

THESIS

TOWARD A LITERATE FUTURE: PAIRING GRAPHIC NOVELS AND TRADITIONAL  
TEXTS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Submitted by

Nicolas J. Roberts

Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2012

Master's committee:

Advisor: Donna Souder

Doug Eskew  
Ted Taylor

## ABSTRACT

### TOWARD A LITERATE FUTURE: PAIRING GRAPHIC NOVELS AND TRADITIONAL TEXTS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

This thesis focuses on the need to incorporate visual literacy instruction in the secondary classroom. I begin by first exploring the need for a change in the instruction of literacy at the high school level; especially a change that emerges from those who are currently working in the high school classroom. I examine how visual literacy instruction can help to improve declining traditional literacy rates. The use of multimodal texts, such as graphic novels, has been proven to increase the ability of students to read traditional text-based works. I also look at the impact that the lack of visual literacy competency has on students when they leave the secondary setting. High schools are producing students who can consume visual culture, but they are unable to produce and critique that culture. This visual illiteracy places students at a disadvantage. They enter the culture with a lack of culture capital, and are missing the skills to attain more. In my argument, I suggest that one way to help improve the visual literacy skills of students is to incorporate graphic novels into the high school curriculum by pairing them with traditional texts. I offer suggestions for ways educators can make different pairing, based on the needs of their classrooms.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....1

CHAPTER TWO: THE NEED FOR A CHANGE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION.....5

CHAPTER THREE: DEFINING VISUAL LITERACY.....11

CHAPTER FOUR: A DEFICIENCY IN VISUAL LITERACY LEADS TO A  
DEFICIENCY IN CULTURE CAPITAL.....16

CHAPTER FIVE: VISUAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM.....25

    In Theory .....25

    In Practice.....32

CHAPTER SIX:CONCLUSION.....44

WORKS CITED.....46

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Most people would feel uncomfortable going in to see a doctor who has not been seeing patients for over twenty years. We might hesitate to take our car to a mechanic who has only been talking about cars for three decades, and not actually working with them. If your technology specialist is a wizard when it comes to repairing a Commodore, but nothing else, then you would probably hesitate to hand over your new iPad.

If these situations seem ridiculous to you, then you must not have spent much time in the world of education. Unfortunately, the situation described above is very similar to the model that is used in the public education system for the promotion of administrators at the building and district level<sup>1</sup>, as well as the increasing number of third-party consultant firms which are tasked with school reform. After spending a few years in the classroom, administratively-motivated teachers make the move to a building-level position. These teachers, often those who are uncomfortable in the classroom, or unable to effectively connect with students, take the necessary steps to leave the classroom behind them. They move their way through higher paying positions, which require less contact with actual classrooms, but are still responsible for evaluating and guiding teachers on how to manage their own classrooms. Eventually, these administrators may leave the school altogether and become district administrators.

Administrative positions, which seem to increase in number every year, come with an even higher salary and virtually no contact with students or teachers. District administrators do, however, have even greater influence over what curriculum and pedagogical practices are best suited for students and classrooms. Once administrators have spent the better part of their career in a building completely devoid of teachers and students, many retire and take jobs with

---

<sup>1</sup> Building-level administrators include principals, assistant principals, and activities/ athletics directors. District administrators range from specialists all the way up to superintendents.

education consulting firms and continue to make ridiculous sums of money by stepping back into the world of education in order to share their lifetime's worth of teaching wisdom with those who have chosen to remain in the classroom.

Where, in all of this mess, are the classroom teachers? We are right here, trudging away. As a high school teacher, I have seen for myself this process which seems to make no logical sense. I have worked under individuals who have the same number of years in the classroom as I have; some have had even fewer. These individuals are given the authority to make sweeping decisions about what is taught, and not taught, in the classrooms that are only a faint memory to them.

As a result, or at least as a correlation, of this system, the district I teach in, as well as many other districts, find themselves struggling to meet the minimum standards set forth by both the state and federal government. Unfortunately, the solution that my district has chosen is not to turn to successful teachers in thriving classrooms in order to understand how they have managed to be successful. Instead, the district chose to hire a consultant firm from New York to come in and tell teachers how improve their instruction. Within the last few weeks, *The Denver Post* ran an article which provided detailed accounting of just how much my district is paying this company. Over a three-year period, the district will hand over \$7.4 million to this company. The introduction of consultants could have been a viable solution, if these consultants were current leaders in their fields, master educators who are having great success working with this generation of students. Again, unfortunately, they are not. The majority of the people who are leading this consulting firm, and the vast number of others which have begun to spring up, are retired administrators. Individuals who spend the majority of their careers as principals, administrators and superintendents are now stepping back into our classrooms to enlighten us on

how we can better educate our students. Even this solution could have held some promise for the students in our district if these consultants were coming into the classroom with innovative approaches, and major restructuring of the current model of education. For the third and final time, unfortunately, they are not. Most of the time spent with these coaches, according to the *Denver Post* article, is focused on instructing educators to make lesson plans and analyze assessment data. Both of these tasks are firmly rooted in the same system that led to our declining district performance. At every turn, my district seems to be moving closer and closer to canned education. Every student in every classroom will be receiving the same lesson, because that is what the education experts have decided will best suit my students, whom they have never met.

I find myself stuck in the middle of a system that seems to make little sense. I am trying to reach an increasingly diverse population of 21<sup>st</sup>-century students who are lacking skills that are becoming even more necessary for their future success. My classroom is controlled by administrators who were last teaching in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some earlier in that century than others. These administrators are focused on skills and pedagogical approaches that date back even earlier in the educational system. There is a major disconnect here, but very few people, especially at the administrative level, seem to recognize it.

And so, in my attempt to stand up and say, “Wake up and look at the real problems,” I put forth this paper. Realizing that I am merely a classroom teacher, and not a high-paid administrator, I offer a different solution to our problem of struggling students and low achievement. As educators, we do not need more of the same. As educators we need to realize that our students are changing, the world they exist in is changing, and the world they will enter into after they leave the realm of academia will change as well. And as educators we cannot

continue to fight a 21<sup>st</sup> century battle with 20<sup>th</sup> century weapons. We must engage our students where they are, not where students were sixty years ago.

One of the most crucial areas that educators must address is literacy, more specifically visual literacy. Realizing that this phrase may be unfamiliar, and even a bit frightening to many educators, I will take some time to explain what it means and why it is so vital to students. I will conclude by explaining how pairing graphic novels with “traditional” texts provides a scaffolded instructional method for students to engage in the realm of visual literacy without abandoning traditional literacy, and gives teachers a solid foundation on which to expand their familiar pedagogical practices to include instruction in the non-verbal.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE NEED FOR A CHANGE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

The education system in the United States is faced with an increasing number of students who are graduating with insufficient literary skills. Studies, like those conducted by The National Endowment for the Arts, are indicating that, “literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young” (Metros103). While there are many factors that may lead to this decline in reading rates, one undeniable contributor to the trend is, “increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games and portable digital devices” (Metros 103). There is an increasing level of competition between the visual communication that students receive from the world around them, and the less intriguing work that is being presented to them. Recent studies, conducted by Yale University, of visual stimulation in children have shown that, “The average U.S elementary school student watched between five and six hours of television a day. By the time students graduated from high school, they had logged some 22,000 hours of television” (Frey and Fisher 6). Teachers are failing to use the same tools and processes used by the entertainment industry to catch the attention of their students in order to encourage them to spend more time working on assignments and study, and less time being distracted by other sources. Despite the misguided attempts of many educators to stem this flood of technology, the classroom has become inundated by it. Students are turning away from traditional educational approaches in favor of more enjoyable stimuli. Unfortunately, this decrease in traditional literacy has not been accompanied by a measurable increase in other literacies, particularly visual literacy.

As a culture, we can see at any given moment the increase of visual communication, but there has been a seemingly obvious failure of schools to address it. Students are bombarded by

texts in the form of television, the internet, billboards, advertisements, and even packaging<sup>2</sup> (Hill and Helmers 2). The increased use of visual images in modern communication stands in stark contrast to the lack of direct instruction for students in how to interpret these images. Many experts fear that, “Although our students are consumers and producers of media and highly stimulated by a culture rife with easy access to the visually rich Web, photo defendant social networks, video saturated media, and graphically sophisticated entertainment and gaming, they are not visually literate” (Metros 103). Students are not able to interpret these images because they have never received the correct instruction needed (Burmark v). The lack of emphasis in the education system has created a generation of students who, “do not have the skills to understand how to decipher an image and make ethical decisions based on validity and worth. They also lack a vocabulary of vision to communicate nonverbally” (Metros 103). Our education system focuses heavily on traditional reading and writing and ignores the fact that students, “engage their peers in a rich language of sight and sound” (Metros 102). The key to helping students understand their world is to focus on the complexity of the forms of communication they see every day, and not to assume that the students will be able to interpret them based on the more simplistic forms<sup>3</sup> that we tend to focus on in schools (Allen). For most students, their instruction in visual literacy ends with the recognition that, “Green means go.”

