threatening – incomprehensible and chaotic.

The easiest way to generate understanding through images is when they pertain to very common and logical realities. Unless there is a balance between challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990), Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Robinson claim that in visual communication "a certain amount of visual discrimination seems to be indispensable ... and that a person with only rudimentary perceptual skills, namely one who has never exercised visual discrimination ... will be unable to derive an aesthetic experience from any but the most simple forms." Because one cultural reality differs significantly from another, even if some realistic images have a chance to be read analogically, they challenge the Modernist credo that conventions of pictorial representations are easily shared and understood cross-culturally. But even then, to be efficient in communicating, the images must hold many of the cues through which persons connect their physical, emotional and cultural realities to the conventions.

The photographer Lewis Hine argued that most viewers/audiences believe that the camera creates a specific relational reality made up of environmental interrelationships between objects, landscapes and people. They believe that photographs are not artificially staged events or manipulations of reality. In his understanding the image must have all of the convincing aspects of presenting reality, but although things resemble objective reality, pictures nevertheless are not replications of reality. Their subjective nature is a filtered view through the author's perceptual frame.

The reading of metamorphic or symbolic images and specific styling is the arena with the most difficulties. Metaphors are language based, frequently colloquially linked and are not shared in the form of puns, fables or literary narratives (i.e., "it's raining cats and dogs"; "eating a hot dog," etc.). Symbols find their roots in mythology and frequently do not transfer easily from a western culture to another. A big culprit is 'graphic styling.' In styling, the selection and expression through 'cool' visual form, often masks a precariously slim content as well as narrow ideological implications.

GRAPHIC

STYLING

In communication design, each designer's individual ideological persuasion – populism, minimalism, surrealism or beat, hippy, punk or hip-hop – decides the choice of visual vocabulary and forms of expression. Styles are arbitrarily selected. They are short-lived. For example, in magazine design, there seems to be a five to seven-year cycle in which a magazine's styling has to be changed. In other areas the cycles can be much shorter or longer, depending on market conditions. Styles are usually disconnected from contents and contexts. Worse, they are totally disconnected from culture. During the thirties, the industrial designer Raymond Loewy introduced styling to the various transportation and automotive industries. His designs did improve the exterior looks but did not improve performance or function; neither did General Motors' design chief, Harley Earl, who introduced arbitrary fins on Cadillacs as early as 1948. Styles are superimpositions of new identities on common, fading or aging endeavors. Although very rare now, sometimes styles are inspired at significant moments in time when all creative ventures (in architecture, industrial design, the visual arts, literature and music) share an overarching worldview.

The social significance of style lies in its rarity or newness. Its exclusivity must stand out from other distinct styles adopted by other competitive entities. The rarity of a style creates its own territoriality, and if it is accepted by a significantly high position group in the social hierarchy, it creates the group's exclusive identity. Styles in many ways signal social and cultural territories. Visual communication styles relate much more to the prevailing, fashionable visual expression of the day. Since style is no longer bound to cultural conventions other than marketing, styles have to be simple, easily learned; therefore they are strongly promoted by the media. Especially in globalization, style seems to be a barrier rather than a facilitator, as there are few cultural bridges that are bound by custom and tradition.

VISUAL

CONVENTIONS

Visual conventions behave very much like the conventions of all living languages; they are dynamic. The narrow familiarity through an art/design education for image-makers with conventions frozen in present-day modishness in no way assures ease or cognition regarding the reader/audience's ability to interpret the contents or context of an image. As always has been true, the quality of meaning emerges from the reader's sophistication, experience and contextual knowledge. For the public, visual literacy comes as an afterthought. It is not clear that greater education would increase the ability to read the signals and signs. The function of the viewer/audience's visual acuity has little to do with intuitively absorbing and reacting to visual clues. Instead of a cognitively critical viewing process, it has rather to do with flight/fight instinctive reactions and immediate physical ramifications.

It is also interesting to point out that the environmental conditions of the surrounding landscape foster an instinctive understanding of concepts like 'upright' and relationships of objects in relationship to light. Observing conventional art and design students viewing abstract painted images, one finds they frequently read the cues in the image and then turn a painting until it matches the original north-south position in which it was painted. Eskimos behave differently, inhabiting a much more horizontal and elliptical environment, bounded by unlimited vastness and lack of verticality. They read images positioned without reference to north-south with ease. Judith Kleinfeld (Kleinfeld, 1991) points to the fact that ecological and cultural characteristics of Eskimo society lead to significantly higher levels of visual memory. A test of visual memory was given to 501 Caucasian (urban) and 125 Eskimo (village) children. Village Eskimo children demonstrated significantly higher levels of visual memory. Visual memory was also found to increase significantly with age. Up to sixty-five percent of teachers in Eskimo villages noted the unusually high ability of Eskimo students in recalling visual detail or mentioned their high performance in tasks depending partly upon this ability.

