Writing in the age of the screen: aspects of visual grammar

Had I been writing this chapter ten years ago, I would have felt that, by and large, that was more or less what there was to think and say about the matter: the question of what the resources of writing are, and of how people use them. Of course, even within that framework there are many things to explore. But writing the chapter now I am aware that things are very different. The screen more than the page is now the dominant site of representation and communication in general, so that even in writing, things cannot be left there. As I have said, what is fundamental is that the screen is the site of the image, and the logic of the image dominates the semiotic organisation of the screen.

This happens in at least two ways. First, the screen, and whatever appears on it, is treated as a visual entity. Even though the graphic marks, the graphic stuff, may be those of letters, that stuff is organised – potentially or actually, more or less – as visual stuff. It is ‘laid out’ according to principles which are visual principles: bullet-points are an instance; so are spacings, indenting, treatment of margins, of white space as visual framing. The written text now has to look good. Of course, aesthetic principles governed the look of the page: but that was then a matter for those professionals whose jobs were associated with writing: from ‘typists’ to typesetters and printers. Now everyone can and really needs to ‘play about’ with such matters. Added to this are other graphic or visual effects, such as bolding, differentiations in size and type of fonts, and so on. These make writing as a whole and letter in particular into visual entities, adding meanings of the visual modes to those of writing. On the screen, the textual entity is treated as a visual entity in ways in which the page never was.

Second, a significant organisational feature is that writing, whether on the screen or on the page, is accompanied more and more by image, whether as ‘picture’, diagram or map. In these writing/image ensembles, placement, the spatial positioning of the mode-elements, matters, it has meaning-effects. The placing of the elements of image and writing on the space of the screen (or of the
page) matters because that placing expresses principles of visual grammar through which this now visual entity is organised. A simple example is the ‘caption’, where it clearly matters whether the verbal caption is placed near to the visual element or more distantly, or whether it is placed at the top, at the bottom, to the left or to the right, within the same frame, within the visual element or outside.

It is now important to focus on each kind of element with equal attention at some level: on the letter as much as on word, sentence or complete text. But not just that: the placement of letter or word, the shape of the letter or its size, all these now need to be treated as signs. Now that the logic of image dominates on the screen certainly but increasingly also on the page, and now that frequently the elements of writing occur in a subsidiary role to image, it may be the case that a letter in itself has significance at the visual level, or that a word occurs simply as a subsidiary part of an image, a caption. Figure 5.2 is an instance of such a word–image relation.

On this ‘page’ writing is very much the subsidiary mode, and it is reduced to the function of label. Here the caption at the highest textual level is bolded, its significance is marked by visual means; it is placed close to the item for which it acts as label, so spacing – also an aspect of the visual – indicates that meaning.

In the high era of writing, when the logic of writing dominated the page, the organisation of the page was not an issue. Now that organisation has become one resource for the meaning of the new textual ensembles. These meanings derive from the meanings of the mode of the visual, from the meanings of visual ‘grammar’. It becomes necessary therefore to say something about visual grammar. My brief excursion into etymology at the start of the chapter indicates why I am happy to use the term grammar, despite the danger of being accused of applying linguistic terminology to images. I feel confident about reappropriating the word for a much wider use in semiotic discussion of all modes of meaning-making, where the term can have real uses. In that new sense grammar is for me the overarching term that can describe the regularities of a particular mode which a culture has produced, be it writing, image, gesture, music or others.
The points made here draw directly on the grammar of images set out in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. The assumption – following the *semiotic* theory of Michael Halliday – is that any fully functioning human semiotic resource must have the potential to meet three demands: to represent states of affairs or events in the world – the ideational function; to represent the social relations between the participants in the process of communication – the interpersonal function; and to represent all that as a message-entity, a ‘text’ which is internally coherent and which coheres with its environment – the textual function.

Take, as an example, the utterance ‘it’s cold in here’. The state of affairs it represents or reports is about temperature in an enclosed space. Grammatically it is a declarative, so something is being declared by someone to someone else; semantically it is a statement, something is being stated by someone to someone else. Both of these produce a specific *social* relation: of someone who can declare
Figure 5.2 The eye: biology in the secondary school
or has something to state, to someone who is, by that utterance, cast as someone who may want or need such information. An interrogative, or question, by contrast – ‘is it cold in here?’ – produces a different social relation, a different assignation of roles of someone who might confirm or disconfirm, and someone who needs that confirmation. The utterance reports something, and does so in the so-called present tense, which has the effect of suggesting ‘this is’, rather than ‘it might feel like that (because you’re sitting still)’. Lastly, the utterance is internally coherent, for instance in the sense that the statement ‘it’s cold’ coheres with the adverbial of place ‘in here’; and it coheres (or does not!) with the immediate environment both of the conversation (say, a preceding ‘I think I’ll put on something warm’), and of the physical environment, the room in which it is spoken.

