JUST AN IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

Jean-Luc Godard's famous maxim, 'Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image' was the starting point for this workshop. Why do we make images? Who for? How do we read images and how do we learn to do it? What images are truthful? Looking at images from Prehistory to Potemkin, from Potter to Picasso, we attempted to draw parallels between all areas of visual expression: fine art, photography and film. We explored the underlying values implicit in all visual images and learned to appreciate the modes in which meaning is constructed in all visual media. The workshop focused on ways in which students can develop skills in the interpretation and the construction of visual meaning within the digital environment.

IMAGES

Paraphrasing Roland Barthes comments in 'Camera Lucida' (Vintage,1993) '…we are gorged with images in the twenty-first century'. In any one-day we can experience films, television, advertising, paintings, web images, news photos. Yet these types of images can no longer be seen as isolated practices. The construction of the moving film image refers to the framing and mise-en-scène in a photographic image that in turn refers to the painted image. It is not only these references, but also intertextual relationships themselves which continually problematise our idea of the 'image'. At the same time we need to consider the purpose of these images – the advert, the film, the home movie (in all its forms) – the documentary, the fictive, the observational and the persuasive. We need to expand our 'human wit', as Alexander Pope would say (An Essay on Criticism in Selected Poetry), to look beyond the 'single parts' and see how one type of image might relate to another.

If we are 'gorged' on images then how do we start to encourage our students to come to terms with the ways in which meanings are created in, and, via images? And how does the purpose of the image affect the ways in which meanings, representation and ideologies are both created and communicated? How can we encourage our students not only to 'read' images but also to 'see' them? In what ways can we ask our students to express their understanding and vision of images in ways that use digital media and go beyond the mere written essay? This is not to say that the essay is 'dead', just to say that other opportunities exist to express understanding which link the critical with the creative – the theme of this conference.

Finally how do we ensure that our students develop their own critical autonomy so that their own understanding, expectation and consumption of images in their many forms becomes more informed and critical – and also pleasurable. In this I take pleasure to mean a more developed acceptance of the 'pleasures' that different types of text offer and the ways in which these pleasures are created by the interplay between the image text and the reader/viewer.

The 'Just an Image' workshop was based on an aphorism of Jean-Luc Godard's:

> *'ce n'est pas un image juste, c'est juste un image'*

> (*Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* – Colin MacCabe, BFI 1980)

badly translated as 'It's not a real image, it's really an image.' The play on words is between the French word 'image' conjuring notions of 'the real' and 'the image'.

This can be extended by a further Godard quotation:

> *'Film is not the reflection of reality but the reality of the reflection.'*

> (Colin MacCabe, BFI 1980)

Combining these two ideas we arrive at the concept of the constructed image and the ways in which the viewer/reader is entwined within the understanding of the image. If our aim as teachers is to untwine this relationship, to unravel the Gordian Knot – or rather to give our students the strategies to question what they see before them – then the key pedagogical issue is 'What are the questions that our students should ask with regard to an image that they see/read?' And what are the concepts that should underlie this questioning, in particular in relationship to themselves and their own experiences, both of images and the relationship to their own lives and expectations?

STAGE 1

The starting point of the workshop was to raise the issue about what sort of questions we should ask of an image?

Instead of using advertising or filmic images, the members of the seminar were asked to look at pre-historic cave paintings – images for which we know no pre-determined ideological and intertextual answers. Looking at four images taken from the Lascaux Caves, delegates were asked to consider what questions they would ask about theses images and what answers they might give. From a student perspective, there were no right answers – in the past when we have used these materials in student workshops and the answers to these questions given by the delegates reflected those that had been posed by the students – the images could be anything from religious symbolism to a shopping list. Key to this exercise, however, were the questions that delegates asked about the images:

- Why did the images look the way that they did?

- What don't we see?

- Where are these images?

- How did people relate to them?

- Why did people want to see them?

- How did they reflect and relate to life at the time?

- How did the 'artists' learn to paint that way?

- What was the importance of these images?

- What are those 'dots' for? Why can't we understand their purpose?

- Why are they there? (i.e. within a cave)

- What was the point of these images? What purpose did they serve?

In trying to answer these questions, members of the group realised that, as we have no knowledge of the time, there are no 'right' answers. Although the images themselves were clear, our ideas about them were vague. We lacked a cultural perspective on the means and purpose of production. However, vital to our move to critical autonomy, we were putting together a series of questions – and these could be addressed to any image.

STAGE 2

Having discussed the ways in which meanings could be created, members of the group then moved on to looking in detail at how images are constructed and the idea that, through deconstructing the image, we are able to assess and evaluate why an image looks the way it does and how it might impact on the viewer.

Using the iLife suite, the group were given a selection of images – photos and paintings including Monet's 'Girl at the bar of the Folies Bergeres' (1881), a photograph of David Hockney in Lucien Freud's studio (2003) and the Arnolfini Portrait by van Eyck (1434). Using iPhoto, we selected various parts of each image that we felt were significant – a hand or door, for example, or the look on a face. Each of these selections were then transferred into iMovie and we started to put together a 'moving image essay' that analysed the image under discussion. Delegates soon realised that the essay needed editing and ordering in order to make the 'essay' analysing the image into a coherent narrative.

Given more time each group would have recorded their analysis and, following the addition of music via iTunes, would have completed their moving image analysis, turning their image into a mini-documentary – uniting the creative with the critical. If we accept that all images are in the process of making themselves via the spectator, then this exercise encapsulated this process in action.