Eskimo space is a smoothly experienced continuum (Mihalcheon, 2005), flexible and unpredictable. It is directional rather than dimensional or metric. There is no need for a single symbolic image or for ownership of the terrain – no need for planting markers and flags. The Eskimo has always accepted the coefficient and reciprocal qualities of his surroundings, required by his nomadic methods of attaining food along with constantly shifting conditions (species, migrations, seasons, weather conditions). The Eskimo embraces his environment and works within nature as a synergetic component in a highly sensitive total organism, not like a western controller or strategist. He is at ease with the dynamism of the terrain confronting him.

In contrast, perception of western space is not haptic or real, tactile or natural. Space is reduced into an abstract abbreviation of a diagram. It is striated, showing the seats of power or points of origination. It is a proportionally grided system of metric references to calculate and pre-determine distances for consistency and dependability. Concerned and preoccupied by striated space and dependent on distance vision, as well as horizons, the westerner is uncomfortable reading Eskimo images in which animals seem to float, without land under feet and hoofs, because the ground constantly changes direction, and as different viewpoints shift, the body has to move in time and space, coming to rest upside down. The Eskimo is unconcerned with horizons, for he represents thoughts and entities in free relation to one another, rather than as opposed to a striated and pre-defined contextual setting of horizontals and verticals.

CULTURAL

STAKEHOLDERS

Goodwin Watson (Watson, 1974) suggests that in all social systems, stakeholders of social, political or economic investment become gatekeepers with serious intellectual interests and commitments to maintaining the culture in its established configurations. They will make all effort to protect against any intrusion or alteration, positive or negative. Stakeholders prefer to maintain the balance between all forces, unless there is a proportionally greater promise of benefit. The various rationales of the stakeholders' vested interests construct the conceptual territorial line in the sand, their first line of defense: homeostasis, habit, primacy, selective perception, dependence, superego, insecurity and regression; and their social and cultural system's corollaries: conformity to norms, systemic and cultural coherence, vested interests, the sacrosanct/shibboleth and automatic rejection of outsiders and their views.

Watson points to cultural norms, which create measures of loyalty, evolve outlines for conduct that invite or prohibit participation, condemn and weed out any deviance. He explains that through an organic resistance, even miniscule parts take on the resistance of the whole. Changing a part is perceived as an attack on the whole. He also discusses that every culture clings to something revered, that lives in a void, is metaphorically dynamic and not clearly defined, but is considered untouchable, beyond the reach of reason.

It is much easier for most to accept E. O. Wilson's study of the biological basis for all social behavior when it is applied specifically to his insect research subjects, but leaves the implications for human ecology in doubt, when he introduces the analogy that human behavior is the product of heredity, environment and the sum of past experiences. Because of human idealism, his argument that 'free will' is just an erroneous conceptual illusion is hard for most Americans to accept (Wilson, 1979, 2000).

Sociologists are able to identify the positive moral incentives cultures provide, which are considered by the majority of members in their particular choices for the greater benefit, evolution and survival of a culture, while maintaining it now and in preparation for the future. Preservation of traditional values and history or condemnations of amoral or unethical behavior are important, when failure to act occurs in certain culture-destructive ways, these also may qualify as moral incentives. Moral incentives build cultural self-esteem, communal approval and social admiration. Rejection of moral incentives usually results in condemnation or ostracism of individuals or groups. Positive moral incentives are grounded in cultural altruism. Advantageous, beneficial and gainful incentives are offered when a culture and its members, in an exchange, can expect certain rewards for changing traditions and adopting new social, economic and political worldviews. When less powerful cultures are forced by powerful, assertive and domineering cultures into a discourse, the incentives offered are usually coercive, rooted in loss, pain, alienation, embargo, punishment or loss of social status and ideological territory.

Even altruism activates a dynamic quest for proxemic incentives, responding to ever-shifting requirements of human needs for expansion of physical, emotional and ideological territories in which even Mother Theresa was a keen competitor. Who could have given more away than she? She owned nothing, but shared everything.

SOCIAL

CAPITAL

The term 'social capital' describes an intercultural aggregate of social skills owned, practiced and appreciated by individuals; there are social units in a system of intercultural connections that engender social obligations, like fostering cooperative relationships that facilitate collective resolution of problems. Although social capital is understood as an economic definition, in reality it represents a spectrum of psychological and cultural factors and functions, all of which share a focus on a culture of trust and tolerance and the ability of people to work together for common purposes.

The discussion of social capital is nothing new. It has roots in Adam Smith's "The Theory of Moral Sentiments," 1759, and has been explored through Emil Dürkheim's normative sociological explorations of tangible characteristics (Nisbet, 1974) that promise high returns on people's quality of life, built on good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among individuals and institutions that make up the social units of a culture. Nearly all cultural positivists have shown empathies for the promotion of social capital, including Marx (Von Mises, 1936) Weber, (Baehr, Wells, 2002).

The wealth of humanity is not fiscal. It lies in the shared cultural aggregate of intellectual and physical artifacts, as well as the classification and recording of the historic evolution of skills and insights embedded in them. Specifically, the value lies in language and in the descriptions encapsulated in cultural metaphors used to give them meaning and value. If not safeguarded, globalization, with its major focus on efficiency, expedience and commerce, seems bound to eliminate many of those aspects.