For the purposes of thinking about written word/image ensembles, only one of these needs to be considered at the moment. That is the textual function: how do the elements which make up the text-ensemble cohere in the space of page or screen, and what meaning attaches to their spatially constructed relations? Traditionally, this is what is meant by ‘layout’, though layout tended not to be seen in terms of making a contribution to meaning. The questions are, ‘how are they placed together, and how do they cohere?’, and ‘what meaning derives from this particular arrangement?’ This is the level at which word arrangements (as graphic blocks) and images (as graphic blocks) interact.

In the ‘Visual Biology’ example above, the lower-level relations are marked by connecting lines, the higher-level ones use proximity. There is use of the device of bolding to indicate salience, as a means of indicating semiotic equivalence – equivalence in the sense of ‘elements operating at the same level’. In a page from a geology textbook, the relations might exist between word-blocks and image-blocks. It is of course strange to think of a block of written text as a ‘graphic block’. But in these new textual arrangements that is what they are. At the first level of analysis, whether the formal analysis of theoretical work or the informal analysis of everyday reading and viewing, we are dealing with the mode of layout and its elements. These entities exist as
‘graphic blocks’, elements in the mode of layout. The ‘blocks’ might be realised by material from any other mode: writing, image, diagram. At the next level ‘down’ we then ask questions about the mode-specific characteristics of these elements. At this level we are concerned with the blocks in terms of their mode – writing or image.

It may seem strange to think in terms of ‘blocks’ rather than immediately of meanings; it is in fact no different than when we play with syntactic meanings in speech or writing, without paying attention to word-meaning. If I say ‘oggles igged twuddles’ everyone who understands English will know that the oggles did something that affected the twuddles. From there I would be able to say, ‘Oh, you mean the twuddles were igged, then?’ I would know that on this occasion at least, the oggles were iggers of twuddles, and so on. There are structural relations which have a regularity and have a meaning. The relations and the regularity together ensure the meaning – in speech, in writing, in image, in gesture and, here, in layout.

For all modes, the regularities are culture-specific. Image is not directly and transparently a representation of the world which is represented. My comments apply broadly to those Western cultures that I know – Germany, Australia, France, the UK, the USA – even though there are differences between these that need to be explored. In general, because of the long history of cultural trade between cultures in Europe, these regularities have relative validity across many European cultures, though the further one travels from the north-west of Europe to the south-east, the less that is likely to be the case.

The resource which is used for making meaning in the visual mode is that of (position in)space. In a framed space, say the rectangular space of the page or the screen, elements can be placed at the bottom or at the top, to the left or to the right, or in the centre. These positions have meaning-potential. In Western visual tradition, though perhaps much more widely, given our body’s positioning in space (‘feet on the ground’, ‘head in the air’) and the meanings which attach to that, the meaning-potential of ‘bottom of the visual space’ and ‘top of the visual space’ are broadly those of
‘grounded’, ‘of this earth’, ‘the empirical’ – meanings which might be characterised as ‘real’. The meaning-potential of ‘top of the space’ has broadly opposite values: ‘not of this earth’, ‘that which is desired’ – meanings which might be characterised as ‘ideal’. These are meaning-potentials, not meanings: literally, they are potentials for making meaning. ‘Real’ in a sixteenth-century religious painting may mean ‘of the earth’ or ‘secular’, whereas in a contemporary advertisement it might mean ‘what the commodity is actually like’ and while in a scientific diagram it might mean ‘the empirically real’. ‘Top’ in the religious painting may mean ‘of Heaven’, ‘divine’; in the advertisement the meaning might be ‘the benefits that you might get through the use of the commodity’; in the scientific diagram it might mean ‘the abstract’, ‘the theoretical’, ‘the general’.

In Western alphabetic cultures – not, however, in alphabetic cultures such as Arabic or Hebrew – the reading direction of written texts is from left to right. This means that ‘left’ has a culturally different meaning-potential to ‘right’ (though it may be the case that left and right, just like top and bottom, derive their meaning from historically earlier, semiotically and perhaps physiologically more basic organisations). The left is ‘where we start from’, whether that is the chapter or the line; it is ‘the starting point’. The right is then ‘the point to which we are moving’, ‘where we will get to’. If the left is the starting point, it is also where ‘we’ all are to begin with, it is the place ‘we’ know, and information that is placed there is shared, known, ‘given’ in the (Hallidayan) terminology of Reading Images.

This gives rise to a quadrant of differing meaning-potential as in Figure 5.3 (overleaf). Moving from bottom-left in clockwise direction, the meanings are given/real, given/ideal, new/ideal and new/real. Placing elements in these quadrants has significant effects. It makes a difference whether an image is to be read, in a geography textbook, say, as ‘new’ and ‘real’, or as ‘given’ and
‘ideal’.

Figure 5.3 Quadrant of spatial meaning potential in ‘Western’ images