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Diana George

From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing

In an attempt to bring composition studies into a more thoroughgoing discussion of the place of visual literacy in the writing classroom, I argue that throughout the history of writing instruction in this country the terms of debate typical in discussions of visual literacy and the teaching of writing have limited the kinds of assignments we might imagine for composition.

In some respects ... words cannot compare in effectiveness with pictures. The mere outlines in a Greek vase painting will give you a more immediate appreciation of the grace and beauty of the human form than pages of descriptive writing. A silhouette in black paper will enable you to recognize a stranger more quickly than the most elaborate description in words. (166)

—John Hays Gardiner, George Lyman Kittredge,
and Sarah Louise Arnold, 1902

How's this for a visual argument: In response to reading Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*,¹ Boikhutso Jibula, a first-year student from Botswana, reproduces three maps of Africa, each on a transparency. In the first, the continent is empty except for what look like random circles primarily in the sub-Saharan region. The circles outline areas traditionally occupied or claimed by

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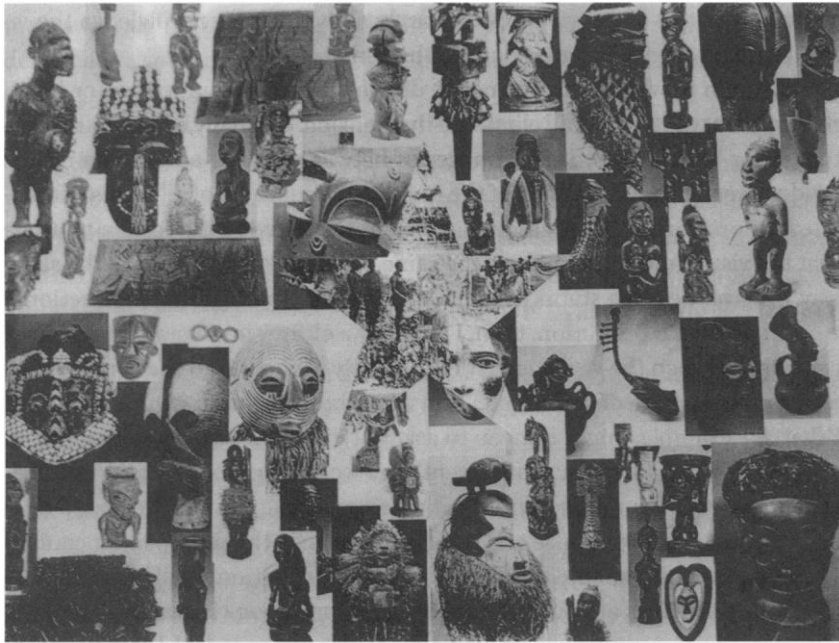
various tribes or communities before colonization. Boikhutso then superimposes a second map—this one of colonized Africa. He points out the English, French, and German names of places that now have well-defined borders, most of which cut through the original circles, splitting traditional regions into new nations, neither named for nor controlled by the people whose places he had identified in the original map. Over that second map, Boikhutso superimposes a third—this one is postcolonial Africa. The names, he points out, are changed. German East Africa is now mainly Tanzania. The Congo Free State is, on this map at any rate, Zaire. Colonization has ended, he tells us, but the boundaries are much the same, the people dispersed or gone, the languages and kingdoms and villages still split or destroyed. It takes very few words for Boikhutso to tell the class what these maps show them: Precolonial Africa cannot be recovered. There is no possibility of going back to what was there before the colonizer. African people must work as nations within the nations now outlined on this third map.

Or picture this: In the same course, Grace VanCamp from lower Michigan creates a dinner place setting, Judy Chicago style. On a place mat, she arranges a plastic plate, knife, fork, spoon, and Coca-Cola® glass. On the face of the plate, Grace has glued a map of the African continent. The place card reads, “King Leopold.”

And finally: Deirdre Johns shows the class a remaking of Leopold of Belgium’s Congo Free State flag. Like the original, her redesign features a bold yellow star in the center of a deep blue field. She tells the class that in her research she learned of the reasoning for the design: the star was to signify the light of Europe being brought in to the Dark Continent. In Deirdre’s flag, the blue field is now covered with images of precolonial African art. The gold star is covered in images of slavery, faces of explorers, photos from the rubber and ivory trade. “This is what Europe really brought to Congo,” she tells the class.

There are others I could describe—graphs and oil paintings and Web pages and digital designs and book covers and more—but they would tell much the same story. The work of these students and others like them has convinced me that current discussions of visual communication and writing instruction have only tapped the surface of possibilities for the role of visual communication in the composition class.² Or, even more to the point—our students have a much richer imagination for what we might accomplish with the visual than our journals have yet to address.

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Original design by Deirdre Johns

From W. J. T. Mitchell's claim that the second half of the twentieth century was marked by "the pictorial turn" (11–34) to the New London Group's call for a pedagogy of "multiliteracies," we are experiencing yet another push to incorporate visual language into the composition course.³ It is, of course, true that an insistence on the importance of visual literacy is an old and perennial one. In fact, it has become common today to talk of multiple literacies, to encourage the uses of visual communication in the teaching of writing, and to argue that writing is itself a form of visual communication.

Even so, there remains much confusion over what is meant by *visual communication*, *visual rhetoric*, or, more simply, *the visual* and where or whether it belongs in a composition course. What's more, to the extent that this confusion remains unaddressed, visual and written communication continue to be held in a kind of tension—the visual figuring into the teaching of writing as a problematic, something added, an anomaly, a "new" way of composing, or, somewhat cynically, as a strategy for adding relevance or interest to a required course. Only rarely does that call address students as producers as well as con-

sumers or critics of the visual. More rarely does the call acknowledge the visual as much more than attendant to the verbal.

My aim in what follows is not to define visual communication or visual rhetoric in a way that would eliminate that tension. I actually believe that some tug of war between words and images or between writing and design can be productive as it brings into relief the multiple dimensions of all forms of communication. For my purposes here, at any rate, there is little reason to argue that the visual and the verbal are the same, are read or composed in the same way, or have the same status in the tradition of communication instruction.