Linguist K. David Harrison, Swarthmore College, states that some 7,000 distinct languages are spoken in the world today, and one of them dies about every two weeks. This rate of language extinction is very alarming. It far exceeds that of birds, mammals, fish or plants and that language loss often parallels loss of biological species. More than half of the world's human languages have no written form, therefore, he warns, when the last speaker of many of these languages vanishes, the language will be lost because there are no dictionaries, no literature, no text of any kind. Losing languages translates directly into losing knowledge. Most of what humans know about the world is encoded in spoken/written languages. With their loss, centuries of human thought and knowledge are simultaneously lost. Traveling across the American continent, one becomes aware of indicators, that corporations, clubs and church groups have adopted a highway mile or more and sponsor its maintenance and clean up. The venerable Audubon Society monitors bird species to protect them and their wilderness habitats. Whole development-projects are put on hold by court intervention, because rare species of birds, fish or turtles would be displaced. Wilderness societies like the Sierra Club and Nature Conservancy advocate for the preservation of land, trees and wild life, against industrial intrusion and conversion of wilderness into public recreational lands, while individual citizens 'adopt' or sponsor zoo animals of endangered species. But it is totally curious that there are few signs of public concern and advocacy outside the academic community for the protection of endangered indigenous cultures, languages and customs. With Darwinian callousness, namely survival of the fittest, the powerful know that their cultures are relatively safe in the process of globalization, and in an inhuman gesture to a more defenseless tribal man, care little about his vulnerability and those things that speak of more varied, diverse and richer worlds.

LOOSING

LANGUAGE, LOOSING CULTURE, LOOSING KNOWLEDGE

On January 25, 2008, the Associated Press reported that Marie Smith Jones, who had worked to preserve her heritage as the last full-blooded member of Alaska's Eyak Indians died at the age of 89. She was the last fluent speaker of her native language. Marie Smith Jones worked diligently to preserve Eyak, a branch of the Athabaskan Indian language family tree. Her efforts were to construct a written record of the language so future generations would have the chance to resurrect it. Marie Smith Jones spoke twice at the United Nations on peace and the importance of indigenous languages. "With her death, the Eyak language becomes extinct," Michael Krauss, a linguist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, who collaborated with her, said. He believes that in all nearly twenty native Alaskan languages are at great risk of disappearing. He fears that with it the unique intellectual heritage of this part of the world also risks the same fate. Krauss described her as a "wonderfully ordinary Eyak lady who lived to a ripe old age not because of an easy life but because of a rather hard life, coming up and surviving as an Eyak in the 20th century." Being the last of her kind for the last fifteen years, Krauss said, "was a tragic mantle that [Ms. Jones] bore with great dignity, grace, and spirit."

ATTEMPTS

TO STREAMLINE WORLD LANGUAGES

In 1973, Irish (Gaeilge) was accorded 'treaty language' status by the European Union with the advantage that the founding treaty was restated in Irish. Irish (Gaeilge) was declared one of the authentic languages with which to correspond with EU institutions. However, despite being the first official language of Ireland, including its minority-language status in Northern Ireland, Irish was not made an official working language of the EU until January 1, 2007, which meant that until then legislation approved by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers was not translated into Irish. Because there are only 538,500 citizens who use Irish on a daily basis (of a maximum of 1,660,000 speakers in a population of 4,240,000), there is fear that the EU will see the requirement for Irish as too cumbersome and expensive, and favor the Anglicization of its communication with Ireland. Even though one easily thinks that after achieving Irish independence, the number of citizens speaking Irish would have increased, today's facts show a serious decline, with possible reasons due to the state's pressure on Irish-speakers to use English, the primary language of education and employment. The December 2006 government announcement of a twenty-year plan to help Ireland become a fully bilingual country, encouraging the use of Irish language in daily life, does not stave off its decline or possibility of ceasing to exist.

Supposedly, when Bill Gates launched Microsoft's Encarta World Dictionary in 1993, using his "one world, one dictionary" slogan, he was considered a representative of an evil totalitarian empire, because in his Internationalist attempt to streamline world languages, he ran immediately afoul with the Irish culture, in which many scholars had observed the serious decline of their root languages and the erosion of Irish language, which was slowly giving in to English. They argued that the Belfast Agreement recognized that all languages indigenous to Ireland are part of the cultural wealth of the nation, and will continue to be central to the social development of the Republic and Northern Ireland and worked diligently to rebuild the Irish language from the ground up. They hoped that mankind would never descend into the abyss of making a uniform world. "One world, one language" seemed just a generation away. Gates was blamed for a false totalitarian, culture-negating ideal. "One mind, one world, one word dictionary" was considered by many as a retailing gimmick. But it loomed heavily atop Irish cultural survival. Under great pressure and sharp rejection, Microsoft developed an Irish language version and publicized its accomplishment: "At Microsoft, we believe that people and their communities around the world are more likely to benefit from technology when it is available in their native language. This commitment is shared at Microsoft Ireland where we have developed Irish language versions of our popular Windows and Office products."