How is it possible that such an obvious oversight exists when there is an equally obvious need for this knowledge? Several possible suggestions have been presented by different experts in varying fields.

---

<sup>2</sup> The color, images, and displays used to entice a buyer.

<sup>3</sup> Students learn basic visual cues at an early age. We teach them what a red light means, and what a stops sign looks like.

The most obvious reason for the exclusion of visual literacy from the standard secondary<sup>4</sup> curriculum is the ongoing battle between the visual and the textual. Classrooms are becoming increasingly, “more text driven, a function of the press to prepare students for the all-important testing formats, starting in the early grades and including dozens of state tests, SATs, APs, etc.” (Myatt 187). The word is king in the classroom, because the word can be easily assessed on a standardized test. In the majority of classrooms, “monomodal texts such as classic novels and standardized test passages often dominate what adolescents are expected to read and comprehend” (Serafini 348). As a result of this dominance, “most students receive very little formal instruction on how to read, analyze, interpret, and compose texts that go beyond the alphabetic” ( Faigley et al. xii). The insistence on placing the word above the visual is not preparing our students for the world that they face when they leave the realm of education. Instead of preparing our students for the twenty-first century, “ we insist on having our schools teaching the skills of the medieval clerk—reading, writing, counting and memorizing texts” (Myatt 187). As we continue into the new century, we cannot continue to disservice our students in this way.

In addition, there is a general uncertainty of just where this field falls in relation to other areas of study. Many educators are uncertain about their own understanding of the subject and find, “the idea of reading pictures is still too unfamiliar for many teachers to accept” (Frey and Fisher 49). It gets passed along from English to communication to visual arts and just keeps circling without ever getting a chance to land in one field for too long. It gets pushed to the periphery and most often finds itself, “outside any mainstream literacy curriculum, taught only in

---

<sup>4</sup> Middle or high school years

specialized courses in disciplines such as art and architecture” (Bleed 8). In many schools facing budget cuts in the area of the arts, it is left behind entirely.

The reluctance on the part of teachers is exacerbated by the current disregard for the impact of mass culture on the student. Many educators feel that mass and visual media are not worthy of academic endeavors. A large number of educators believe that studying images is, “soft or non-rigorous because images are commonly construed to be illuminative and decorative” (Hill and Helmers 2). Many educators share the belief that students are already equipped with the skills that they need in order to navigate the currents of our culture, and, therefore, do not require any further instruction. These educators feel that, “unlike reading and writing skills that must be taught and tested, ... students naturally see and hear” (Metros 107). What these educators fail to realize is, “living in an image rich world...does not mean students naturally possess sophisticated visual literacy skills, just as continually listening to an iPod does not teach a person to critically analyze or create music” (Flint and Brozo 526). There is very little instruction in visual literacy at the secondary level, because educators too often equate exposure with understanding. Educators and students fail to make the distinction between, “studying a cultural form and uncritically taking it in” (Graff 101). We, as educators and individuals, assume that if we are exposed to a subject for a long enough duration, we begin to understand it; which often not the case.

Another factor that leads to an omission of visual literacy is the fact that there is also a struggle to simply define what instruction in visual literacy should look like<sup>5</sup>. Educators have no

---

<sup>5</sup> As I began to look into this subject, I found myself faced with the difficult task of trying to define exactly what “visual literacy” looked like. I found it to be a rather difficult task. There are plenty of definitions available, but they are not all cohesive, and they are often conflicting. I will spend a good deal of time in Chapter Three discussing this area. For now, the most basic definition I can give you for visual literacy would be, “The ability to read/comprehend and write/produce meaning from visual sources in a manner similar to that used for textual sources.” You can choose a definition that works better for you after reading the next chapter.

real consensus as to what the best practice is, or who the responsible party should be for passing along this information. Instead of working to achieve a high standard for instruction, most educators choose to turn away from the issue altogether. With increased expectations from all levels and decreased support from administrators, school boards, and states, it is understandable that teachers would feel reluctant to take on a new area of instruction. Teachers are fully aware that, “the current political climate is not particularly supportive of innovation” (Schwarz 63). All of these add up to failure for students (Hill and Helmers 13). With so many factors working against it, it is no wonder that visual literacy has received very little attention in so many pedagogical discussions

As educators, we find ourselves at a very important moment in time. Our students are entering a world that is much different from that in which many of us grew up, even those of us who have only recently completed our growing. Educators must begin to understand that, “although previous success in school and work was heavily dependent on left-brain abilities of logic and analytical talent, right-brained abilities are now the abilities that matter most – artistry, empathy, and seeing the big picture” (Bleed 5). The text-only world of education is coming to an end, and, “the previously unquestioned hegemony of verbal text is being challenged by what Mitchell labels the “pictorial turn”– a growing recognition of the ubiquity of images and of their importance in the dissemination and reception of information, ideas, and opinions – processes that lie at the heart of all rhetorical practices, social movements, and cultural institutions” (Hill and Helmers 19). If we want our students to achieve in the future, we must prepare them for the future, and not mire them in the past. In order to do this, we must be willing to admit that, “the entire education system needs to be revamped to emphasize visual education, from kindergarten

to college” (Bleed 4). For my purposes, I will be narrowing my focus to just one specific area of the education system - the high school English classroom.

The key to a successful visual literacy curriculum resides in our ability as educators to find a balance between the verbal and non-verbal communication that is being presented to students. We must find a solution of balance rather than exclusion as we begin to seriously address these shortcomings. The ability to “read” and understand visual text should be taught alongside traditional skills of reading and writing. If our goal is to enable our students, “to perform well in both the world and on new assessments, students need a critical understanding of print and nonprint texts in relationship to themselves as readers and viewers within different social, cultural, and historical contexts” (Seglem and Witte 217). If educators are able to focus on a balance of literacies, not just choosing one over another, we can better prepare our students for the challenges they may face in the future. Through an incorporation of literacies, we can teach students to, “critically read and view all texts, not just the traditional print texts,” and allow teachers to, “build upon the skills needed to read and write, increasing students’ literacy levels in all areas” (Seglem and Witte 224). Students will be entering a world requiring multiple literacies, we as educators can no longer ignore no to service another.

We must begin by adding to our already existing vocabulary of literacy a new, visual-based vocabulary. It is also important to provide students with opportunities to create and critique visual works as they continue to learn about them (Metros and Woolsey). Any change to pedagogical practices should look not only at how to teach students to understand and interpret the visual world around them, but also how to become contributing members to the visual discourse that is taking place (Riddle). We must approach the issue of pedagogy in a way that

allows visual rhetoric to be used both as a tool in the classroom as well as a means of instructing students.

### CHAPTER THREE: DEFINING VISUAL LITERACY

*Literacy* has been one of the primary goals in education for centuries. For years, whenever anyone discussed learning, they most likely made some reference to the “three Rs.” While this familiar phrase may be somewhat outdated, not to mention oversimplified and misspelled, it is worth noting that two of its pillars serve as the basic definition of literacy. We traditionally define literacy as an ability to both read and to write. This definition has remained steadfast through many of the sweeping changes that have taken place in the education system. There are, however, new definitions of literacy emerging. As we continue into the twenty-first century, it is becoming increasingly more obvious that, “because of television, advertising, and the Internet, the primary literacy of the twenty-first century is visual” (Frey and Fisher 5). It seems that *literacy*, a term that has been used for many years, is quickly becoming one of the top educational buzz-words. I intend to focus on a single literacy, visual literacy, and examine its role in the education of students.

Visual literacy is defined in a number of different ways. The difficulty in pinning down a single definition is due in part to changes in how we define literacy in general. As we change and evolve, we find that, “literacy is now a fluid concept determined by cultural context” (Seglem and Witte 216). Most definitions include elements such as, “a hierarchy of skills, a set of competencies, elements and strategies of communication, a set of components or dimensions, a set of skills-orient learning objectives, and an aptitude for visual communication, visual thinking and visual learning” (Messaris and Moriarty 481). Based on this definition, visual literacy can be defined as both a skill to be acquired and a study used to aid in understanding. As a skill, visual literacy is seen as a process that is used to understand a message communicated visually (Foss *Theory* 143). We are constantly receiving visual messages from sources as varied

as children's drawings, textbook illustrations, advertisements, magazine layouts, scientific diagrams, maps, sculpture, children's toys, and architecture (Kress and Van Leeuwen 3). One of the primary focuses in developing the skill portion of visual literacy is to begin to view and define these visual messages in ways similar to those used for understanding traditional text. Many would suggest that the key to understanding visual literacy is to provide a descriptive look at the way visual modes of communication are related to written modes, and not a prescriptive listing of strict grammar rules that govern visual communication. The primary focus is for a student to develop, "the ability to understand and use images, including the ability to think, learn and express oneself in terms of images" (Seglem and Witte 217). Educators do our students no service if we limit our instruction of visual literacy to a few vocabulary terms dealing with vision, but ignore the very practical ways that visual images are used in the daily lives of our students.