In place of a resolution, then, I am after a clearer understanding of what can happen when the visual is very consciously brought into the composition classroom as a form of communication worth both examining *and* producing. What, for example, might it mean to ask, as I did of the students whose work opens this paper, for a visual argument? Are we posing a new relationship between composition and communication or resurrecting an older one? How does the visual both promise and threaten to change the composition course?

At this point, I should make an important distinction. I will be examining primarily the places of visual literacy in the *composition* classroom. It is quite

“Remember that graph-and-chart reading is not one of the three R’s” (180).

—Rudolph Flesch, 1949

true that a concern for visual literacy/visual communication has been an ongoing one in the teaching of scientific, technical, and professional communication. In fact, for a number of compositionists over the years, the technical writing course was exactly where the visual belonged. (Witness, for example, Rudolph Flesch’s rather Gradgrindian declaration that one mainstay of technical writing instruction, understanding the uses of graphs and charts, “is not one of the three R’s.”) My focus is on arguments that have been made for including the visual in composition courses because these arguments are linked closely to discussions of basic literacy and even to English departments’ investments in literary studies rather than to professional communication’s emphasis on the functions or uses of visual information. That is not at all to dismiss the extensive work that characterizes professional communication’s engagement with the visual. Instead, it is my attempt to bring composition studies into a more thoroughgoing discussion of the place of visual literacy in the writing classroom.

In the end, I argue that the terms of debate typical in our discussions of visual literacy and the teaching of writing have limited the kinds of assign-

ments we might imagine for composition. I do not make a claim that our students have a special talent for the visual or that their knowledge of the visual is necessarily more sophisticated than their teachers' are. Instead, I would argue that if we are ever to move beyond a basic and somewhat vague call for attention to "visual literacy" in the writing class, it is crucial to understand how very complicated and sophisticated is visual communication to students who have grown up in what by all accounts is an aggressively visual culture. Such a move must first address how relationships between visual communication and writing instruction have been typically configured.

In order to get to that argument, however, I find it necessary first to set what I'd call one curricular context through which visual literacy has entered the teaching of writing, at least as it emerges in scholarly journals and textbook assignments for more than fifty years. The history of how visual literacy has entered the teaching of writing, at least as it emerges in scholarly journals and textbook assignments for more than fifty years, is not a smooth or consistent one in which writing instruction and visual literacy move seamlessly from image analysis to design. Instead, it is one that can best be related through major themes that have dominated the English classroom since at least the 1940s. I begin, in fact, at what might seem a far remove from the college writing classroom: examining arguments in elementary and secondary education for including visual instruction alongside lessons more familiar to English language arts. It is here that we see most clearly how visual studies has been perceived as a threat to language and literature instruction.

Visual literacy in the English classroom

In 1946, the instructor's edition of the popular Dick and Jane elementary reader series alerted teachers to the reality that teaching reading demanded attention to more than print literacy. It meant teaching students to read pictures as well as words:

Skill in interpreting pictures is becoming increasingly important as a means of securing pleasure and information. Adults today are exposed to "picture" magazines, cartoons, advertisements, movies, and many types of diagrammatic schemes for the presentation of facts. Children are surrounded with picture books and

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“read” the funnies long before they enter school. Regardless of age or situation, the individual who can “read” pictorial material effectively has access to a vast world of new ideas. (Kismaric and Heiferman 88)

Fifty years later, the New London Group issued their report through which they identified the ability both to read and *use* visual information/visual signs as primary among multiliteracies:

[W]e argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. *This includes understanding and competent control of representational forms* that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word—for instance, visual design in desktop publishing or the interface of visual and linguistic meaning in multimedia. (61, emphasis added)

The two reports sound a common theme about visual communication that might be summed up in this way: Literacy means more than words, and visual literacy means more than play.

Coming as it did at the beginning of a media revolution of sorts, the Dick and Jane statement was repeated in a number of ways for the next thirty years or so. During much of the second half of the twentieth century, mass media became a focus for study or a problem to confront in literacy instruction, and so I turn briefly to school talk about television, the visual medium that, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, threatened (or promised) to change the English classroom permanently.

In 1961, NCTE issued its report from the Commission on the Study of Television, *Television and the Teaching of English*. Neil Postman, who twenty-

five years later would publish his own critique of the culture of television (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*), was its primary author. For Postman and the members of his commission, the job at hand was to convince English teachers that television was not only a proper subject for the English classroom but a necessary one, even though “We do not mean to suggest by its use that television is the equivalent of *belles lettres* but rather that certain kinds of television programs employ language and action in ways that duplicate the functions of traditional literary forms” (39–40). The commission’s incentive for bringing the study of television into the English class will likely sound somewhat dated but still very familiar: “To the extent that their responses to television are in-

**“Whatever the future may hold, teachers of English can face it with equanimity if they avoid the temptation to pit television or any other medium against print.” (13)
—Neil Postman, 1961**

formed, discriminating, and creative, we may be assured that our language and literature, as well as the lives of our students, will be enriched by contact with television. *But taste and critical judgment are learned habits of mind*" (1, emphasis added). Here, the points of concern are explicit: Television is what our children are watching. It surrounds them daily. It is their "primary source of literary experience" (1). The English teacher's job, then, is to foster "taste and critical judgment," two qualities that lift the schooled above the unschooled. This judgment was deemed important because, according to the commission's figures, already in 1961 (only thirteen years after the 1948 postwar boom in television production) 88 percent of American households in the U.S. owned at least one television (30). It was a "literary experience" that threatened to replace those forms more common (and more comfortable) to the English class. "Teachers of English," the report states, "must help the children qualify their enthusiasm with thoughtful criticism" (73).

Though not quite the call for relevance that became common in the 1960s, this report, like the Dick and Jane instructors' manual fifteen years earlier and the New London Group's manifesto thirty-five years later, does acknowledge a changing world in which "a redefinition of 'literacy' is required, one that would extend beyond the printed page" (12). In the end, although the Commission on the Study of Television was not persuaded of the need for a new literacy, its members did accept the challenge to extend the content of the English classroom to include a new literature—television as literary text.

It is here, then, in these early lessons on the uses of visual texts in the reading and writing classroom that literacy instruction and literary studies meet. Visuals (be they

paintings, films, comic books, or television narratives) were to be studied in the same way as literary texts, as subjects of close analysis—a use of the visual that continues throughout the history of writing instruction.