SOCIOLINGUISTICS

All linguistic systems, including 'visual language,' innately respond to behavioral, social and cultural needs of a group (Meyerhoff, 2006); supporting the person's self identity, that of groups and signaling clearly to others their territorial status in perceived hierarchies. In 'visual language' as in sociolinguistics, each segment of its taxonomy is organized to accommodate high and low, casual and formal aspects of a language. Designers need not agree or even like these facts, all living languages have constant and dynamic shifts, but designers need to understand and appreciate the cultural and social contexts. If citizens need to understand and appreciate the complexity of the world in the process of globalization, they need to become tolerant, but not necessarily to share the same experiences. A contemporary sociolinguistic view of 'visual language' would not exclude any visual statement, but would rather place it clearly into a functional taxonomy in which it is not pitted against everything, but placed into an analysis within its appropriate context.

For example, one may or may not find the Hallmark greeting card of high artistic value or of great design merit. But the outsider's or the elite communication designer's opinion does not really matter. If the Hallmark card is a well functioning device in daily life, that helps individuals negotiate their everyday social contracts, and if the culture agrees that greeting cards are useful communication devices with strong predictable social ramifications, then greeting cards have social and cultural standing. The analyses of their merit by art or design critics may be interesting, but this is totally irrelevant. Today's sociology tries to look at things as they are, rather than how they are fitted into a power hierarchy.

Any monolithic 'visual language' (or in fact any temporally dominating design style) depends to a great degree on isolation that is artificially introduced and cultivated. For example, Hitler's banishment of modern expressive art 'degenerate art,' did not stop the evolution of Expressionism, but gave room for a short period of time to a very stilted German fascist iconography that infiltrated all homes, in some cases even the homes of the artistic and intellectual elite.

Ideally, most citizens would prefer a socially desirable segregation between the strata of the power community and the rest of the public, looking to find or construct their own rationales for forming their identities as part of communities. But the reality is that all clans, tribes and communities strive to define their identities and values for all through indigenous architecture, the specific holdings and collections of museums, which are clear indications of a community's values. Because the social codes for all cultures are defined by an elite (academic intelligentsia, journalistic perspective, publishing, education, rhetoric of church, government and commerce) and accepted by a majority, individuals select from them, to underscore the philosophical gestalt that supports their representational identity to others in a relentless dynamic competition for status and hierarchical standing (economic class, education, professional standing and imposed or self-imposed caste, sub-culture and interest community).

Sociolinguistics offers opportunities to isolate features from the complex system of linguistic forms. It presents opportunities to construct a discourse that indicates either close or distant social relationships between speaker and audience. It makes clear when a narrative is used in particular formal or informal situations and marks the significant elements of the situation (gravity, triviality, insignificance, etc.). 'Visual communication' has not matured to that point. It is still neutral, frequently presenting important and trivial subjects in the same visual dress. A sound approach would compare the limited principles of visual literacy with the linguistic paradigm of social-rhetorical theory, and learn from it. This would have two very valuable ramifications. Visual communication would become more nuanced and sensitive, and the designer broader and better educated.

In modern rhetorical theory, while the arts continuously redefined aesthetics, the value of a literary contribution moved from focus on the author to the specificity of narratives and the preparedness or receptivity of audiences. A new value emerged – a product of a synthesized experience – energized by the social material and cultural baggage that an audience brings. Linguists knew early that all perceptions of truth are flexible from well informed to erroneously constructed. Perceptions are sturdy; they withstand enormous assault, as any national election will bear out. They are what they are. They can be altered over time, but not instantaneously. For that the information has to be culturally relevant.

The Governance Through Metaphor Project

The Union of International Associations, Brussels, Belgium, is a century old, non-profit research organization investigating the use of metaphor as a tool to further possibilities for a sustainable global civil society, promoting and facilitating understanding of representations of valid interests in all human activities: philosophical, religious, ideological beliefs and scientific, artistic and trade-related activities, in response to world problems. Since the 1980s the association has been exploring the role of metaphor in relation to governance, understanding world problems and the articulation of more appropriate and transformative organizational strategies.

Even though metaphors are a natural form of presentation in many cultures, the information gleaned from the "Governance Through Metaphor Project" points to many cultural constraints inherent in each language, social and cultural communication processes (verbal/written) and certain characteristics embedded in some languages that facilitate or hinder comprehension and are not easily overcome. In addition, there exists the dilemma of many possible views concerning the nature of sustainable human development. The use of metaphor as a vital ingredient in global negotiations has not been systematically and deliberately explored to overcome fundamental communication weaknesses.