Visual literacy is also used as a means of studying the field of visual rhetoric, a term which will be discussed later. We must see visual literacy as a study of how we use visual rhetoric in our communication (Foss *Theory* 142). In order to be truly visually literate, one must also be able to understand the larger field of visual rhetoric and how the individual images are used within the larger argument. We must take into account both, "the cultural practices of seeing and looking, as well as the artifacts produced in diverse communicative forms and media" (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 3). Many rhetoricians attempt to define the term, both as an artifact of rhetoric and as a way of studying it. They look at the ways that visual rhetoric is currently being used to understand an image based on its nature, function and evaluation. This second focus helps to clarify the role that visual rhetoric is playing in the larger field of rhetoric (Foss *Framing* 305).

An accurate definition of visual literacy must include an understanding of the image itself, and its role in our ongoing discourse of visual communication. Richard Lanham suggests an approach to understanding visual literacy that combines both elements. Lanham's theory suggests that in order to fully understand what we are seeing, and evaluate it accurately, we have to begin to see the images as more than just pictures. Lanham suggests that we must develop a pattern of looking both at the visual and then through it. We look through the visual in order to obtain meaning. We look at the visual in order to understand how it is being used to persuade us. This oscillation between appreciating the visual rhetoric and then critiquing it is necessary to fully understand it (Lanham). We must guide our students to become, "informed critic[s] of visual information, able to ethically judge accuracy, validity and worth" (Metros 103). In addition to understanding the image, as Lanham suggests, a visually literate student must also be able to create an image which has meaning. These students must be able to, "decode and interpret (make meaning from) visual messages and also to be able to encode and compose meaningful visual communications" (Metros 103). Even those students who claim to have no artistic ability, can produce meaning from the most basic of stick figures, if they are given the proper tools and understanding.

Simply defining visual literacy is not enough to prove its worth in the classroom. As educators, we must first understand that there is an academic purpose for including this subject in an academic setting. Educators have to determine whether visual literacy is a requirement for people in order to properly function in the world. If visual literacy is a requirement, that suggests that visual literacy deals with more than just looking at an image and telling someone what the image *is*. Educators have to be able to, as Lanham suggests, explain what the image *means*. Individuals find meaning in images all around us. These images, "express meanings on

traffic signs, rest room doors, Olympic venues and biceps. Armies continue to march under images; the devout of many faiths continue to pray to them” (Faigley et al. 58). In all of the discussions currently taking place over this subject, none are as highly contested as those that are trying to prove or disprove visual communication as a valid form of rhetoric. Verbal and visual literacy have gone back and forth as the dominant mode of communication for centuries. They had reached an apparent stalemate until as recently as 300 years ago, when Western scholars were able to assert the written word as the accepted means of communication (Hobbs). Visual rhetoric “the symbolic actions enacted primarily through visual means, made meaningful through culturally derived ways of looking and seeing and endeavoring to influence diverse publics”(Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 3), has continued to play an important role in the shaping of historical events. Looking at well-known images in the recent past can provide a familiar background to the discussion of the impact of the visual on our own memory of the past. Images from recent events, such as the attacks on 9-11, can be compared to images from the past, such as the raising of the flag over Iwo Jima, in order to illustrate the fact that, even in a written-language culture, visual arguments can be as impactful as written ones (Edwards). Historically, visual rhetoric has served as a means of subversion, when written language is regulated. The visual is a way to communicate when the written and the verbal are strictly controlled by the government (Goldfarb).

The debate has continued, even in the face of the seemingly unbeatable written word. On one side is the long-held view that arguments can only exist in the written and verbal realm of communication. This belief, “reflects the unsupported view that traditional literacy is the only literacy” (Seglem and Witte 217). The individuals who support this view insist that visual images cannot be considered arguments because they are not the traditional, “two-part, two-sided act”

(Fleming 13). The opposition looks at visual elements and their ability to persuade, and focuses on how this persuasion can be shaped into a visual argument (Blair). Some argue that visual representation can be used effectively along with printed information, while others suggest that it is able to stand alone as its own conveyor of meaning. In fact, many of these experts go so far as to suggest that, “the world is made up of visual symbols that require more complex thinking skills than traditional literacy requires” (Seglem and Witte 216). They assert that the barriers that have kept visual elements out of discourse have been removed by the increase in technology that has happened over the last two decades (Metros and Woolsey). The prominence of technology in the lives of students has brought along with it an increased number of visual images that students see on a regular basis. Those who argue that technology has impacted literacy look at how technology has influenced the way students “see” the world around them and discuss how these changes have impacted other areas of study, including the standard concept of literacy-reading and writing-as well as numeracy (Jones-Kavalier 11). If our goal as educators is to equip our students to better navigate this world of visual input and technology, then they must leave our schools visually literate. In the most basic terms, they must, “learn to “read” (consume/interpret) images and “write” (produce/use) visually rich communications” (Frey and Fisher 5). Just as a traditionally literate student must be able to consume and produce, so must the visually literate students of the next generation.

## CHAPTER FOUR: A DEFICIENCY IN VISUAL LITERACY LEADS TO A DEFICIENCY IN CULTURE CAPITAL

We must go beyond this initial debate of word vs. image if we are to truly understand the role that visual literacy plays in the field of education. While current discourses focus on the role of visual literacy in the classroom and its importance to young learners as they begin to venture further out into the world, they seem to completely overlook the effects that this issue will have on students once they leave the confines of their schools. It is my belief that, beyond its role as a skill in understanding street signs and images, visual literacy plays a much larger role in the relationship that individuals have with their culture. A deficiency in visual literacy can alienate students from their culture and prohibit them from fully participating in that culture.

We must first understand what is meant by the term *culture*. This term has become one of the most widely used terms in critical circles in the last twenty years. Entire departments have been devoted to the study of it. It makes sense that so much focus falls on the idea of culture. We are a species that exists for and by our culture. It is vital to our survival. As a group we are able to, “flourish only through culture” (Eagleton 159). But what is culture? What is this entity that holds so much sway over us? For our purposes today, I will be borrowing a definition from Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*. In his text, Eagleton refers to culture as, “Pleasure, desire, art, language, the media, the body, gender, ethnicity” (Eagleton 39). In short, culture is everything that makes us human. There is more to culture than the music, beliefs or images that are popular at any given point in history. Culture is the elements of our daily lives that bind us together. It is also, unfortunately, the elements in our daily lives that tend to separate us as well.

When we speak of differences between groups, the discussion often boils down to one of culture. What should serve to unite our species more frequently fragments it. This would

suggest that there is some greater weight behind culture than just a listing of current trends. While culture is found in all forms, for the purpose of this discussion, I will be focusing on the visual aspects of culture. This visual culture is so pervasive that, “the contemporary U.S. public sphere seems dominated by visual images, visual artifacts, visual performances, and other commands to “look” (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 1). The images and artifacts associated with culture are simply the signifiers of culture, not the signified<sup>6</sup>. There is much more to our ability to interpret our culture than simply deciding if we *like* or *dislike* certain elements found within it. We must be able to understand what lies behind these elements. Most students who participate in our culture do not realize that it is really a system of “signs and representations” (Eagleton 49). Students are not able to fully participate in their culture because they are unable to fully interpret their culture. They do not understand that, “all cultures have sign systems, or systems of meaning that determine the ways which meaning and information is communicated and received” (Serafini 343). Students, generally speaking, see the superficial level of the culture only. They do not understand that while they may “see” an advertisement, what they are really looking at might be a complex system of signals that are influencing their beliefs and values.

Now, don’t mistake what I am saying here. Students are more than capable of consuming the culture that they live in. They can pay for movie tickets, buy CDs, attend concerts, watch television and shop with very little struggle. They are also aware, sometimes overly so, of the roles of gender and sexuality in themselves and their peers. What students are not capable of is really understanding their culture and what their role is within it. They remain ignorant of the forces that are manipulating them into making decisions, forming beliefs, and altering who they become. This ignorance is due, in large part, to an inability to ‘read’ the culture. Students see

---

<sup>6</sup> The visual images and artifacts do not have the cultural value in themselves, but, rather, they point us towards, or away from those elements of culture which do have value.

the culture as a series of harmless artifacts that have no real purpose outside of their ability to add to or detract from their popularity. They are unaware of the messages that are beneath these superficial items. They do not understand that these messages, “have economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes;” (Frey and Fisher 2). They cannot interpret the visual arguments that they see in billboards, film, art, or television. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage as they begin to navigate the culture. They are relegated to the bottom of the cultural system that runs our society. From this position, students are only able to consume the culture. There is no possibility to produce, manipulate, interpret or critique the structures around them. They are lacking the means to access these visual works, both in terms of “their production and their consumption” (Guillory 1484). Guillory defines these means as a form of literacy. When students enter the culture with this visual illiteracy, they do so with a lack of cultural capital as well.