In 1962, only one year after the publication of the Postman report, NCTE published William Boutwell's *Using Mass Media in the Schools*, a report from The Committee on the Use of Mass Media. In it, Boutwell writes, "No rain forest in darkest Africa ever confronted men with more unknowns or a stranger mixture of enthusiasm, excitement, fears, and hopes than the tangled strands of communication we call 'mass media'" (v). As Boutwell tells us in his preface to the report, mass media (everything from newspapers and magazines to ra-

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"Every teacher must, sooner or later, face the fact that television is here to stay." (254)

—Anita J. Willens, in *Using Mass Media in the Schools*, 1962

dio, television, motion pictures, and comic books) "often seems to be a force beyond human control" (vi).

An air of resignation over the influence of mass media permeates this collection, even in such writing assignments as Nina T. Fleir's proposal that teachers use students' favorite television shows rather than poetry, drama, or fiction as prompts for writing (150–52). Only rarely do we encounter a suggestion that students might become producers as well as receivers or victims of mass media, especially visual media. As a tool for literacy instruction, then, this collection uses visual media as little more than a prompt for student essays and stories, a substitute for more traditional literary forms, or a subject of scrutiny.

By contrast, the 1996 New London Group report would also direct students' attention toward mass media but not as a subject of scrutiny or an invention prompt alone. Instead, the New London Group adds to the older model of media study the notion of *design* as a way of understanding literacy acquisition. What the New London Group urges, then, is not a closer relationship to media but the use of media to encourage the development of "multi-modal designs" that relate

... all the other modes in quite remarkably dynamic relationships. For instance, mass media images relate the linguistic to the visual and to the gestural in intricately designed ways. Reading the mass media for its linguistic meanings alone is not enough. Magazines employ vastly different visual grammars according to their social and cultural content. A script of a sitcom such as *Roseanne* would have none of the qualities of the program if you didn't have a "feel" for its unique gestural, audio, and visual meanings. A script without this knowledge would only allow a very limited reading. Similarly, a visit to a shopping mall involves a lot of written text. However, either a pleasurable or a critical engagement with the mall will involve a multimodal reading that not only includes the design of language, but a spatial reading of the architecture of the mall and the placement and meaning of the written signs, logos, and lighting. (80–81)

What these scholars urge, then, is not simply the inclusion of mass media as objects of study but the use of media to encourage the development of multimodal designs.

I will return to this issue of design, but for the moment it is important to point out that thinking of composition as *design* shifts attention, if only momentarily, from the product to the act of production. We might say that despite their concern for the influence of television on students' writing and

reading abilities, even the 1962 Boutwell collection in some ways prefigured the work of the New London Group. Yet, without a concept like the notion of design, these older media assignments seem to be stuck in a kind of literacy civil war—one that pits poetics against the popular and words against pictures.

Visual literacy in the writing class: The case of *Writing with a Purpose*

The treatment of the visual in postsecondary writing instruction has been a tentative one in many of the same ways as those early attempts to bring mass media into English classrooms. As a case in point, the story of how visual elements were incorporated into successive editions of a single and very popular twentieth-century college writing text (James McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose*) can serve to mirror the history of the visual in writing classes, especially as it indicates a clear impulse to include the visual but not always a consistent or stable way of doing that.⁴

Although some visual elements (primarily charts, graphs, and diagrams) were present even in 1950 in the first edition,⁵ it wasn't until 1972 when *Writing with a Purpose* introduced a visual assignment, organized around eighteenth-century British artist William Hogarth's prints *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane*, that the textbook used visuals as an integral part of any writing assignment. According to Dean Johnson of Houghton Mifflin,

The Hogarth pictures were introduced in the fifth edition (cy 1972) and used through the eighth edition (cy 1984). Originally they were the stuff of an exercise to support observation as a means of gathering material. In each edition, however, they were treated differently. In the seventh edition, for example, they were used to illustrate a so-called "three step method of interpretation" (e.g., observe, interpret, infer).⁶

By the eighth edition, the Hogarth prints were linked to lessons in the chapter on planning strategies.

In his discussion of how the 1970s editions of *Writing with a Purpose* reflected the changes in the student population, Robert Connors points to the visual design of the fifth edition as indicating a "lowered evaluation of its audience's abilities" signaled by "wide margins and a two-color format to open up the text's appearance" (107). Later editions, Connors writes, are even more prone to a visual appearance that suggests a dumbing down. The 1976 edition, for example, "goes in deeply for the 'visual observation' invention methods . . . It is filled with photos, cartoons, illustrations, all meant to add spice to the

text” (108). And, while I would argue that the visual is not at all a simpler form of communication than the verbal, it seems clear that Connors is very likely correct in his assessment of the editorial motives for changing the visual format of *Writing with a Purpose* and, in particular, for adding visuals like the Hogarth prints.

At the outset, the *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* prints were meant to teach students the art of observation and develop the skill of creating vivid word images—much in the tradition of *ut pictora poesis*, popularized in literary criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially by Jean Hagstrum’s *The Sister Arts*.⁷ According to Johnson, the Hogarth prints remained in McCrimmon’s text primarily because teachers liked them. Thus, the prints stayed on for several editions because they were popular with faculty who, no doubt, recognized them as not mere popular culture but popular culture in the literary tradition. Assignments linked to the prints changed with changing composition pedagogy.

This last bit of information is useful to keep in mind in the context of a discussion on the places of visual in the writing classroom. In many respects,

Within the tradition of verbal/visual communication I am outlining here, only certain kinds of “visual” assignments seem possible for a writing course. Primarily, these would be assignments that use visual images as prompts for essay writing.

the Hogarth prints were absolutely peripheral to whatever writing assignment might be attached to them. Nearly any pair of images might have been used as prompts for the same writing assignments. Within the tradition of verbal/visual communication I am outlining here, only certain kinds of “visual” assignments seem possible for a writing

course. Primarily, these would be assignments that use visual images as prompts for essay writing.