VISUAL

METAPHOR IN GLOBAL USE

In its political eagerness to control, visual communication design is proud of having persuaded educational institutions to eliminate illustration programs all together. Before design became so powerful, a general education would celebrate the metaphoric contributions by Francisco de Goya or Leonard Baskin. Artists like Ben Shahn and Saul Steinberg were always part of the cultural discussion, and so was the work of David Stone Martin, Alice and Martin Provensen, Bob Peak, Franklin McMahon, Bernie Fuchs, Fred Otnes, Tomi Ungerer, Gary Kelley, Ronald Searle, André Francois, Ralph Steadman, Edward Gorey, Geoffrey Moss and Brad Holland, among many others. David Stone Martin was known for capturing the rhythmic energies of jazz; Ben Shahn for social and political reporting; and Saul Steinberg as an insightful cultural observer and literate critic. Ronald Searle and André Francois were contributing with great humor and cultural wisdom; and Tomi Ungerer as satirical social observer; while Geoffrey Moss (featured in next pages) created images that stand alone, without any support of text; Brad Holland and Ralph Steadman still exploit visual opportunities by inventing smart, surreal and sardonic editorial and political statements. These illustrators are known for their ability to invent provocative communication metaphors. *(See table 1 for web addresses of artists/ illustrators mentioned.)*

Designers have lost their ability to originate images and have thrown out this skill with the technological bathwater. They are now primarily excellent typographers in relationship to times before type generating software came into existence, but now that everybody knows the typographic styling codes, designers stand exposed, incompetent as visual communicators, having lost the important skill of developing visual metaphor that can stand up on its own without textual support. They have relinquished this territory totally to photographers.

A look at any annual, which supposedly presents the best and most successful visual communication projects, shows redundancy, repetition, predictability and flatness of design metaphors. For example: the Shoshin Society catalogue (Helmken, 1983) presenting contributions of the most prominent American designers to a poster exhibition that commemorated the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could be organized into very few categories of visual content, signaling a dearth of metaphor development.

Poster design in Poland, especially the work by Roman Cieslewicz, Jerzy Czerniawski, Mieczyslaw Gorowski, Franciszek Starowieyski and Leszek Wisniewski, is a good example of a rich and metaphor-laden visual language. In film one can test the contribution and collaboration of sound and movable images that support the narrative. In good films, both sound and film tracks usually can stand independently, making sense. Not so in visual communication design. If the type message is removed, the images make little sense. There is visual silence, induced by visual one-liners.

Here and there throughout this paper Geoffrey Moss' political drawings appear – they are not visually silent. Syndicated without 'text captions,' they are an example of pure visual communication. He is best known for his book of political satire, *The Art and Politics of Geoffrey Moss* (with a foreword by Dan Rather). To his credit, he has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; has three university degrees and is a teacher and lecturer on conceptual thinking. His work has appeared in *The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report* and many others.

In view of Modernism's many failures regarding its attempts to limit diverse cultural expression by oversimplification, streamlining and standardizing forms of expression and visual and verbal languages, it is time to look at the significance and benefits of cultural diversity, through which individual cultural qualities contribute to an understanding of the infinite complexities that create perceptions of the universe, and through them the value systems that support these views. Much of the thinking in communication design stems from the past. Philosophers Susanne Langer and Ernst Cassierer[1] would give great credit to the logic, order, clarity and science embedded in information design and the required skills of transformation, projection to develop alternative descriptive systems, of invention of symbolic modes, while controlling the variable relationship of form and content. They would open up a serious discussion on Immanuel Kant's "adventure of ideas" – this suggests a need to reflect on the phenomenal character of experience, which is messy and unpredictable. They would want communicators to begin to investigate the spiritual function of symbols, which vacillate between superstition on one side and frozen, dogmatic righteous beliefs on the other, as well as on emotions, through which all information is filtered, and which classifies useful and important or negligible items. They form the mental state associated with a wide variety of feelings, thoughts and behaviors, as well as psychological and physiological responses.

TABLE 1

American, English, French and Polish artists and illustrators who strongly use visual metaphor

Baskin, Leonard
http://www.smith.edu/artmuseum/exhibitions/baskin/index.htm;

http://lts.brandeis.edu/research/archivesspeccoll/events/baskin/introduction/introduction.html;

English, Mark
http://www.markenglishonline.com/images01.htm

http://www.markenglishonline.com/images02.htm

http://www.illustrationacademy.com/MarkEnglish.htm#

Francois, Andre
http://www.artnet.com/artist/178013/andre-francois.html

Fuchs, Bernie
http://www.famous-artists-school.com/index.php/fas/bernie_fuchs/

Gory, Edward
http://www.lunaea.com/words/gorey/

Holland, Brad
http://www.bradholland.net/beta/portfolios/portfolio-Edi.html

Kelley, Gary
http://www.allposters.com/gallery.asp?aid=4701111 66&c=c&search=25671&DestType=12&Referrer%20 =http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=Gary+Kelle y&btnG=Google+Search&aq=f&oq=&KWID=12620714 &KEYWORD=Gary+Kelley&SEM=lang%3D1%26c%3Dc %26search%3D25671%26AID%3D470111166%26KWI D%3D12620714%26Keyword%3DGary%2BKelley

http://www.illustrationacademy.com/SanFran/sfweb-pics/jsviewer1.3%20copy/show.html

http://www.illustrationacademy.com/SanFran/SF-07web/SFgaryslideshow/Garyslides07.html

McMahon, Franklin
http://mcmahonartgallery.com/originalartwork.html

Otnes, Fred
http://reecegalleries.com/Paintings/Otnes/Otnes_Intro.html

http://www.veer.com/products/artistgallery.aspx?artist=2843
http://www.illustrator.net/fotnes/default.asp