If culture is as vital to our existence as some would suggest, if it is the ‘very social air we breathe’ (Eagleton 148), then it would follow that our ability to interact with this culture would be of equal importance. This would suggest that those who are better equipped to handle these interactions would be at an advantage over those who struggle to understand and manipulate the culture. The hierarchy of cultural literacy that develops in a society situates those who can both produce and consume the culture over those who merely consume it. This hierarchy creates a disparity between those who have control over the culture and those who are controlled by it. The hierarchy would not exist without some benefit to those who were controlling the structure. There are definite benefits for those at the top. They control the visual language that becomes the culture. By manipulating the language in a way that keeps it hidden from those beneath them culturally, they are able to capitalize on the fact that, “language forms a kind of wealth,”

(Bourdieu 43). The use of a visual rhetoric to disguise an underlying message gives power to those who are skilled in the interpretation of this message. Visually illiterate students do not understand that, “the effect of an image is virtually instantaneous, and the viewer responds without conscious thought” (Burmark vii). It is impossible to argue against, or even disagree with, a message that you are completely unaware of. This gives power to the message’s producer.

The visual-linguistic exchange has an economic value as well. Whether we fully recognize it or not, “...visual rhetoric is deeply embedded in the ways we buy, sell, and use products, ideas, beliefs, and social relationships” (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 10). When a cultural image is created, there is a relation between the producer who is, “endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market), which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit” (Bourdieu 66). Our economy is very closely tied to the culture. They are nearly inseparable. Since so much of our culture is centered in what is experienced by our senses, they too are closely tied to the economy. Much of the market surrounding our culture is really a market for the attention of our senses. The messages that we receive are hidden beneath some attempt to attract our senses. Our cultural exchanges have become a trade involving the tools we use to interact with the world. Our system has turned, “our senses into commodities” (Eagleton 156). Our bodies, in essence, become the pursuit of corporations and other capitalist entities. As a result of the lack of textual stimuli, and an overabundance of exposure to visual stimuli, in the form of television, “the child born into poverty will be even more affected by visual influences than more advantaged classmates” (Burmark 3). Children born into poverty are far more likely to be exposed to visual influences, like television, than to textual influence, such as books.

The lack of visual literacy skills creates a cultural dictatorship, rather than a cultural democracy. In a system that promises linguistic power, economic return, and, ultimately, control over the bodies of others to those few who are holding the reigns, any members who are lacking the skills and language necessary to interpret the system are going to be at the mercy of others. These illiterate individuals, who, I would argue, make up the majority of any given culture, lack the visual literacy skills required to decipher the images that they are bombarded with constantly. This illiteracy leads to an unbalanced distribution of the cultural capital within any given society. This intangible currency, “formerly restricted to the aristocratic or clerical estates,” (Guillory 1473) should be available to the masses. In some aspects, there is open access to our culture. Anyone is welcome to consume the culture, but this is only one side of the exchange. It is not enough to only play the role of the consumer. In order to be balanced, the system must provide opportunity for all members to produce, or have access to the means of production. Our students must be given the tools and desire to not only, “read or consume images, but also to write or produce them in ways that let the students’ values, feelings, and achievements take center stage” (Frey and Fisher 23). A democracy is only a democracy if, “every citizen can govern and that society places him...in a general condition to achieve this” (Guillory 1480). In order for our culture to be democratic, then, everyone participating in it must have the opportunity to control the elements that are produced by it<sup>7</sup>. Our culture does not meet this description. The culture,

---

<sup>7</sup> I make no claims that our country operates on a truly democratic model; there are very few that really do. Our political model, that of a republic, allows for individuals to choose others to represent their wishes and best interests. This system works in the political arena, because we are aware of it. The individuals in the society understand that we are giving over power to someone else. In terms of our cultural power, most individuals are not even aware that they have forfeited their power, because they are unaware that the system exists. In its most base sense, our culture is more closely related to an oligarchy than either a republic or a democracy. The power is held by a few who have always had the power, or who have obtained the means to take the power.

therefore, being undemocratic, survives by placing a few members at the top to control the masses beneath them. These few have the majority of the capital.

The American education system's current arrangement leaves visually illiterate students entering the culture in a position from which there is little hope of escaping. They are left to the whims of the, "small and powerful caste that is linguistically and ethnically unified," (Guillory 1478) which holds the controlling shares of cultural capital. These students are left to struggle for any level of cultural capital that they can wring from the grasp of the dominant members in the culture. The majority of the population is left to fend for themselves culturally. They are told what their culture is, and never have the chance to decide for themselves. Comparatively speaking, they are culturally bankrupt. How can they be expected to flourish within their culture if they are continually pushed down by that culture? No group of people can, "thrive when they are starving, miserable or oppressed" (Eagleton 128). This withholding of culture serves to split the society into distinctly unbalanced levels. The culture, which should be shaped by all who claim it as their own, is manipulated by those who are economically, ideologically and, in most cases, ethnically aligned. All others are brushed aside during the construction of the culture, but are eagerly welcomed back when it is time to consume that culture. Those who can 'read' and understand culture rely on the economic contributions of those who can't. They must keep the majority of the culture ignorant of the visual messages being used to manipulate them. In contrast, "studying visual rhetoric trains us to discriminate the commercial from the civic, the propagandic from the democratic, and the sentimental from the memorable, and it may even increase citizen involvement in the processes of government and community" (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 4). By teaching students to examine and question their culture, we are actually

pushing them to improve their culture. If they refuse to accept the visual realm as “simple pictures,” they begin to require more from their culture.

The education system has served to propagate this ignorance, rather than strive to remedy it. Schools hold great sway over the continuation of a culture within any given society. While it is nearly impossible to have one single culture within any nation, “the school is the vehicle of transmission for something like a national culture” (Guillory 1472). It is the school system which serves as the first introduction to culture for most children in a society. It would seem to make sense that, “if the culture teens are immersed in revolves around the visual and the media, their minds recognize the patterns created by these images, creating a persuasive argument for incorporating these patterns within the classroom” (Seglem and Witte 222). If the focus of education were to shift slightly to allow for the introduction of a more comprehensive field of study in visual literacy, the effects on the culture would be vast. Students entering the culture with a visual literacy would be able to take part in the discourses previously, “appropriated as the cultural capital of the dominant fraction” (Guillory 1473). An influx of citizens who are not only able to consume without questioning the culture, but also to take part in the construction and formation of that culture would result in complete cultural overhaul. The cultural conversation would be suddenly muffled by the addition of previously unheard voices. Those who had previously been marginalized and alienated from their own culture would finally be able to read the signs and representations surrounding them. The culture of many would have to answer to the many, not simply exploit them.

If the educational system has it within its power to affect such sweeping cultural changes, then why has it failed to so? Why does it continue to send out students with a handicapped view of the ‘national culture’? The answer is simple – money. Education is a part of the same system

which survives at the expense of the many. Those in control of the culture are the same who are in control of education. Curriculum within schools is dictated, either directly or indirectly, by forces outside of the school. Boards of education, at the local, state and national level make decisions about what should be emphasized in classrooms. Standardized tests determine which skills are taught, and which ones are neglected. Presidents mandate sweeping changes which allow for very little flexibility within a school's curriculum. Teachers, too, are responsible. Whether teachers care to admit it or not, teaching is political<sup>8</sup>. Through their choices, teachers shape their curriculum, and are not, "hapless victims of political circumstance but are active policy players [whose] choices, the value decisions they make and the interpretations of policy they enact, are of great import in relation to the quality and equity of students' schooling experience" (Frey and Fisher 54). As teachers, we still make choice in the classroom; some have more liberty than others. We may decide what novels are taught and which are left on the shelf. We decide which answers to accept as correct, and which disregard. We even decide the tone we use to present material, based on our own beliefs toward the subject.

The educational system is just one more cog in the cultural machine. It is in some regards, the most important cog. Since its initial inception, *school* has had, "the monopoly in the large-scale production of producers/ consumers" (Bourdieu 57). Without the school, the culture as we know it would not exist. Rather than provide equal access to both aspects of culture, production and consumption, the school serves to reproduce the inequalities that exist in the larger culture through an, "unequal distribution of cultural capital" (Guillory 1484). Students from affluent families can afford to attend schools that are free from many of the outside forces

---

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Graff explains this realization in his book, *Beyond the Culture Wars*. He recounts that he, "now had to recognize that I had been teaching an interpretation of the text, one that was shaped by a certain *theory* that told me what was and was not worth noticing and emphasizing in my classroom. I had been unable to see my theory *as* a theory because I was living so comfortably inside it" (29).

which restrict the curriculum in most schools. These students are given the opportunity to discover the underlying messages that exist in a visual culture. These students have more access to the culture from the earliest years of their education. They are ‘tracked’ into cultural wealth before they are even capable of consuming the culture on their own. The survival of our culture as we have known it to exist to this point depends on the, “differential tracking of students according to class or the possession of cultural capital” (Guillory 1472). The only way to bring balance to the disparities within the culture is to bring balance to the disparities within the school system. We must educate students, “of how knowledge is produced and how reading takes place and thus make them capable of playing an active role in their society, enabling them to intervene in the dominant discourses of their culture” (Graff 186). If the dominant discourse of future generations are going to take place visually, how are our students going to participate in them?