Such a tactic was not new with McCrimmon, of course. Lucille Schultz found similar uses of the visual to be common in writing textbooks as far back as the nineteenth century:

[These texts] rely heavily on illustrations as a teaching tool . . . fairly detailed and complex illustrations were used abundantly in many of the lesser known mid-19th century first books of composition; in addition to common objects, they depicted scenes of home life, school life, and work life, and the illustrations served as writing prompts for young writers who were asked to describe what they saw in the picture. In these books, the illustrations were not simply embellishment or ornament, they were an integral part of the book’s instructional practice. (12)

Though these early texts commonly used pictures (often reproductions of paintings) as prompts for student compositions, the aim of each exercise was to bring students to a more vivid or accurate use of written language.⁸ Often, the authors made an elaborate case for the advantage or superiority of words over pictures. The Gardiner, Kittredge, and Arnold comment that opens this paper, for example, appears at first to be an argument for the primacy of the visual over the verbal, but the authors go on to say, “what can a picture tell you about wind or heat, about sound or smell, about motion, about the feeling of roughness or moisture? Nothing *directly*; it can only *suggest*” (166, emphasis in original).

Of course, other kinds of assignments involving visuals do occur in college writing pedagogies. Visual analysis (especially advertising analysis) has been commonplace in postsecondary writing instruction for at least fifty years as a part of the post-World War II emphasis on propaganda and semantics characteristic of many composition and communication courses beginning in the 1940s,⁹ but that

**“Drawings are generally more accessible than essays to those college students who are inadequately prepared in reading” (vii).
—Lewis Meyers, 1980**

practice did not always or consistently include careful consideration of how images, layout, or graphics actually communicated meaning. Instead, advertising was treated as a subject for critique rather than itself a form of communication that employed both word and image. A 1975 CCC article by D. G. Kehl describes an advertising analysis assignment typical for composition in the seventies. Though Kehl does make a brief reference to the images (the pictures) in particular ads, he does so only to suggest that the ad image functions to replicate the “controlling idea” or “central thesis” of a traditional argument essay of the sort students might be assigned to write. Like the McCrimmon assignments, Kehl used advertising as a sort of shadow essay, a form once removed from the actual written essay students would produce. Kehl’s stated motive for using advertising at all is one repeated by many of his colleagues throughout this period: He argues that this is a good assignment, especially “For students who are visually but not necessarily verbally sensitive” (135). Running through much of the composition literature of the period, assignments linked to images carried with them a call for relevance, the need to make this dull, required class more interesting, and the suggestion that less verbal students would perhaps succeed with pictures where they could not with words. These were sometimes arguments for using popular culture in the writing class but not always.¹⁰

For many instructors during this same period, the use of visuals went hand in hand with expressivist pedagogies. In 1972, for example, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published Joseph Frank's *You*, a trendy writing text loaded with photos, paintings, ads, drawings, and graphic designs. The basic assumption of this text was that each student was an individual who had something to say and could find a voice with which to say it. The focus is clearly on the self as Frank tells students, "*You* is also concerned with perception, for how and what you perceive determines who you are" (iii). Thus, assignments tied to visuals asked students how a particular image made them feel or of what an image reminded them. One assignment even juxtaposes a Rorschach-like inkblot with an abstract painting to get at how an image can be created "deliberately trying to expand both [the painter's] and the viewer's consciousness" (100). And, of course, Walker Gibson's *Seeing and Writing*, written around this same time, makes much the same argument for using visual media in the writing classroom.

Throughout much of the work mentioned so far, there runs an ongoing suspicion that the visual must somehow be important to writing. It just isn't

"Learning to see well helps students write well."

—Donald and Christine McQuade, 1999

entirely clear how. Are images strategies for getting students to pay attention to detail? Do they mimic the rhetoric of verbal argument? Are they a dumbing

down of writing instruction making visible to nonverbal students what the verbally gifted can conceptualize? Certainly, there is the message in much of this work that images may be useful, even proper stimuli for writing, but they are no substitute for the complexity of language.

The turn to cultural theory

When David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky reprinted a portion of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* in their 1987 composition reader (and named their text *Ways of Reading* in a nod to Berger's work), they connected the visual arts very directly with the world of language. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* initially shook the world of art history with its insistence upon the social production of art. As a text about meaning and culture, *Ways of Seeing* has been even more important to a broader audience.¹¹ Berger begins his argument simply:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with

words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. ... The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. (7–8)

That idea, that images are not a reflection of a fixed reality, that, instead, our ways of understanding the world around us are somehow commingled with how we represent the world visually was a notion that appealed to teachers of writing like Bartholomae and Petroskey who were searching for ways of incorporating cultural theory into the composition classroom.

What was radical about Berger's work was his insistence on breaking down the barriers that separated high culture (in this case art history) from low (advertising). Bartholomae and Petroskey's *Ways of Reading* made that message available to the writing class. In

this textbook, not only was meaning no longer restricted to the verbal, the visual was also not used as a gentle step into the "more serious" world of the verbal. As an extract published in a

What was radical about Berger's work was his insistence on breaking down the barriers that separated high culture (in this case art history) from low (advertising). Bartholomae and Petroskey's *Ways of Reading* made that message available to the writing class.

composition reader, *Ways of Seeing* certainly did lead writing teachers to ask students to examine images as culturally informed texts. Yet, the complete written text of Berger's argument was *visually* much farther reaching than any discussion of image analysis might suggest or, at least, than the design of composition readers at the time would allow for.¹²

In a "Note to the Reader" that opens *Ways of Seeing*, Berger writes, "The form of the book is as much to do with our purpose as the arguments contained within it" (5). Berger points particularly to "essays" that consist only of images that "are intended to raise as many questions as the verbal essays" (5). And, yet, he could just as well have been talking about the text's heavy font, the cover design that reproduces the opening remarks of the first essay, or the ragged-right margins that call attention to page design. It would be many years before this very conscious attention to design and its relation to meaning would have much impact at all on college composition courses.

Instead, the push in the eighties was to continue to explore what visuals could teach students about their written compositions. In 1986, for example, William Costanzo, then chair of the NCTE Committee on Film Study, reported

in *CCC* on a 1979 NEH project to teach film *as* composition. He lists four arguments for the use of film in teaching writing:

(1) The basic steps of filmmaking can serve as a working model of the composing process . . . (2) . . . An understanding of the visual code which enables us to “read” a movie can help to clarify the conventions of English diction, syntax, punctuation, and usage. (3) Many of the rhetorical principles of film composition (for organizing inchoate experience into meaningful sequence, for achieving a suitable style, for selling a product or an idea) can be applied directly to specific writing tasks. (4) When students’ notions of composition are widened to include these more familiar, visual forms, the writing class seems less remote. (79–80)

This urge to tie the use of images in any way possible to “the composing process” was a common one throughout this period.