Peak, Bob
http://www.bobpeak.com/

Searle, Ronald
http://www.ronaldsearle.co.uk/

http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicao/744086.html

http://lambiek.net/artists/s/searle_ronald.htm

Steadman, Ralph
http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/search/cartoon_item/Ralph%20Steadman+AND+artist:%22Ralph+Steadman%22

Steinberg, Saul
http://www.saulsteinbergfoundation.org/gallery.html

http://www.nga.gov/fcgi-bin/gemini.pl?slide=1&artist=52

http://www.cartoonbank.com/Steinberg/prints_steinberg_bio.asp

Ungerer, Tomi
http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/ungerer/

http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/07/27/arts/0727-KENNEDY_index.html

http://thenonist.com/index.php/thenonist/permalink/perverse_subversive_and_absurd/

Polish designers/illustrators

Cieslewicz, Roman
http://www.theartofposter.com/search2.asp?author=Cieslewicz+Roman&title=&years=&category=all&country=all&print=all&director=&titleo=&actor=&countryp=all&authorp=&id=&Submit=++Search++

Czerniawski, Jerzy
http://www.theartofposter.com/search2.asp?author=Czerniawski+Jerzy&title=&years=&category=all&country=all&print=all&director=&titleo=&actor=&countryp=all&authorp=&id=&Submit=++Search++

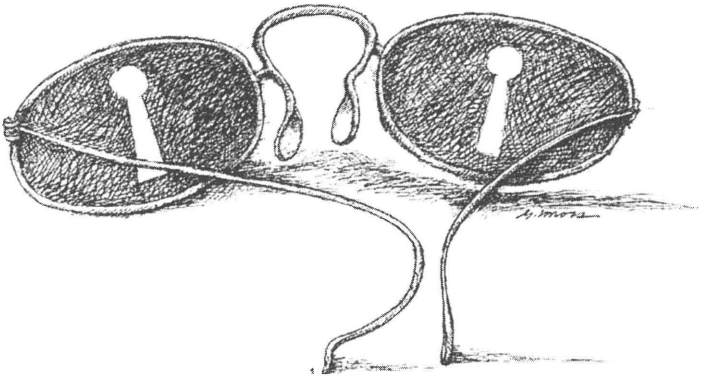
Gorowski, Mieczyslaw
http://www.theartofposter.com/search2.asp?author=Gorowski+Mieczyslaw&title=&years=&category=all&country=all&print=all&director=&titleo=&actor=&countryp=all&authorp=&id=&Submit=++Search++

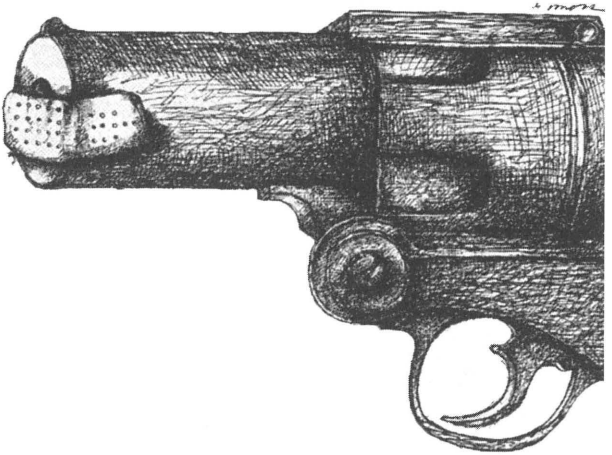
Starowieyski, Franciszek
http://www.posterpage.ch/exhib/ex81_sta/ex81_sta.htm

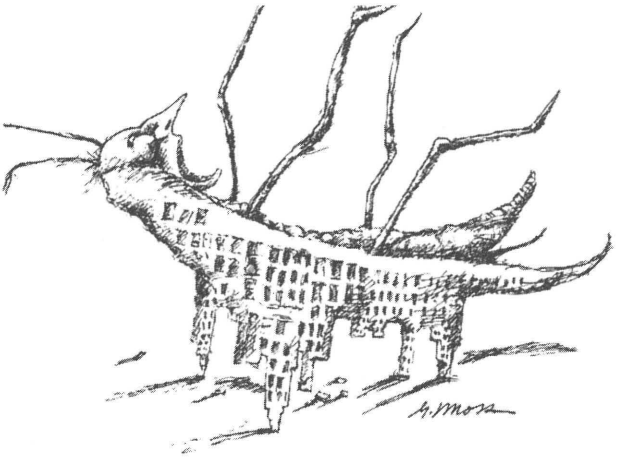
http://www.theartofposter.com/search2.asp?author=Starowieyski+Franciszek&title=&years=&category=all&country=all&print=all&director=&titleo=&actor=&countryp=all&authorp=&id=&Submit=++Search++