There exists within our culture an extreme imbalance between those with vast stores of cultural capital and those without. This unbalance results in an unequal distribution of knowledge, power and wealth throughout the nation. At the heart of this conflict is the inability of the vast majority of the culture to read and interpret the signs and representations that are present within the culture. Those in power are able to understand and produce these cultural messages in order to manipulate and dominate those who lack the visual literacy needed to navigate the culture. It is only through an inclusion of visual texts in the everyday instruction of students that visual literacy will become a valued skill in the educational system. Until this occurs, we can expect very little change in the ability of average citizens to fully participate in their culture.

## CHAPTER FIVE: VISUAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

### The Theory

The use of visual rhetoric, the application of visual literacy, as an educational tool is firmly rooted in our earliest dialogues on knowledge. Aristotle himself said, “without image, thinking is impossible” (quoted in Stokes 1). The terms that we use to describe knowledge are rooted in the visual. From the Greeks we find that, “the words *theoria* or knowledge and *theoros* or witness are rooted in sight” (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope xxii). Our earliest scholars understood the role that visual rhetoric played in our acquisition of knowledge, even if they did not use that term specifically. They saw the power that images held in teaching those who were not able to decode the written word. Aquinas claimed that those who were unable to read could, “learn from pictures as if from books” (quoted in Faigley et al. 60). Those students who struggle with text may thrive with a pictorial input.

The visual also plays heavily in modern rhetoric. Literary and compositional theorists across diverse disciplines have focused, at least in part, on the ways that visual input affects the way that we see the world and shape our reality:

They explore the visual aspects of *common rhetorical devices* such as depiction, metaphor and other rhetorical figures; visual scholars find several of Kenneth Burke’s concepts useful, including his discussions of the *tragic and comic frame*, the *psychology of form*, *identification*, and *representative anecdote*; the *ideograph*, first introduced by Michael McGee; *the image event*; *rhetorical circulation*; and the *iconic photograph*. “Examples of attention to the act of viewing include Laura Mulvey’s *the gaze*, Michel Foucault’s discussions of *surveillance* and *panopticism* and *heterotopias*, and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic discussion of the *mirror stage* (Olson et. al 9).

These scholars, many the leaders in their fields, believe that we cannot separate what we see from what we know. They have come to see that, “visual rhetorical studies is not parasitic on traditional rhetoric” (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope xxiv). Unfortunately, the world of education has not made that same discovery. They have failed to realize that, “images also wield great power – religious, tribal, romantic, pedagogic” (Faigley et al. 60). As a culture, we send men out to die in battle under an image; we pay homage to images on Sundays; we present images to our loved ones by the dozen; and yet, we have failed to harness the power of the image to educate our masses.

In the classroom, visual literacy can become a powerful tool in instructing students in traditional literacy. Students enter the classroom with years of experience in “looking” at the world around them. They used visual input to help them try to make sense of the world around them since their birth. These students have been influenced by a visual world far more than they have by a verbal one. We tend to overlook the ways that, “visual rhetoric helps constitute the ways we know, think, and behave” (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 3). It would make sense that we, as educators, would try to use this familiarity in visual processing in order to aid in verbal processing. It seems, however, that we have forgotten that, “because visual literacy precedes verbal literacy in human development, it is basic literacy in the thought processes that are the foundations for reading and writing” (Stokes 3). Students learn to look and recognize long before they learn to speak and write.

Educators tend to separate these acts because we feel that they are too different to share a pedagogical relationship. In reality, there is very little difference in what is being asked of students to demonstrate in visual literacy and verbal literacy. In any form of reading, “a reader pulls meaning from a system of signs; letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, shapes, colors,

pictures” (Faigley et al. 112). The skills that these two literacies emphasize are nearly identical, and yet, we treat them as completely separate entities in the classroom. Instruction in visual rhetoric enforces a student’s ability to read a verbal work and, “make connections, determine importance, synthesize information, evaluate, and critique” (Frey and Fisher 1). By focusing on the similarities between the verbal and the visual, educators are actually able to reinforce students’ understanding of both.

Visual literacy is actually capable of enhancing a student’s grasp of literary literacy. Skills that are acquired through reading a visual text can be translated into an improved reading of a verbal text. For example, some of the most fundamental skills needed for traditional literacy, “such as visualizing, summarizing, asking questions, and predicting are successful in supporting readers’ comprehension of written texts” (Serafini 342). Unfortunately, not all students possess these skills. In fact, “many struggling readers (kids who read below grade level) are unable to visualize pictures in their heads” (Frey and Fisher 32). By focusing on a single skill, visualization, we can see just how visual literacy can have a direct impact on literary literacy. These students who are unable to visualize, cannot connect with a text in the same way that other students can. These students “struggle with making the leap from words to images” (Seglem and Witte 217). Without this ability, students struggle with comprehension. They lack the skills to, “become more engaged in their reading and use their imagery to draw conclusions, create interpretations of the text and recall details and elements from the text” (Seglem and Witte 217). Without instruction in visualization, and reinforcement in visual literacy, these students will struggle with anything that they read. In short, “they *need* graphics to help them understand the message” (Frey and Fisher 32). Images provide a scaffolding for struggling readers until they are able to “see” the story on their own.

Instruction and inclusion of visual literacy is also beneficial in other areas of education, not just literacy. Educational research has shown that, “using visual treatments in lessons enhances learning” (Stokes 4). Studies indicate that, in any area of education, “students can learn more effectively from a more concise summary, particularly when words and illustrations are presented together” (Stokes 4). In addition to improved responses in classroom instruction, many students, “showed more improvement in test scores when using the text-plus-graphic format” (Stokes 5). As early as 1978, education researchers had discussed the benefits that visual literacy might hold for the classroom. In a study cited by Flynt and Brozo, educational researchers Ausburn and Ausburn found that an increase in visual literacy could lead to improved, “verbal skills, self expression and ordering of ideas, student motivation and interest in a variety of subjects, chances of reaching the disengaged, self-image and relationship to the world, and self-reliance, independence and confidence” (Flynt and Brozo 528). Thirty four years ago, the importance of visual literacy was being discussed, and yet, here we are.

One the most successful formats for teaching visual literacy seems to be the inclusion of multimodal texts into the classroom. These texts combine both traditional verbal communication with nonverbal communication in a single work. The incorporation of more than one form of communication allows teachers to, “provide a bridge from the text-based literacies of the traditional middle and high school classroom to the multiliteracies necessary for the future” (Serafini 343). Incorporating multiple modes and genres within a text allows teachers to, “provide tools for middle through high school students to re-envision reading and writing” (Dean and Grierson 456). While many educators may see these works as simply “picture books” there appears to be a great deal more going on beneath the surface of these texts. In some ways, these texts are actually asking students to do more work than a traditional book. A multimodal text is,

“more complex than texts that use written language as the primary semiotic resource. These challenging texts require that readers work across multiple sign systems and use different strategies for navigating and comprehending these texts” (Serafini 343). By incorporating textual and visual input within a single text, the multimodal work allows teachers and students to clearly identify the relationship between the two. Teachers are able to use these texts in order to instruct students on how to, “understand how images produce meaning, and become engaged in the search for this meaning” (Frey and Fisher 96). The combination of the visual and the textual is key. Looked at separately, students may struggle to make the necessary connection between the two sources of meaning.

One multimodal genre that seems well suited for the classroom, but remains overlooked, is the graphic novel. While often seen as nothing more than a comic book, the graphic novel offers many of the benefits that are at the heart of visual literacy instruction. A graphic novel that is well constructed, “offers the immediacy of the prose reading experience, with the pictures and the words working simultaneously, making a graphic novel not only something one reads but something one sees as well, like reading and watching a movie at the same time” (Griffith 182). Students are asked to read the traditional text they would find in a novel, while interpreting the images at the same time. This connection between the, “words and illustrations is crucial because the art as well as the text must be “read” (Butcher and Manning 68). In addition to this multimodal interpretation, students are asked to interpret a third source of information. Students, “must not only decode the words and the illustrations but must also identify events between the visual sequences” (Butcher and Manning 67). The graphic novel provides the combination of textual and visual systems of information needed for effective instruction in visual literacy. The graphic novel is an invaluable tool in the classroom because it has the ability to, “appeal to

various readers, offer all kinds of genres, help students develop critical thinking, and encourage literacy” (Schwarz 58). In this single, usually condensed, genre of literature, a teacher can find a wide range of benefits to aide in the instruction of visual literacy.