Costanzo’s report would seem rather ordinary, certainly right in line with attitudes we have already witnessed, if it weren’t for an afterword he included as the article was being readied for press. In it, Costanzo acknowledges that his report was written five years earlier and that his understanding of the role of film in writing classes has changed considerably since that time. By 1986, Costanzo is no longer making a simple link between the study of film and the teaching of composing strategies. Instead, he writes: “If I once regarded film study as a path to better writing, I now see film and writing as equal partners traveling along the same road” (86). His concluding remarks signal a significant shift in the way he, at least, had begun to think of the role of visual media in the writing class:

Much of what once seemed revelatory about the role of visual media in our students’ lives is now widely accepted, even taken for granted. Film and television continue to dominate a major portion of their formative years, creating expectations, shaping attitudes, influencing language patterns, and providing a common frame of reference. . . . At the same time, groundbreaking work in semiotics, neurophysiology, and cognitive psychology has made strong connections between visual forms of thought and written language. It now appears that the act of writing involves more visual thinking than we recognized in traditional composition classes. (86)

Here, Costanzo was no longer talking about the visual as a convenient heuristic but, instead, asking that compositionists pay attention to “visual thinking” as one way of understanding the written word. Significantly, Costanzo’s report appears in the same issue of *CCC* as Stephen Bernhardt’s “Seeing the Text,” an article arguing for the importance of teaching not images in the writing class-

room but writing-as-image or, at least, of noting that the design of a text as well as the words used in the text conveyed meaning. Bernhardt's work indicated a change in the ways many compositionists began to think of "the visual" as it relates to the teaching of writing. For many, that change was most evident in attention to design.

The influence of design

Throughout the history of writing instruction in this country, there has been some attention to the visual nature of written compositions, if only, in the earliest textbooks, to emphasize the importance of handwriting or penmanship as a visual representation of the writer's character.¹³ And, of course, even today, the one visual reproduction we can count on in even the most contemporary texts is that snapshot of the research paper, complete with title page and works cited. In these lessons on producing the research paper, such visual marks as margins, page layout, and font size take on the utmost importance, again, in visually representing the seriousness and thoroughness with which the student has approached the assignment. In effect, they become a sign of academic decorum.

For many years, in fact, the research paper section was literally the only place in a composition textbook where we might encounter any reference to page design, layout, or font choices; primarily, we found a reminder to double space, choose a readable font appropriate for serious work (12-point Times, perhaps), and use "normal" margins. That has begun to change, especially since the first edition of John Trimbur's *Call to Write*, which includes a brief chapter on document design as well as attention to visual communication throughout in genres as various as flyers, posters, Web pages, and public service ads.¹⁴

In his most recent scholarship, Trimbur examines the "materiality of literacy from the perspective that writing is a visible language produced and circulated in material forms" ("Delivering" 188). This attention to the production of text as visible language, emphasizing "the composer's work . . . to make the special signs we call writing" (189) is one that links literacy practice with production and distribution of text and to the history and theory of graphic design (see also Trimbur, "Composition"). Perhaps even more useful for the future of visual communication and writing studies is Trimbur's use of the work of Walter

This attention to the production of text as visible language, emphasizing "the composer's work . . . to make the special signs we call writing" is one that links literacy practice with production and distribution of text and to the history and theory of graphic design.

Benjamin who “offers a way to think about how the study and teaching of writing might take up the visual . . . as more than just new texts and topics . . . to write about” (“Delivering” 199–200). As this work suggests, recent emphasis on design history, research, and theory marks a turn in the way scholars and teachers might begin thinking of composition and its relation to graphic design.

Such a turn is, however, very recent. Even as late as 1987, discussion of page design was minimal and often tied to word processing technology or desktop publishing. In March 1987, for example, *College English* ran a Macintosh™ ad entitled “A lesson in English Composition.” The ad copy suggests that a Mac can make proofreading, copyediting, and formatting easier. The sample page offered in the ad—“created on a Macintosh”—tells a very different story. This very professional looking page clearly argues that it is the visual dimension of this composition that is most intriguing—layout, graphics, fonts, pull-out quotes. “With a Macintosh your students can prepare compositions that look like classics,” the ad reads. “The rest is for posterity to judge.”

Perhaps more than any other technology, desktop publishing has moved writing instruction into the world of design, despite, I suspect, our best efforts

To talk of literacy instruction in terms of *design* means to ask writers to draw on available knowledge and, at the same time, transform that knowledge/those forms as we redesign.

to contain composition in the essay of the sort familiar in *Harper's* or *Esquire* or *The Atlantic*.¹⁵ To talk of literacy instruction in terms of *design* means to ask writers to draw on available knowledge and, at the same time, transform

that knowledge/those forms as we redesign. Design, the New London Group writes, “will never simply reproduce Available Designs. Designing transforms knowledge in producing new constructions and representations of reality” (76; see also Buchanan on the rhetoric of design).¹⁶

If I have given the impression that the media revolution of the fifties and sixties was a tough one for composition teachers, then I must say here that the world of graphic design, electronic text, and Web technologies certainly will prove even more difficult, though ultimately perhaps more useful for future understandings of composition as design. As with written compositions, Web pages must have an internal coherence; they must, in other words, be navigable. Unlike written compositions, the internal logic of a Web piece is likely to appear first in the visual construction of the page—not only in the images chosen but the colors, the placement of text or links, the font, the use of white space, and other elements linked more closely to the world of graphic design than to composition pedagogy. The work of Anne Wysocki is useful here as

she challenges writing teachers to rethink their notions of what composition means—beyond the word and inclusive of the visual. Wysocki writes, “When we ask people in our classes to write for the Web we enlarge what we mean by composition. None of us are unaware of the viscosity of the Web, of how that initial default, neutral grey has a different blankness than typing-paper” (“Monitoring Order”). And whether it is true or not that their teachers are aware of the difference between the blank screen and the blank page, our students are certainly aware of this difference. Many already compose for the Web. Many have worked in the realm of the visual (or the *virtual*) as constitutive of composing texts of all sorts years before they get to their first-year college courses.

