Poetics of the Visual

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Academic rigour in the visual arts has for the main been articulated through a textural interface based on the schematic limits of theory. Traditionally students produce their own work through formal experimentation and by critiquing the work through a framework of often separate theoretical discourse. In many cases the value of the visual work is the result of how well written and argued the theory paper, which accompanies the visual, is presented. This duality of outcomes does very little to add rigour to the visual work.

In the studio the student tends to concentrate on the craft of making visual work. Students are also encouraged to seek out exemplars of critically acclaimed work and to make some judgement on the “reading” of it. The criticality being the common interpretation of whatever the message is that is intended to be conveyed. The appreciation of other visual work becomes an intuitive process without any involved criticism, however it could lead to this if there was a studio methodology based on a critical framework which questioned the approach taken to produce the work, and questioned how the outcome could be improved through work in progress. This approach would make the student question the praxis at a number of defined stages. What assessors are looking for is primarily “domain creativity” where the creator of the artwork goes beyond the domain or alters the domain in a significant way but is also able to clearly communicate the intention through the use of theoretical constructs. This discovery of the voice of an artwork is akin to poetry where there is no superfluous word to skew the message.

The modus of assessing the visual requires a shift in the thinking of what constitutes a literate person. Visual literacy demands the ability to move from the literal to the figurative world and the ability to correctly read the signs is essential in the process of critique. Burbank (2007, p.5) succinctly states it as “what you get is what you see”. Traditionally however scholarship has been built around the written word which has been the primary means of recording, preserving and conserving thoughts and ideas.

Oliver (2005) states that,

... the written word as a means of communication and of knowledge-archiving was valorised at the expense of images. From the work of a variety of thinkers, including Richard Kearney (1988) and Leonard Shlain (1991 and 1998), it is apparent that the reaffirmation of the value of images is of relatively recent origin. For centuries the imagination as human faculty for the production of images was regarded with a high degree of suspicion by thinkers as influential as Descartes and Spinoza, and it is not until Immanuel Kant rehabilitated the imagination by showing persuasively that it was part and parcel of reason, instead of being somehow opposed to it, that it has gradually come into its own again (Kearney 1988, 167-177; Oliver 2002) (Oliver 2005, pp. 41-42).

Indeed the proliferation of imagery in the postmodern age is unprecedented in any other historical era. Yet the refereeing of the visual without the use of a textural adjunct has for a long time been seen as lacking in rigour. Academic institutions have treated visual material as an appendage to the textural, and most academic faculties would identify themselves as disciplines of words. The ideal of rigour has for the most part been assumed as being in the domain of words. This notion of rigor validity in the textural form has its roots in the Platonic western tradition where trust can not be placed in the opinions of the writer. Paramenidis in a speech states,

And you must ascertain everything-
Both the unmoving heart of well-rounded truth,
And the opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust (Barnes, 1979, p.156).
Rigor in writing is fundamentally concerned with rule based organisation of logic which can often be at odds with creative practice which can be regarded as opportunist in the way it creates originality from often illogical connections.

Opinions were only validated through the rigor of testing which was then able to be recorded as evidence to other writers. Wood (1998) in his discussion of academic rigour in design makes note of Baudrillard’s comments on the culture of writing which,

. . . has an alienating effect upon the writers and readers themselves: “Speech constitutes subjects as members of a community by solidifying the ties between individuals. Print constitutes subjects as rational, autonomous egos as stable interpreters of culture who, in isolation; make logical connections from linear symbols’

The written word has significantly affected the way in which we think and organise our world. McLuhan (1962) indicated that all the arts and sciences have been shaped by the use of the written word. It has become the dominant media for the transmission and storage of information. It’s dominance in the academic world has constrained artistic expression and brought about the need to recode visual communication into another symbolic representation which is inferior to the original. The translation of the visual into textural form for the process of critiquing loses direct communication effectiveness of the original interaction of the viewer with the subject.

The critiquing process relies on a body of information which enables the person making a judgement on the quality of the work to understand the context in which it was produced. This usually takes the form of a four stage process. The first is a description of what one can see. In a number of cases an evaluation of the visual may not be done satisfactorily without some kind of context. Secondly an analysis is made of the elements which make up the work and the principles which led to the production of the work. The third process involves the interpretation which tries to clarify what the artist is trying to say, the issues which caused them to say it and what are the theoretical foundations for creating the work in a particular way. Finally this leads to an evaluation of how successful the artist was in the conveying all this information. The communication of the clarity of intention becomes critical and if a textural format is not used there needs to be some other mechanism for communicating this information.

The advent of the digital age has now given us opportunities to revisit the idea of the assessment of the oral as a powerful adjunct to critiquing the visual. Traditional academic scholarship has for the most part been disseminated through the use of text. There have been a number of scholars (Innis 1951, McLuhan 1964, Logan 1986; 1995) who have written on the way writing affects thinking patterns. Logan (1986) points to the linear construction of thoughts as the foundation for the use of deductive logic of the scientific method. McLuhan (1978) was interested in the way different media affected the literacy patterns of individuals. He theorised that alphabetic literacy relied on the left hemisphere which was characterised by sequential thought patterns.

The dominance of the right hemisphere, on the other hand, depends upon an environment of a simultaneous resonating character, as is normal on oral societies (McLuhan, 1978 p.55).