One of the greatest benefits of the graphic novel in the classroom is its ability to reach all levels of student. Teachers who use graphic novels in their classroom do so because, “they *enable* the struggling reader, *motivate* the reluctant one, and *challenge* the high –level learner” (Frey and Fisher 32). Reaching struggling readers is one of the most difficult tasks a teacher may face. I spoke earlier of the losing battle that teachers face in regard to the visual stimuli that students prefer. The graphic novel is one answer to that struggle. Students who are alliterate<sup>9</sup> may find the subjects and formats available in graphic novels more appealing than a more traditional text. Getting these students who choose not to read interested in literature is a vital first step to getting them plugged into the rest of the world. As Mark Twain said, “The man who doesn’t read is no better off than the man who can’t read” (Frey and Fisher 32). Even those students who struggle to read can be aided by the graphic novel. In a 2005 survey, researchers found that, “high school students who were identified as having learning disabilities self-reported that graphic novels motivated them to read and aided their comprehension” (cited in Griffith 186). High performing students can be engaged and challenged by graphic novels as well. The unique structure of the genre allows for higher level discussions and inquiry. Teachers can use this form as, “an engaging medium for asking students to analyze information and persuasion in different ways” (Schwarz 61). The graphic elements also allow for higher-level students to be introduced to, “semiotic modes, connecting graphic novels to the study of signs and symbols” (Griffith 186). Higher-level students may initially turn their noses up at having to read, “a

---

<sup>9</sup> Alliterate students possess the skills needed to read, but choose not to.

simple comic book.” It is vital for the teacher to hook these students right away, and provide them with a graphic novel that offers some depth of discussion. Just as we find with traditional novels, not all graphic novels are created equally.

In addition to engaging students, the graphic novel also offers teachers a new way to provide instruction in a variety of literacy skills. As a result of the combination of text and images, “both traditional, alphabetic literacy and literacies such as information, visual and media literacy can be well served by classroom engagement with the graphic novel” (Schwarz 59). Graphic novels rely heavily on the traditional elements found in a text novel, and so, they provide students with an opportunity to reinforce their understanding of these terms. Many teachers have found that they can effectively, “use graphic novels to teach literary terms and techniques such as dialogue, to serve as a bridge to other classics, and as the basis for writing assignments” (Butcher and Manning 68). Visual literacy instruction is obviously served by the graphic novel. Students must go beyond traditional means of discussing a text, and include analysis of the visual. In order to fully understand a graphic novel, “students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering style” (Schwarz 59). This introduction into the use of visual elements is crucial in the development of visual literacy. Directing students to engage in analyzing, “the elements used to construct visual images (e.g. line, shape, pattern, texture, color) provides a focus and develops a working vocabulary for discussions about how various visual elements are perceived and eventually interpreted” (Serafini 344). The graphic novel also provides opportunities for instruction in critical media literacy<sup>10</sup>. While this is not my focus here, it is important to

---

<sup>10</sup> Being able to think critically about the influence and power wielded by the media.

mention, given the close relationship between visual literacy, the media and culture. This genre provides a manageable and age-appropriate way to introduce yet another form of literacy into the classroom; a literacy that, “affirms diversity, gives voice to all, and helps students examine ideas and practices that promulgate inequity” (Schwarz 62). Many graphic novels, including some that I suggest later, are written by individuals whose culture, nationality, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation may have traditionally excluded them the mainstream classroom.

Unfortunately, despite the benefits that the graphic novel genre offers, it has remained relatively unused in the classroom. A nationwide survey found that, “only 4 percent of fourth-through-twelfth-grade teachers use graphic novels in their classrooms” (cited in Frey and Fisher 35). This number is startling given the acceptance that the graphic novel receives in all other circles. In the public sphere, the graphic novel is becoming increasingly more popular, especially in overseas markets. It is estimated that, “in France, one out of every five books sold is a graphic novel” (Frey and Fisher 29). The graphic novel has even made a name for itself in contemporary literary circles. Current graphic titles are receiving more and more recognition from the literary community. Even titles from the early days of the graphic novel are recognized for their literary merit. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize twenty years ago, before anyone even really knew what a graphic novel was. Despite this acceptance in other fields, the graphic novel has seemingly become another victim of, “national policies stressing high-stakes testing have influenced teachers to ignore sequential art narratives and various types of literacy in favor of more traditional forms of print and literacy” (Frey and Fisher 53). As long as teachers are pushed to prepare their students for these tests, there will be a struggle to incorporate skills and content that are not included on “the test.”

## **The Practice**

If visual literacy is necessary, and indeed vital, to the future success of students, then what do educators need to do in order to improve their instruction, especially at the secondary level?

Before I begin with what I want to say, let me first make clear a few things that I do want to say.

I am not here to suggest that educators should simply abandon the canonical literary texts that are found in the classroom today. While I am a proponent of the reexamination of the accepted literary canon, that is not the focus of this particular work. There are many works in the traditional canon which still offer a great deal of value in the classroom, and those that do not are finding themselves coming under an ever-growing scrutiny. The canon, once accepted as sacrosanct, has, as Graff puts it, “[...] become a conflict of theories” (Graff 52). I do not need to add my voice to this conflict at this moment. I am, rather, asking teachers to consider ways in which they might, “evolve their own canons” (Frey and Fisher 55). A system of augmentation is preferable to one of replacement. That is easier said than done, I know.

Educators should not abandon all forms of print text either. There will always be an important role for traditional print texts in the classroom. My approach is not one of visual literacy only. We should work to expand upon the literary works that have been the foundation of the classroom from its inception, and not throw them out, “like leftovers” (Frey and Fisher 58). I believe that we should take the approach of augmenting instruction with visual literacy, and not replacing other, equally important literacies with it.

And, finally, I do not claim that what I am suggesting is the end-all and be-all of the visual literacy discussion. It would be naïve to think that a single approach could serve as the solution to any issue in education, let alone one as far reaching and controversial as this one. I will merely propose one possible path that can be used to improve the education of students. I am simply throwing my rock into the pool of education in order to make a few ripples.

Before I go any further, it is important to first address a few of my own biases in regards to this topic. As an English teacher, I have a predisposition toward the written word. It is what drew me to this field. I view reading and writing as essential to our existence, and therefore, find myself unable to suggest a solution to the problem of visual illiteracy that does not include the integral elements of traditional literacy. An avenue of instruction may exist which is completely isolated from the conventional forms of reading and writing, I cannot see it myself, however.

My pedagogical experience has occurred almost exclusively at the high school level. I have been an English teacher in a high school for six years, so that is the lens through which I am most comfortable framing my discussion. I have very little insight in elementary education, or even the middle school, for that matter. My undergraduate and graduate experience has given me some insight into what is occurring in terms of visual literacy at the post-secondary level, but that is outside of my realm of comfort as an educator. While the steps I propose could quite possibly be adapted to different levels of the educational system, I do not have the appropriate level of experience to make that claim with any degree of certainty.

The final bias I wish to address is that which I have towards the visual. I am firmly rooted in the video-game-playing, internet-surfing, and visually-centered generation that my students belong to<sup>11</sup>. Despite the difference in age, I find myself closely aligned with my students when it comes to an almost overwhelming need to consume all things visual. I feel very comfortable in a visual world. There are many teachers who do not share this sentiment. They are much more comfortable in a world comprised only of words on a page. In addition to

---

<sup>11</sup> I grew up playing video games. I can still remember struggling through games on our Atari. I continue to play video games, albeit, on a much more advanced platform. I spend too much time on Facebook. I worry that I have a growing addiction to StumbleUpon. The last five books that I purchased for pleasure reading have been electronic versions that I read on an iPad. I am constantly taking pictures on my phone which are later updated to various internet albums. I understand the power that the visual world holds over my students, because it has the same hold over me.

growing up in this visual world, I have also had extensive experience in the field of theatrical design, so I am very familiar with the elements of design, which I will discuss shortly. I approach this subject knowing that it will be foreign to many, even those who consider themselves to be well established in the world of education. For some, this unfamiliarity will prove too much to overcome. For others, there may be a fairly steep learning curve, but they may choose to persevere. Others, like myself, will find it a small leap to make from teaching students to read a text to teaching them to read an image, or a series of images.

What, then, do I propose? It is really very simple. At the secondary level, pairing graphic novels with traditional, and even canonical, texts provides a scaffolded instructional method for students to engage in the realm of visual literacy without abandoning traditional literacy, and gives teachers a solid foundation on which to expand their familiar pedagogical practices to include instruction in the non-verbal. As educators, we already have a number of ways that we use literary texts in the classroom, depending on our own personal pedagogical beliefs. By juxtaposing a visual text with a written one, we can instruct our students in the development of visual elements in the same way that we would with more traditional texts. What I will examine here, is how this might benefit students, and teachers, and what this might look like in a classroom.

One of the first obstacles that we must overcome is to help our students understand that the visual elements that they are exposed to almost constantly, are actually capable of creating meaning. To many students, a line is just a line. These students do not understand that we use colors to express ideas and emotions. They may understand that a word like “innocence” has a meaning that they can express using other words and that it possess an emotional response that is unique to them, but they do not always understand that the color white can be used to evoke the

same definition, and emotional response. As educators, we have to help them make this connection between what they see and how they understand and respond to it. In order to help them to begin to make this connection, I actually begin with music. I know, not only am I suggesting that we work with visual elements, now I am throwing in auditory elements as well. Just go with me. I have students listen to four very different pieces of music<sup>12</sup>. I choose instrumental pieces with no vocals, but the choice is really yours to make. As the students are listening to each piece, I ask them to make a list of words that the song brings to mind. These words can be memories, colors, emotions, or anything that they think of. I also instruct them to draw lines and shapes as they are listening. Their images can only be abstract; I do not want them drawing actual scenes or pictures. When we have finished, we discuss what they have written and drawn. The kids are surprised to see that they usually have very similar terms and images. This shared representation leads to an interesting discussion of why they drew the things they did. We finish the activity with a brief written piece in which the students must discuss the connection between the music, their drawing, and the terms that they have written. They are given the task of trying to explain how their abstract images reflect the written description for one of the pieces of music. For many of them, this is the first time that they have stopped to think about any possible connection between images and meaning in any depth beyond the superficial. At this point, they are thinking about visual literacy, but they do not really understand it.