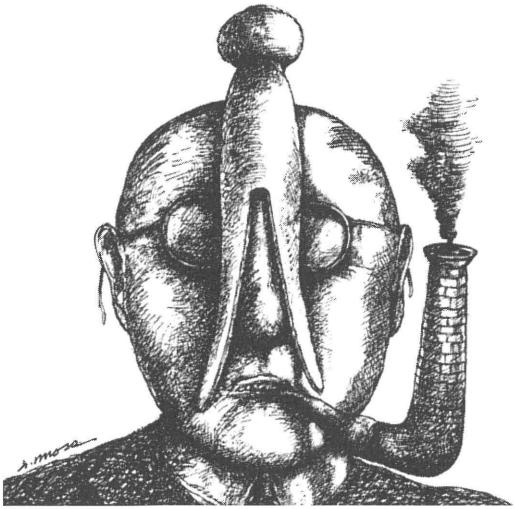
Wisniewski, Leszek
http://www.theartofposter.com/search2.asp?author=Wisniewski+Leszek&title=&years=&category=all&country=all&print=all&director=&titleo=&actor=&countryp=all&authorp=&id=&Submit=++Search++

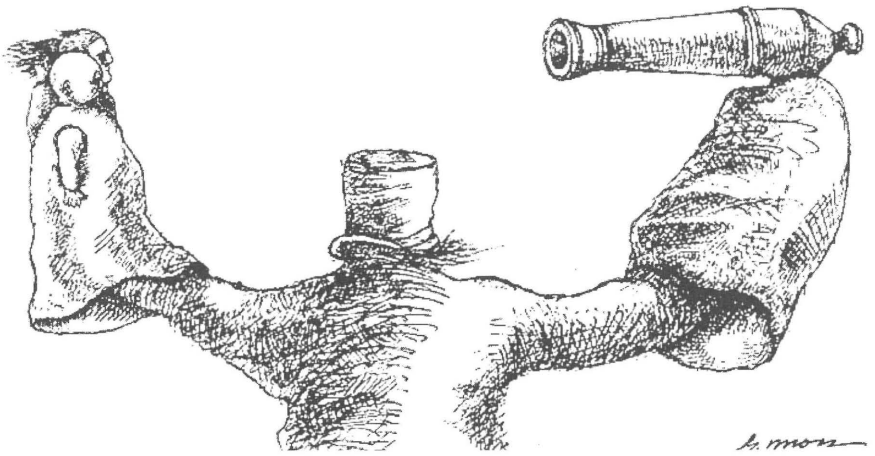
The following images by Geoffrey Moss demonstrate wordless communication. Reproduced with permission.