“What are we likely to carry with us when we ask that our relationship with all technologies should be like that we have with the technology of printed words?” (349)

—Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola, 1999

The place of the visual in composition today

At this point (feeling just a bit like Tristram Shandy telling the story of his life), I must back up once more before I go forward, this time to emphasize how much has changed in the ways we have thought about our students’ work in composition over the past twenty-five years or more. In 1975, Harris K. Leonard, writing about his use of *Superman* comics to teach concepts from the classics, expresses concern over his students’ request to make their own comics. This is how he describes the situation:

Once the students realized how influential comic books were, some of them began to inquire why they could not write their own comics, reflecting their own heritage and their own reality. This was a difficult question, but as a teacher of the classics I had only one way to answer it. When they finished the course they would be able to write their own comics. However, the reason they were in college was not to learn comic book writing, but to counter the comic book mentality of our age with a more educated vision. The classics provide that vision. The classics are classics because they represent the finest and most humane statement on the universal human condition. . . . (406)

Nearly twenty-five years later, Lester Faigley in “Material Literacy and Visual Design,” describes several Web sites he has encountered that are composed by teens as young as fifteen. “I find these sites remarkable for a number of reasons,” Faigley writes, “not the least of which is the considerable design talent of these adolescents” (173). He goes on to compare these teens’ thought-provoking and creative uses of image, text, and technology to the dull sameness of official sites created for mainstream companies. At no point in this article does

Faigley seem remotely worried that these students are not learning what they should be learning in school. He seems to be asking, instead, why it is that we (their teachers) don't seem to understand how sophisticated these literacy practices actually are.

I don't mean to target Leonard here. His response is one that had a certain currency at the time and is right in line with what I've been describing throughout this discussion. Comics might have seemed like a useful way to get students into the "real" work of the course, but the notion that students should want to create their own comics "reflecting their own heritage and their own reality" would have seemed silly to many good teachers even in the fourth quarter of the last century.

I began by claiming that our students have a much richer imagination for how the visual might enter composition than our journals have yet to address, and so I return here to those students whose work opens this paper. In my assignment (see Appendix), I simply asked for a *visual argument*. The form, medium, and aim of the argument was up to the students. The course was a first-year seminar meant to introduce students to university-level work and to make a passing nod, at any rate, in the direction of oral, written, and visual communication practices. For many faculty across campus, I suspect such a course might represent precisely what Leonard was after in 1975, an introduction to the "great works of western culture."

The visual argument is an assignment I have given for at least five years now, but, like Faigley in his encounter with student work, I was struck in the fall of 2000 by how many more students seemed comfortable in the realm of visual design than had in years before and by how very few of them asked what I meant by visual argument. Moreover, these students turned to all sorts of visual design, as the assignment sheet suggested they might, for their projects. Those less comfortable with "art work" chose to create charts, diagrams, or maps. Those like Jake Betzold or Andy Waisanen, more comfortable with digital design and Web technologies, worked with PhotoShop® to make digital "paintings" or set up Web sites devoted to the course. Deirdre's flag was created by using colored construction paper, scissors, glue, and a photocopier. Not one of these students seemed to think that their visual argument was any less complicated or took less research or thought than the typical argument essay that they were also assigned in the course.

When I told other faculty teaching sections of the same course that I would be asking my students to construct a visual argument, many were more than skeptical. They wanted to know if such a genre exists and, if it does, how can it

be taught, and for what reason might I use it—except, perhaps, to keep students doing “interesting projects.” Primarily, faculty asked how I could evaluate visual arguments since some students, according to these faculty, are just more visual/more visually talented than others. Perhaps the most important of these questions is the first: What is a visual argument?

In 1996, analytic philosopher J. Anthony Blair, writing on “The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments,” just barely manages to agree that a visual argument, possessing all of the “salient properties of arguments,” could actually be said to exist, and if it could be said to exist, it would have to be quite strictly “non-verbal visual communication” (26). To summarize Blair briefly, an argument must make a claim (an assertion), motivated by reasons for the claim, communicated to an audience in an attempt to convince that audience (the recipient) to accept the claim on the basis of the reasons offered (24). In this definition, drawn from the work of D. J. O’Keefe, claims must be “linguistically explicable” though not necessarily expressed linguistically. In other words, there is room here for the possibility of a nonverbal assertion.

To be faithful to Blair’s position, I would have to say that, though he does acknowledge that visual argument is possible and even that visual arguments have been made, he does not hold out much hope for making one that is either propositionally complex or at all unique. Of course, in order to make his own argument, Blair must assert that the visual is open to interpretation in a way that words are not.¹⁷ Such an assertion can only be made if one believes that the verbal and visual both involve communication of meaning. Certainly, parallels between verbal and visual communication do exist, which is why Blair finds himself agreeing, if grudgingly, that visual argument is *possible*.

My own requirements for visual argument are less rigid than Blair’s, though I certainly accept his primary description of argument and ask that visual arguments make a claim or assertion and attempt to sway an audience by offering reasons to accept that claim. The simplest way for me to explain visual argument (and one I use with my own students) is to begin with visual parody, especially of the sort familiar to readers of *Adbusters* or the

Visual arguments make a claim or assertion and attempt to sway an audience by offering reasons to accept that claim.

Guerilla Girls. Visual parody, like verbal parody, does make an overt claim, assertion, or proposition that draws particularly on comparison, juxtaposition, and intertextuality to offer the assertion to an audience for acceptance.¹⁸ But visual arguments do not need to be parodic. All sorts of visuals make assertions and develop those assertions with visual information.