How, then, does one begin to teach visual literacy? The same way that we teach children to read and write with words; we start with the most basic elements. We would not assume that a child, though she may have been exposed to words for years, would understand even the most

---

<sup>12</sup> For my class, I use Barber's "Adagio for Strings, Op.11"; "A Night in Tunisia" featuring Clifford Brown; Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons, Violin Concerto in E Major"; and "Fanfare for the Common Man" by Aaron Copland

basic terms on a page if she had not been given instruction in letters. Educators must understand that:

Visual literacy is a learned skill, not an intuitive one. It doesn't just "happen." One becomes visually literate by studying the techniques used to create images, learning the vocabulary of shapes and colors, identifying the characteristics of an image that give it meaning, and developing the cognitive skills necessary to interpret or create the ideas that inform an image, be it a television show, photograph, painting, chart, graph, advertisement, PowerPoint slide, animated GIF or monster movie. It takes work, study and practice. (Burmark v)

Similarly, we do not expect a student at the high school level to be prepared to analyze a text-based novel without first understanding at least a few basic literary elements, such as plot, character, symbol, etc. Fortunately, these literary elements are also important when discussing visual texts, so some of the fundamental instruction will actually serve a dual purpose. In terms of visual texts, the basic building blocks are the elements and principles of design. In order to prepare students to "read" the visual, we need to teach them the language that is used to "write" the visual. Teachers need to be able to provide instruction in elements such as line, shape, color, direction and principles like balance, emphasis repetition and unity.

I imagine this is the point at which I begin to lose those who are not entirely comfortable with the visual lexicon. While I understand that this does require teachers to begin offering instruction in an area in which they may have very little confidence, I would ask them to consider a few things. First, because we live in a world of visuals, there is absolutely no need for a teacher to actually possess an artistic ability, in order to help students understand the basics. No one is asking English teachers to pick up their sketch pads and provide in-depth

demonstrations of design elements in their classroom. That is simply not necessary. There are plenty of wonderful examples of all of the elements and principles of designs that have already been created that you can use to demonstrate to your students; we call it art. Which brings me to my second consideration. In our current climate of cross-curricular instruction, instruction in the basics of design provides a perfect opportunity for teachers to venture out of their classrooms and visit their schools' art teacher. How often do these individuals get to share their expertise with other adults in their building? If you are uncertain about how to explain some of the elements of design, or where to find quality examples of balance, then go and ask the experts. Talk to them about what it is that you are doing in order to benefit from their insight. Learn from the experts. Which is a nice segue into my final consideration. I can hear the protests of teachers already. "That is not my field." "That's someone else's job." "I already have too much to do. How do you expect me to learn something new?" While I understand that the world of visual literacy may be new to many teachers, the value to our students far outweighs any extra learning on our part. Every day, we ask students to learn something that they did not know before they entered our classroom. We expect them to overcome any objections that they may have to working hard and to struggling in order to understand what we think is important. How can we expect this from our students when we are unwilling to learn and struggle ourselves?

By providing students with discussions, definitions, and examples of the basic vocabulary of visual design, we begin to make the transition from images that are, "Just pictures," and images that say something (visual rhetoric). Like any new subject, students require reinforcement and repetition of the fundamentals of visual literacy if they are to be expected to begin speaking the language of visual rhetoric.

The most important step in the process is providing students with the opportunity to apply their newly developing skills. This is where the pairing of texts comes in. By pairing a traditional text with a visual one, specifically a graphic novel, you allow students to receive the benefits of two different genres while using them both to support the other.

The novel provides students with exposure to the traditional literacy that they will need in order to navigate the rest of their time in the educational system. They will learn how to interpret written texts and respond to it in a written format. Students will be forced to persevere, and, for some, struggle in order to stay engaged with a lengthy text. Finishing a piece of reading is a definite skill that must be practiced. These students will also be able to identify important literary elements, and analyze the texts based on these elements. The graphic novel gives them the skills that they will need when they enter the “real world.” While they will be able to identify literary elements, analyze the text and provide written responses, the graphic text allows them to go further. Students are given a chance to make connections between the visual and the verbal. They can see, in a shorter span of time, how a story is developed both through text and images. It also provides an opportunity to continue to strengthen our students’ understanding of the elements and principles of design. The pairing of the two texts provides students with two different perspectives on similar concepts<sup>13</sup>. It also provides for immediate comparisons between the written and the visual, in a context that the students are already familiar with. The novel can add a sense of rigor to the “easier” graphic text, while the graphic novel can add a sense of interest and engagement to the novel.

---

<sup>13</sup> Concepts such as *how a character is developed, or how a symbol is used.*

When it comes down to what this instruction actually looks like in a classroom, there are several variables that can be manipulated by the individual instructor in order to meet the needs of their students, as well any instructional constraints under which they find themselves working.

The first variable is when teachers choose to have their students read these two texts. There are two possible routes that can be taken in terms of when students are assigned a graphic novel. They can either be asked to read the graphic work alongside a traditional text, or as a separate reading done before or after the traditional text. This decision must be made by the instructor, and should be based on the students he/she is working with. Using the graphic text at the same time as the traditional text allows students and teachers to analyze and discuss the similarities and differences between the two texts as they unfold. Students are able to make connections in the moment as they switch back and forth between different literacies. The simultaneous approach helps to solidify the ties between the visual and the textual. The downside to this is that not all students will have the skills necessary to make these changes between texts. Some, perhaps many, students will find the idea of reading two different texts simultaneously too overwhelming. The other option, reading the graphic novel before or after the traditional one, helps to relieve some of the anxiety that students may feel with reading multiple texts at the same time. This approach allows teachers to treat each text as an independent entity, while still creating the connection that the pairing provides. The drawback here is that these connections might not be as apparent to students as they are trying to recall events and elements from a text that they are no longer reading. There can still be a good deal of payoff from this instructional method, but it does require the teacher to emphasize the connections that *will* be occurring while students are reading, rather than the connections that *are* occurring,

In terms of actual pairings, there are endless possibilities. I will not, and probably cannot, attempt to list what I think might be the best graphic novel pairing for every text in the canon. I am not a graphic novel sommelier. What I will discuss, however, is a few different approaches to choosing the pairing that will work best for your students in your classroom. I will also provide a specific example for each of the approaches, based on the experiences that I have had in my own classroom.

While it is certainly possible to find a graphic novel version of many of the traditional texts that are used in the classroom, this is not necessarily the type of pairing that I would suggest. There is a benefit to using a graphic novel alongside its traditional counterpart, in that, students are able to follow along with the same story in two different genres at the same time. If a student is struggling to understand the text being used in the traditional novel, the graphic novel can provide assistance in comprehending the story. It can also, however, provide an “out” for these students. The key to a successful pairing of texts is that students actually read both texts. By using a graphic version of, say, *Moby Dick*, alongside the traditional text, you might actually be encouraging students to skip the text and only read the “easy” version. The use of the graphic novel should not provide students with a way around doing the important work of learning how to decode a dense text. The intent here is not to allow reading a graphic text to become the equivalent of “just watching the movie” instead of doing the reading. This is not to say that these graphic classics do not have a place in this discussion. You could choose to use a graphic version of a canonical text in conjunction with the traditional version of a different text. Pairing the visual version of *Moby Dick* with a text such as *The Great Gatsby* can accomplish the goals that we are looking for and introduce students to two traditional stories at the same time.

In addition, a teacher might also choose to use excerpts from a graphic version of a text in order to illustrate specific uses of visual elements without having students read the same story twice.

One way that teachers may choose to pair texts is to find a graphic novel that shares a similar theme with a traditional text that they intend to use. A thematic connection allows students to understand how the two texts are similar, while still allowing them to identify a variety of differences in how the themes are being presented to them. Traditional texts like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and, more recently, *To Kill a Mockingbird* share several thematic elements. Both deal with young protagonists coming of age alongside strong influences of racism. Either one of these texts could be paired with a graphic novel that shares this similar thematic focus. Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, could serve as an interesting pairing with these texts. It shares many of the thematic elements that we find in the two novels and it provides students with a modern look at the racism that still exists in society, especially in the school environment that they are so familiar with. The pitfall to a thematic focus is that, if not handled carefully by the teacher, any discussion and written work that accompanies the reading can focus on the story and the theme without taking into account the visual elements. It falls on the teacher to continue to draw the focus of the students back to the messages being encoded by the visual aspects of the text and to make that a focus for students. Students should be able to understand how the design elements are being used to influence the reader in regards to a specific theme.

