

A PRIMER OF VISUAL LITERACY.

By Donis A. Dondis.

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There are many elements which compose and structure visual information. For most people, the signification of these visual elements and the nature of their expressive powers remain obscure. They lack visual literacy. They are unaware of the visual culture in which others inhabit around them. They do not see the same world of form and structure that the architect does, nor do they comprehend the composition of structures which the photographer seeks. They may have an awareness of the graphics of commercial art or the configurations of the industrial designers, but their sense of the Gestalt of these products remains well below the critical facilities of those who create them. In a world in which the processing of visuals is a major form of human cognition, the individual who is visually illiterate are indeed handicapped.

All visual patterns have a center of structural gravity in which patterns can be arranged to create a sense of stress, balance, leveling, sharpening, or other forms of visual composition. These basic elements of visual communication involve the use of dots, lines, shapes, direction, tone, color, texture, dimension, scale, and movement. The theoretical framework for interpreting how these elements interact and effect human perception and give it visual meaning can be found in the experimental field of Gestalt psychology. Dondis translates these findings into the language of visual communication and notes, for example, how the dot has the power to attract the eye or how two dots can create a sense of visual space. With the line, the sensation of direction is increased giving it energy and purpose. When lines are enclosed they provide such shapes as the square, the circle, and the triangle and each of these shapes has visual characteristics. The circle signifies endlessness, the square portrays dullness, and the triangle depicts conflict, or tension. Dondis illustrates these concepts and provides a full discussion of how they interact in a visual composition. She not only provides insight into the anatomy of visual messages, but discusses visual techniques and how they are arranged in polarities in order to signify either contrast or harmony. This entails the Gestalt principles of sharpening or leveling. It involves what Rudolf Arnheim calls "visual thinking." These techniques provide a dichotomy between balance and instability, symmetry and asymmetry, regularity and irregularity, simplicity and complexity, unity and fragmentation, economy and intricacy, understatement and exaggeration, and so on. These techniques play an important role in the creation of visual styles by means of which artistic periods are readily classified.

What Dondis has to offer in this informative volume is important and has numerous implications for many semiotically related disciplines. The quest for literacy is not limited to the print culture with its concern for the assessment of reading ability or the measurement of reading comprehension. There is also a concern for more understanding of the visual

world and its visual messages. There is a need for visual literacy. Those who use a language laboratory to teach the acquisition of linguistic patterns fail to interact with the larger visual world in which verbal knowledge is acquired. They remain unaware of how space is organized culturally (proxemics) and how people differ in the use of gestures and nonverbal communication (kinesics). This primer provides language teachers with some insight into how to measure for visual comprehension and how to structure such information in a cross-cultural context. It allows them to complement the verbal message with a visual one.

NALLD NOTE: Another new use for foreign languages!

A recent news release from the National Notary Association (NNA) announced yet another public service program, the introduction of a Translator's Universal Notary Certificate. The purpose is to enable persons speaking different languages to enter written agreements with each other without fear of misinterpretation or misunderstanding. In addition, the certificates will hopefully facilitate trade and assist minority citizens in societies with only one official language—such as the United States—to become full participants in a monolingual legal system. For more information, contact the National Notary Association, 23012 Ventura Blvd, Woodland Hills, CA 91364.