Though I would reject Blair's notion that a visual argument must be entirely nonverbal, I would say that a visual argument must make its case primarily through the visual. Deirdre's argument, for example, makes use of the flag as a visual expression of nationhood. Through research, she learned what the original Congo Free State flag was supposed to be saying about that nation. Her assertion, that what Europeans really brought to Africa was not enlightenment but slavery is carried through visually. To make an argument that would convince her audience, she used visuals familiar to that audience, in this case, a class of first-year students in a seminar called Africa in the Popular Imagination. She drew from books the class had read and images the class had seen. In other words, her argument was visually powerful and easily read by her target audience. Though some readers might consider her assertion somewhat sentimental or oversimplified, I do not read it that way at all. The students in this course, including students from Rwanda, Botswana, and Ghana had not heard the history of Leopold's Congo before the course—in particular, the international human rights movement generated by events of the time. The American students began the course recalling stories they had heard or read of African exploration, and most assumed that explorers had opened the Congo, as well as other areas of the continent, up to development of the best sort. Deirdre's decision to turn Leopold's flag back on him, to show it for what it was, represents an attempt on her part to ask her audience to reread the history of Congo exploration and to rethink the state of civilization and art that thrived there before Leopold's Congo Free State.

The same could be said of Boikhutso's map and Grace's place setting. Grace took from the course Leopold's statement that he meant to get for himself "a piece of this magnificent African cake" and extended that to the ludicrous: the king who sees an entire continent as his to feast upon. This, in contrast to the propaganda at the time in which Leopold represented himself as a great philanthropist taking the Congo region under his protection in order to end slavery and ensure international free trade. Her audience knew the background for her argument, and so her piece was shaped for that audience.

Boikhutso's map series aims for a much more difficult position statement. Though his argument might be read as obvious (it is obvious that we can never return to a precolonial Africa), that is not necessarily a position available to everyone involved. Boikhutso began the course by wanting to explain current Zimbabwe land disputes: why some Africans might feel that white settlers should be run off the land no matter the cost. These land disputes, which have

become quite bloody, are for some involved an attempt to return Africans to land that was once theirs. As Boikhutso illustrates, theirs is a fruitless attempt if they believe that they can return to precolonial Africa. As he said in his presentation, "African people must learn to deal with what is here; not to try to recover what cannot be recovered." And, though some might see that argument as self-evident or one only useful for a first-year seminar in a small town, it is an argument Boikhutso felt needed to be made to the people involved today in actual violent and ongoing land battles.

The students in these classes were clearly very serious about the arguments they were making. They were also quite serious about how a visual argument should be evaluated. Given an opportunity to design evaluation criteria, students turned to the same criteria we would find common for written arguments: Does the visual make an argument? How well does the visual communicate that argument? Is the argument relevant to the course and to the assignment? Is it interesting? Is it clear or focused?

In other words, these students and others like them took the visual in its broadest sense as a form of communication through which they could make a sophisticated and relevant argument. And, though their evaluation criteria could certainly come under scrutiny within the context of schooling and how schooling elevates certain values/certain ways of thinking over others, I choose to offer them as one way of illustrating how the students saw these assignments fitting into their course work as it is typically evaluated.

Composition in a visual age

The history I have outlined clearly links words to high culture and the visual to low, words to production and images to consumption. And yet, as Cynthia Selfe has suggested, teachers of English composition have not, until very recently, had the means to produce communication that went very far beyond the word.¹⁹ Many of us still remember producing dittos and stencils. We worked long and tedious hours armed with razor blades, correcting fluid, and as much patience as we could muster given the state of our fingers and hands covered with ink and cracking from printing chemicals. The idea of *producing* anything that went beyond that often blotched or botched handout would have been unthinkable. As well, most English teachers have not been trained in visual thinking beyond the level of *ut pictora poesis* or of media criticism. My own abilities in graphic design are very clearly limited by

The history I have outlined clearly links words to high culture and the visual to low, words to production and images to consumption.

my willingness to learn software, to the clipart and borders available in that software, and to my barely tutored eye for design and page layout.²⁰

Teachers who have been interested in using the visual in writing classes have generally limited their discussions to analysis because there were few ways of doing otherwise. Certainly, more recent access to the Internet and to desktop publishing has given teachers ways of incorporating visual thinking into the writing class, but even that will take time and money and equipment and training. And, again, while some teachers have access to state-of-the-art technology, many others have trouble finding an overhead projector that works or arrives in the classroom on time. My guess is that many of these difficulties will not ease up in yet another age of back-to-basics talk and threats of out-comes-based funding. Yet, our students will continue to work with whatever technology—much of it primarily visual—they can get their hands on.

For those scholars and teachers like Wysocki, Faigley, Trimbur, Johnson-Eilola, and others who are raising new questions about verbal and visual

communication, the issue seems to be less one of resources than of emphasis or, rather, relationship. The question for me is not whether, “Learning to see well helps students write well,” as Donald and Christine McQuade claim in their 1999 textbook *Seeing and Writing* (vii). Instead, the question is much closer to one Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola ask: “What are we likely to carry with us when we ask that our rela-

For students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them.

tionship with all technologies should be like that we have with the technology of printed words?” (349).

Whether that question will lead us, as the New London Group and others suggest, toward multiliteracies or toward composition as design or simply toward a more complete way of understanding verbal and visual communication practices is not resolved. What such a question, and others like it, does lead to, however, is a new configuration of verbal/visual relationships, one that does allow for more than image analysis, image-as-prompt, or image as dumbed-down language. For students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them.

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Appendix

Africa in the Popular Imagination Making a Visual Argument

So far this term, we have talked about how popular ideas and ideals are conveyed in film and in explorers' journals and reports. As well, we have talked about how these ideas can be changed, corrected, enriched by such investigations as Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* or E. D. Morel's reports on the conditions in the Congo at the turn of the century. You have also looked at maps to note how a map can convey a particular argument or idea.

For this next assignment, I want you to make a **visual argument** about Africa and its people. We have been focusing on events in the Congo and on early explorations and reports, so it will be easiest if you focus your work on the issues, people, or ideas you have found in your reading and in the films you have watched.

You'll notice, for example, that even the cover of Hochschild's history makes a visual argument by layering a photo of mutilated African villagers on top of the portrait of Leopold to suggest the two are intricately connected.

A visual argument can take any form you wish. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Make a new cover for one of the books you have read—*Tarzan* or *King Leopold's Ghost* or *Through the Dark Continent* or *Heart of Darkness* or *Travels in West Africa*.
2. Draw a map that conveys an idea of the changing nature of Africa after Leopold—changing populations, exports of raw materials vs. imports, changing political boundaries, changing transportation systems, etc.
3. Design a chart or visually powerful table to convey one or more of these changes.