Another approach is to choose texts that lend themselves toward discussion of specific literary elements that are shared between them. Choosing different texts with shared elements, such as characters or settings, allows students to examine how these elements are presented to them through different media and how that affects their understanding of them. *Hamlet* may be

paired with Anthony Del Col's *Kill Shakespeare*. While both texts vary in terms of theme and plot, they both share Hamlet as their protagonist. A pairing like this allows students to examine how a character's development varies from a textual source and a visual one. Discussion can center on how both the textual and the visual are used to create emotion, express intentions, and provide the reader with insights into the motivations of a specific character. Students are also able to identify how their own visualization of an element differed from that of the artist, and how these differences can affect how they "see" the character in the story. Design elements such as line and color become important in describing how a character or setting is portrayed and can be contrasted with the use of descriptive language that attempts to accomplish a similar goal.

A final way that teachers may choose to create their pairings is based on the structure of the texts. A teacher may decide to focus not just on the story being told, or the elements included in the story, but on how the author chooses to present the story to the reader. The allegorical barnyard creatures of *Animal Farm*, pair well with the cat and mouse game created in Spiegelman's *Maus*. This type of pairing, which uses very different themes, as well as characters and settings, tells its stories in a very similar way. Both use nonhuman characters in order to illustrate very human events and beliefs. By placing these texts together, the students are able to examine and discuss the effectiveness of the textual and visual metaphor using very concrete examples. The texts provide an interesting chance to discuss how reading about and visualizing these characters differs from actually seeing them represented on the page. These discussions, while still focused on literary elements, and the individual texts, can also lead to larger topics dealing with this shared structure.

However a teacher chooses to make his or her pairings, the end goal is always the same. By bringing together a traditional text and visual text, the instructor opens the door on instruction

in visual literacy. While discussions and written work about the texts may look very similar to what is already happening in the classroom, they cannot remain identical to what they have traditionally focused on. Essays about themes and characters are not sufficient assessments of a student's visual literacy skills unless they incorporate an understanding of the elements and principles of design. In addition to traditional means of analyzing a text, teachers must push their students to look beyond the words and start to analyze the images. Simply talking about a graphic novel with the same focus and vocabulary that one would use for a traditional novel is not enough. It is not enough to simply expand our classroom canon. We must also expand the ways that our students see, understand, and critique the texts that they are presented with.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

As I sit in my classroom, ready to conclude this work, I am once again reminded of importance and immediacy of the topic of visual literacy. I can hear my students discussing the newest fad for their smart phones. Many of them have started to play a game called *Draw Something*. In the game, they take turns drawing an image on their phone that is then sent to another player, who must guess what the image is supposed to represent. These students are spending hours communicating with one another through crudely drawn visual messages. Their frustration over the occasional image that they have, “No idea how to draw,” is dwarfed by the challenge and enjoyment that they feel in this new-found means of communication. The educational consultants still make no mention of this. They do not see the opportunities that are being missed, and the needs that are not being met.

I make no claims that this approach to teaching visual literacy is going to solve all of the problems in the world of education. I am not even suggesting that it is the only approach needed in the instruction of visual literacy. What I am proposing is one approach to addressing a concern that I have as an educator.

I do not assume that I have all of the answers. There are many questions that still remain for me in regards to what this looks like in the classroom. I have very little background in working with students who have disabilities. I am not sure what this approach would look like for these students. I am not sure what modifications could be made, or would even be necessary, in order to meet the needs of all of my students. Visually impaired students in particular might require special accommodation, without dismissing the need for their own visual literacy development. This is an area that requires more time and study in order to develop the best practices for students with disabilities.

By addressing the issue of visual literacy, I hope to continue to open up the discussion at the secondary level. If we as educators can begin to understand the role that visual literacy plays in the success of our students, we will be able to better prepare them for the visual world in which they are already living. By incorporating the study of the visual into the secondary classroom, we can improve the traditional literacy skills of our students, as well as develop skills that will become more and more vital for them in the future. Our current disregard for visual instruction has created a handicap for our students which will have serious social, economic and civic consequences. The introduction of visual instruction through the pairing of traditional text-based works, and visually-based graphic novels allows teachers and students an opportunity to expand their literacy experience while still holding firmly to a literacy with which they are more familiar.

School and district administrators may not be able to look beyond test scores and school performance. Educational consultants might only see the skills and techniques that they used in classrooms thirty years ago. As educators, we must widen our gaze. As the rest of the educational system continues to push ahead with skills and techniques that are becoming less and less relevant to students, it becomes imperative for teachers, those with their feet on in the classroom, to see what our students need today, and to look ahead in order to better understand what they will need tomorrow.

## WORKS CITED

- Allen, D. "Teaching Visual Literacy-some Reflections on the Term." *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 13.2 (1994): 133-43.
- Blair, J. A. "The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments." *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (2004): 41–61.
- Bleed, Ron . "Visual Literacy in Higher Education." ELI Explorations. Educause Learning Initiative. Maricopa Community College, Maricopa. 15 Aug. 2005. Reading.
- Bourdieu, Pierre., and J. B. Thompson. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard Univ Pr, 1991.
- Brown, Jennifer . "Federal grants don't equal academic progress in low-performing Pueblo schools." *Denver Post* 20 Feb. 2012: n. pag. *denverpost.com*. Web. 28 Feb. 2012.
- Bucher, Katherine T., and M. Lee Manning. "Bringing Graphic Novels into a School's Curriculum." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 78.2 (2004): 67-72.
- Burmark, Lynell. *Visual literacy: learn to see, see to learn*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002.
- Dean, Deborah, and Sirpa Grierson. "Re-envisioning reading and Writing Through Combined-Text Picture Books." *International Reading Association* 48.6 (2005): 456-468.
- Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. Basic Books, 2003. Basic Books. New York, NY.
- Edwards, Janis L. "Echoes of Camelot: How Images Construct Cultural Memory through Rhetorical Framing." Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004. New York, NY.
- Faigley, Lester, Dianna George, Anna Palchik, and Cynthia Selfe. *Picturing texts*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.
- Fleming, David. "Can Pictures be Arguments?." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33.1 (1996): 11-22.

- Flynt, E. Sutton, and William Brozo. "Visual Literacy and the Content Classroom: A Question of Now, Not When." *The Reading Teacher* 63.6 (2010): 526-528.
- Foss, Sonja K. "Theory of Visual Rhetoric." Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005. 141-152.
- . "Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory." *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (2004): 303.
- Frey, Nancy, and Douglas Fisher. *Teaching visual literacy: using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.
- Goldfarb, B. *Visual Pedagogy: Media Cultures in and Beyond the Classroom*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Kress, Gunther R., and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge, 2006.
- Graff, Gerald. *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.
- Griffith, Paula E. . "Graphic Novels in the Secondary Classroom and School Libraries." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 54.3 (2011): 181-189.
- Guillory, John. "From *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*." *The Critical Tradition: Classic texts and Contemporary Trends*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. David H Richter. Boston: Bedford, 2007.
- Hill, Charles A., and Marguerite H. Helmers. *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

- Hobbs, C. L. "Learning from the Past: Verbal and Visual Literacy in Early Modern Rhetoric and Writing Pedagogy." *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Carol Handa. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 55.
- Jones-Kavalier, Barbara R., and Suzanne L. Flannigan. "Connecting the Digital Dots: Literacy of the 21st Century." *Educause Quarterly* 35.3 (2008): 8-10.
- Lanham, Richard A. *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Messaris, Paul, and Sandra Moriarty. "Visual Literacy Theory." *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*. Ed. Ken Smith, et al., 2005. 481-502.
- Metros, Susan. "The Educator's Role in Preparing Visually Literate Learners." *Theory Into Practice* 47 (2008): 102-109.
- Metros, Susan E., and K. Woolsey. "Visual Literacy: An Institutional Imperative." *Educause Review* 41.3 (2006): 2.
- Myatt, Larry. "Connecting the Dots: The Unexplored Promise of Visual Literacy in American Classrooms." *Phi Delta Kappan* 90.3 (2008): 186-189.
- Olson, Lester C., Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope. *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008.
- Riddle, J. *Engaging the Eye Generation: Visual Literacy Strategies for the K-5 Classroom*. Stenhouse Publishers, 2009.
- Schwarz, Gretchen . "Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels." *The English Journal* 95.6 (2006): 58-64.
- Seglem, Robyn , and Shelbie Witte. "You Gotta See It to Believe It: Teaching Visual Literacy in the English Classroom." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53.3 (2009): 218-228.

Serafini, Frank . "Expanding Perspectives for Comprehending Visual Images in Multimodal Texts." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 54.5 (2011): 342-350.

Stokes, Suzanne . "Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective." *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education* 1.1 (2001): n. pag. Web. 3 Dec. 2011.

Stroupe, Craig. "Visualizing English: Recognizing the Hybrid Literacy of Visual and Verbal Authorship on the Web." *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Carolyn Handa. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 13.