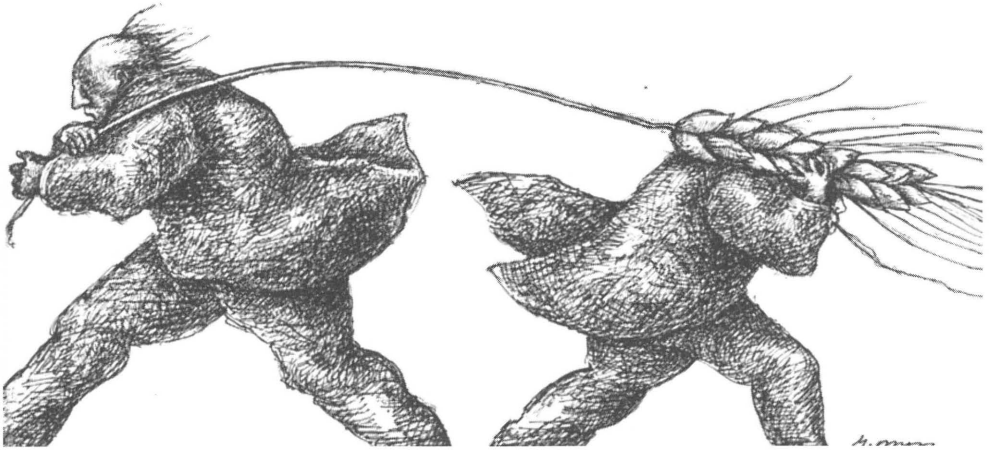


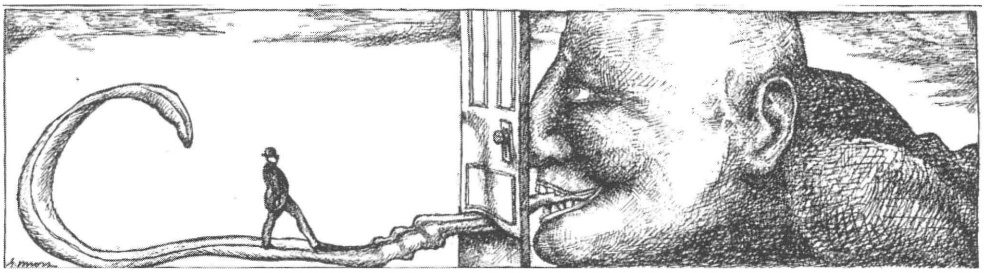


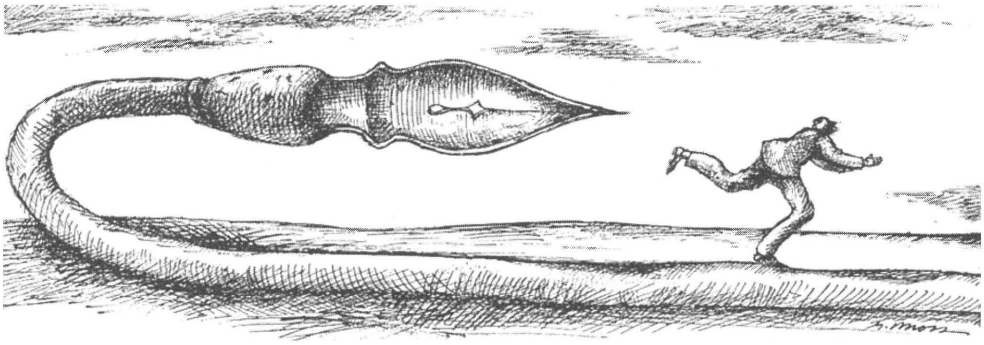












CONCLUSION

Over the past century, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and linguists have investigated and revealed principles of communication. They have contributed variously to theoretical knowledge on processes and necessary aptitudes that facilitate or interfere with communication within complex human environments. The communication practice has not yet applied and tested their revelations.

Facts that humans cannot refuse, but must communicate to assure their survival have been underlined and stressed, and that all forms (personal, cultural, social/hierarchical, professional, formal/informal) that make up these most vital areas are necessary (verbal, textual, gestural, spatial, tactile, still/moving, virtual/real). Everything, from dress, hairstyle to linguistic fidelity or sloppiness, including silence or deliberate or unintentional removal from the communication process becomes an issue in forming perceptions about the speaker, the message, and the intent. Each culture is self-absorbed by its own survival issues and will deal with others when forced, or when circumstances are convenient or beneficial. Most of the assembled perceptions of another culture are stereotypical – are distortions of reality – with a selected view of some coarse characteristics that have roots in some behavior, but are formulaic and oversimplified. They usually lag behind in timeframe, referring to bygone times rather than current behaviors. Stereotypical views are very difficult to reverse, because the response to a message equals that of a well-trained boxer, who presumes to understand the characteristics of his potential adversaries, and instinctively in split seconds, responds intuitively to the information at hand.

Over the period of human existence the major cultural investment has been in recording information in textual form, fostered by ancient efficient traditions of collecting and storing written data in form of tablets, papyrus scrolls and parchment pages, and expediently continued into the present by the ingenious printing and reproduction processes found in many cultures. The communication processes of state, court, church and academy happen primarily through text, and for the uneducated through highly abbreviated image narratives, like the fourteen Stations of the Cross in early Christian traditions, or contemporary comic strips. Children are introduced to reading text at a very early age and the reading curriculum accelerates in complexity (grammar, vocabularies, metaphors, critical analysis) throughout adolescence, coming to fruition during formal academic education, which continues to be predominantly text/word based – lectures, reading assignments, written tests, theses and dissertations.

Much less focus has been placed on the visual, especially outside of the visual presentation of emotionally cool, scientific information. Because American art and design schools have fostered self-expression, the poetics of literature are frequently crippled in the resulting designers' inabilities to cross cultural lines and barriers. In relationship to massive efforts in textual education, only a small percentage of educators and students are seriously investigating visual phenomena, visual language and visual literacy. Very few students take courses in art history (a field of expertise, which in itself is already highly specialized and removed from everyday reality), or critical analysis of how images are viewed and interpreted, with the result that the public's understanding of the function and contents of images and icons is lagging far behind the word and text worlds.

In the early 1960s, in a lecture, Gyory Kepes, artist, designer and founder of Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, seemed to convey the idea that in the future the image/icon would become more powerful and important than text, especially because of global needs for better intercultural communication. He did not provide deep rationales.[2] However, communication designers, who used this erroneously as a professional banner of their communication competence, quickly picked up his thoughts. Kepes' promise has not

become reality and it most likely can't, because to accomplish intercultural visual communication there are components that need to be addressed by art/design schools as well as universities, namely an intercultural visual communication theory, that is not Eurocentric, but is in response to various cultural visual literacies. General communication design must take notice that a truth on this side of the mountains is possibly an unsettling error on the other (Blaise Pascal paraphrased).

Cultural communication is not a process in which professionals speak just to other professionals. It requires not only a deep commitment to cultural understanding through which communication between people of all kinds of differences in social, economic, and ideological strata, is facilitated, but also the willingness to educate the public, giving them everyday tools to seamlessly participate. At this point in time, sophisticated and sensitive intercultural visual communication stays a utopian ideal. Unless academic institutions begin to provide directions for integrating theory into practice, visual communication fidelity will stay an utopian ideal.

1 Suzanne Langer translated and represented Ernst Cassierer's work in the United States.

2 Gyorgy Kepes formally wrote very little, but actively demonstrated ideas through his own work, teaching and editing the work and ideas of key modernists.

AUTHOR NOTE

Dietmar R. Winkler is professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. He has decades of experience as a notable communication designer and design educator in the roles of professor, director and dean. Since 1960, he has been examining and writing about issues affecting professional design practice and communication design education. His interdisciplinary interests have been to expand narrow traditional visual and form/function literacies to include user-based design in behavioral, social and cultural contexts.

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