4. Create a Web page (just the opening page for now) that introduces readers to the issues you think are important.
5. Make a flyer.
6. Create a collage of photos and maps you find that help you convey an argument.
7. Make a painting.
8. Draw a diagram.

You will present your argument to the class. Be sure to tell the class what decisions you made to create your argument and how well you think you got your position across.

The visual can cover any of the material from the beginning of the course through our discussions of *Heart of Darkness*.

Notes

1. *King Leopold's Ghost* is a history of Leopold of Belgium's colonization of the Congo.
2. I first began assigning visual arguments several years ago at a suggestion from John Trimbur whose work very much informs my own here.
3. The New London Group formed in September 1994 at a meeting in New London, New Hampshire. The ten women and men who make up the group are Courtney B. Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, James Paul Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels, Martin Nakata, and Joseph Lo Bianco. Their original manifesto appeared in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1996 and is cited here under "New London Group." A version of that original piece also appears as the first chapter of the book-length collection *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* cited here under Cope and Kalantzis. For more information on the group, see Trimbur, "Review of *Multiliteracies*."
4. I choose *Writing with a Purpose* here partially because of its popularity and long life but also because Robert Connors (*Composition-Rhetoric*) chose it as a text illustrative of composition pedagogy from the 1950s into the 1970s. Moreover, this was in no way a media-based composition book, and so an examination of McCrimmon's inclusion of the visual for this text can serve to suggest how the visual entered many non-media-based composition classrooms for many years.
5. In Robert Connors's discussion of this text he notes that there were "no illustrations at all in the first three editions, but by the mid-1970s *Writing with a Purpose* contained over thirty pictures and photographs" (106). Actually, there were illustrations in that first edition though no photographs. The illustrations occur in the

research paper assignment where McCrimmon has reproduced several graphs and charts.

6. Personal e-mail correspondence with author, April 7, 1996.

7. Jean Hagstrum argues that, though the typical rendering of the phrase came to be "Let a poem be like a painting," there is little warrant for that particular interpretation (9–10).

8. See Lucille Schultz's discussion (18–19) of John Frost's 1839 text, *Easy Exercises in Composition* and A. R. Phippen's 1854 *The Illustrated Composition Book*.

9. See Diana George and John Trimbur ("Communication Battle") for a further discussion of this period in writing instruction.

10. In fact, a brief survey of CCC during this period reveals a growing desire to explain how and why we might bring images into the writing class though the assignments are all slightly different, each with different aims. For example, a 1974 "Staffroom Interchange" piece reports on the benefits of assigning a cassette-slide show in required composition as a way to reach what the authors called "non-verbal/right-hemisphere-dominated" students who "find it up-to-date and relevant to their world of movies and TV" (Burnett and Thomason 430). In 1977, Jack Kligerman argued for the use of photography in the composition class to teach students to see objectively, to learn to detail what they see in an image before they try to interpret that image. Here, photography is used as a kind of heuristic aiding the art of selection, planning, arranging, and observing because, Kligerman says of students, "as writers, one of their main problems is to learn to 'capture' a scene in language, to make or re-make part of the world" (174). In his article, Kligerman expressed special concern that students simply weren't ready to interpret what they saw until they could objectively list the details of the world surrounding them: "For unless we can get our students to record what they see in the most unmetaphorical, uninterpretive way," Kligerman writes, "then as teachers we are merely helping them confirm what they already believe. Moreover, we could be reinforcing habits and making it impossible for them to discover a world 'out there' and, perhaps, a basis for inductive reasoning" (176). The picture as evidence of a fixed and knowable outside reality is the lesson here.

11. *Ways of Seeing* was a BBC television series before it came out in book form.

12. Publishers have, off and on, attempted to play with the more traditional design of writing texts. Joseph Frank's *You*, mentioned above, is one example of that. However, it has not been until very recently, perhaps with the publication of Donald McQuade and Christine McQuade's *Seeing and Writing*, that design allowed the visual to take much more than an illustrative role as a supplement to the written text or as a way of making the written text more appealing to the eye.

13. See, for example, Brainard Kellogg's 1891 discussion of letter writing with its emphasis on penmanship in *A Text-Book on Rhetoric Supplementing the Development of the Science with Exhaustive Practice in Composition*.

14. The shift toward normalizing the visual in writing instruction is also one impulse behind many of the assignments in Diana George and John Trimbur's *Reading Culture*, particularly in Visual Culture, Mining the Archive, and Fieldwork sections.

15. In "Delivering the Message," John Trimbur provides a brief bibliographic sketch indicating how design studies is beginning to make itself felt in writing studies.

16. For a further discussion of design and multiliteracies, see Gunther Kress, "Design and Transformation"; Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, "Designs for Social Futures"; and Kress, "Multimodality."

17. See, for example, J. Anthony Blair's assertion that "the conditions of visual expression are indeterminate to a much greater degree than is the case with verbal expression" (27).

18. See Diana George and Diane Shoos for a more thorough discussion of intertextuality and George and Trimbur (*Reading Culture*, 211–15) for assignments based on visual parody.

19. As Cynthia Selfe points out, "I don't think people remain unconvinced that the visual is important, but I don't think they know how to make that turn" from words to the visual. These comments were made during a telephone conversation with the author, December 4, 2000.

20. Add to that the fact that (as we often tell each other about computers in the classroom) technology is unevenly distributed. Ten years ago, it would have been a luxury for many faculty to have consistent access to a video player and inexpensive videos not to mention the capacity for making videotapes of their own. Copyright laws have made some copying, even some video rental for classroom, difficult. Both videotapes and DVDs are now produced without any permission rights for public showing. In the end, just showing an ad or a clip of a film or television program for class discussion can be considered off-limits if some of the most conservative interpretations of copyright laws are observed.

If a classroom is not wired for Internet use, the expense of visuals can be far beyond the reach of most English teachers. Some of the most useful tapes for teaching media analysis, for example, are extremely expensive if individual teachers must purchase them, running from as low as \$19.95 to as high as \$295 for tapes from such sources as Media Education Foundation. Even cheap rentals are not a wholly satisfying solution to the problem I outline here.

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