Research since the 1960’s (Sperry Gazzaniga and Bogen, 1969) has discovered that the two sides of the brain process information in different ways. The right side of the brain is visual and processes information in an intuitive and concurrent manner, particularly the perception of space, while the left is analytical and sequential which is particularly good with words and numbers. As the two sides are connected there is a degree of drift between the processing of information. Literacy is not an innate function and has to be learned with the written word being reinforced by the left hemisphere, and the oral being the domain of the right. However the imbalance of left and right functions Shlain (2005) believes is actually in a process of restructuring.
A colossal shift I call the Iconic Revolution began in the 19th century. The invention of the camera and film and the discovery of electromagnetism combined to bring us first still photographs and then film, television, computers, graphic advertising, and the Internet. We are now living in an increasingly post-Gutenberg world, where text is rapidly receding and the image has become dominant, as it was in prehistory (though with a vast technologic difference—our “cave paintings” exist in cyberspace) (Shlain 2005, p.159.

Harold Innis in his book *The Bias of Communication* (1951) makes an argument for the reinstatement of the oral dialectic as he declares it is,

... overwhelmingly significant when the subject matter is human action and feeling, and it is important in the discovery of new truth but of very little value in disseminating it. The oral discussion inherently involves personal contact and a consideration for the feelings of others, and it is in sharp contrast with the cruelty of mechanized communication and tendencies which we have come to note in the modern world (Innis 1951, pp. 190-191).

If there is importance associated with human interaction and the discovery of new truth it would seem to be advantageous to engage in the oral in a variety of circumstances when refereeing the visual. Three points emerge from such an action. The first is associated with the methodology for evaluating a thesis which has no, or a minor written component. The second is the development of a methodology which satisfies the objectivity of academic rigour, and the third is the dissemination of the work to a wider audience.

The body of visual work can take a number of visual forms depending on the technology used and the visual media employed. As with any substantial body of work the process of refinement and composition becomes critical. The overall objective is for the student to produce work that alters or transforms the domain in which they are working which is original and identified as valued by reviewers in the field. To be able to accomplish this needs a degree of risk taking and the identification of that risk becomes an important element in the critiquing process. An evaluation of the risk can only be done by comparison with the influences of other work and identification of theoretical constructs which underpin the formation of the work. The traditional methodology for critiquing the visual is through the use of a textural document. This linear method of information transmission Jahandarie describing McLuhan’s view of the Shannon & Weaver linear communications model indicates that it,

... is also a manifestation of the left-hemispheric tendencies of Western scholars... in defiance of the inevitable, an already substantial encroachment of right-hemisphere thought patterns under the impact of television (Jahandarie 1999, p. 59).

Media technology had advanced considerably since McLuhan was writing, but the premise of using a right brain methodology for communication about the visual is still valid and easier to accomplish with the advent of digital recording and editing systems. It now becomes possible to record oral transmissions of information which can be disseminated to a wider audience and kept for archival purposes. It is possible for a film maker of animator to produce a body of studio work which is accompanied by a video documentary explaining the context and development of the work without using a textural interface. There are many other scenarios which can be investigated to achieve a similar result where the student does not have to present as a viva voce.

A suggest model is one in which the acts of self reflection, enquiry and exploration using a multifaceted eclectic approach. The iterative reflective process is a dialogue between the supervisor and the student which is recorded on video. These sessions need to be at regular intervals so the iterative process can be used as a database illustrating the nature and progression of the processes involved in the creating of the work. This then becomes the basis off an annotated workbook which becomes part of the final submission. This final submission becomes the work itself accompanied by the annotated edited highlights of the recorded sessions. The full database of the recordings can also be made available if needed.
It is clear that a new approach is needed which does not use the classic textural rhetorical form. Wood (1998) suggests the abandonment of methodologies associated with “rhetorical or passive approaches” in favour of those associated with empathy which uses a “result seeking mode”. The difference in approach can be ascertained in Figure 1. Although his application is particularly to design the approach is relevant to all visual arts. The dialogue then associated to the critiquing of the visual then takes on a different form. I would use the emphases as descriptors the textural approach versus the dialectic approach.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Methodologies of Textural Approach</th>
<th>Methodologies of the Dialectic</th>
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<tr>
<td>emphasise permanence and ideals</td>
<td>emphasise situated context and change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasise the plan over adaptability</td>
<td>emphasise adaptability more than strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasise consistency of/and method</td>
<td>emphasise integrity of client-relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasise the presentational content</td>
<td>emphasise the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasise notions of ‘truth’ / ‘facts’</td>
<td>emphasise notions of ‘discovery’</td>
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<tr>
<td>encourage radical innovation</td>
<td>encourage incremental improvements</td>
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<td>inclined to narrow-focus clarity</td>
<td>inclined to be more holistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>call for quantified measurement</td>
<td>tend to value human judgement</td>
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Figure 1. Taken and modified from Methodologies of Rigour and Empathy (Wood, 1998).

The comparisons of emphasis are perceptible as is the overall strategy and outcome. If the objective is the creation of new visual work and success in doing so, the actions of promoting change, adaptability, discovery, incremental improvements, collaboration, inclination to the holistic and shared experience would appear to be preferable to permanence, consistency, narrow focus, fortifying existing values and quantified measurement.

This change in approach encourages the development of domain creativity where risks are encouraged and supported through a dialogue of continual self reflection and review. This associated with the acceptance of right brain delivery modes which emphasise the visual as the means of communication will also allow for more appropriate expression of a visually literate world.

References