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STAGE 3

Moving on from analysing still images, group members then considered the development of the moving image and the ways in which it developed its own 'aesthetic' and means of communication.

Delegates watched two early films – the Lumière Brothers' 'Leaving a Factory' (1897/France] and Georges Méliès's 'Journey Across the Impossible' (1904/France]. Although only seven years separate the two films, it is possible to see the aesthetic development within this short space of time. The Lumères' film could be described as a 'tableau vivant' – one static shot, front on – an observational piece. By the time Méliès' film appears, there is not only trick photography (the flying train) but also editing from one scene to another. Although each scene is still filmed 'front on', the fact that audiences could make sense of changing shots indicated an ability and an advance in telling stories in moving images.

This stage also raised issues of 'intention' - the fact that the Lumères' film 'observed' whilst Méliès's 'entertained'. With the Lumères' film, the viewers added details to the story such as 'where is the factory?', 'what sort of lives did the factory workers live?', 'why show the workers coming out of the factory?'. With the Méliès film a completely different set of questions emerged for the audience – 'how was the close-up filmed?', 'how did the sun come to have a human face?' and 'why was such an early film in colour?' Interestingly the Lumères' film raised issues of content whilst Méliès's raised issues of style.

These issues were then followed up by looking at two further extracts based on the same story. The opening two minutes of Godard's 'A Bout de Souffle' ('Breathless'/1959) and the Hollywood remake 'Breathless' (1983). Showing the same incidents, the issues raised here were those of story, plot and narration.

- **story** – the same in both extracts – a man steals a car, drives off leaving a woman behind

- **plot** – the ordering of the story elements were different. In the 1959 version, we see the principle male character played by Jean-Paul Belmondo reading an illustrated newspaper at the very outset of the film. In the 1983 remake, the 'reading' by the character played by Richard Gere takes place later in the sequence and the newspaper is changed to a comic book

- **narration** – there were significant differences in the way in which the plot was filmed. Styles of editing, use of sound/music etc. all pointed to very different styles of narration based on the similar plot.

The key issue here was one of a dominant 'Hollywood' style of story construction within the 1983 version – the smooth editing, revelation and establishment of character and the use of different shots.

The final issue raised here was Eisenstein's notion of binary opposition– an event on film and a filmed event. The two early films exemplified this – with the Lumière's film an example of an event on film whilst Méliès is starting out developing film aesthetics – a filmed event – the idea of selection of images, shots, mise-en-scène. The two 'Breathless' extracts further developed this idea of 'filmed event', as delegates compared the decisions made by the two directors in composing their narratives.

STAGE 4

So having pondered the words of Eisenstein, it was now time to experiment with one of his films – 'Battleship Potemkin' [1925]

> *'We must look for the essence of cinema not in the shots but in the relationship between the shots. The shot merely interprets in a setting to use it in juxtaposition to other sequences.'*

> Sergei Eisenstein, 1926 (*Notes of a Film Director*. Dover, 1971)

There is not space here to examine the complexities of Eisenstein's writings on montage. The above quotation will suffice, within the confines of both the workshop and this article, to set as our starting point to look at ideas of cinematic montage and mise-en-scène.

Eisenstein's concept of montage, the clash of images, makes an interesting progression from the previous activity in that instead of breaking down an image into its component parts and creating a critical narrative of the image's narrative we are now looking at the ways in which images are arranged within a narrative and thus critically looking at a narrative and the ways in which it is constructed.

We now move on to consider the image within narrative. The starting point of Stage 4 is the script – the descriptions of the shots within a section of the Odessa Steps sequence of Eisenstein's 'Battleship Potemkin' – a mother runs down the steps with her son, who is shot by the descending soldiers. She realises that her son is injured, collects his body but is, in turn, shot by the soldiers. At the same time we see shots of the mob running down the steps.

Group members were asked to start working on an exercise in iMovie by using the written descriptions in the script (which had been grouped into types of shots – mother, mob, son, soldiers) to try to put together a written description of how the scene might appear.

Having completed this exercise they were then given thumbnail images from the sequence and asked to storyboard these. Finally they edited together the sequence in their own chosen order.

All the time group members were asking those same questions that were raised in the very first activity – why is this shot in a particular place? What ideas do the images give? How, when placed next to each other do they change their meaning?

Looking at the finished results it was interesting to observe the different interpretations that each pair of delegates came up with. Whilst Eisenstein had come up with his own interpretation of events, other representations of the Odessa Steps were possible, given the raw material shot by Eisenstein and Tisse.

STAGE 5

Although time was against us, we briefly looked at two short pieces of 'home movie' footage – both shot during the Second World War – both showing images of the murder of Jews.

We firstly examined the ways in which we were able to identify these as 'home movies' – lack of framing, shaky camerawork, obscured views and out of focus shots. More importantly however, we were looking at two key issues – the morality of the images and also the purpose of recording these images for 'home' viewing. Issues revolving round photographic images taken during and after the most recent Gulf War were raised – what purpose of posting images of humiliation and torture on the internet?

If the twenty-first century offers the unimaginable possibilities of the circulation of images, then how do we evaluate what we see? What is the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral? One is reminded of debates around the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl and her films of both the Nuremberg Rally and the 1936 Olympics – wonderfully made films serving a brutal and horrific regime.

CONCLUSION

> *'One science only will one genius fit*
>
> *So vast is art, so narrow human wit:*
>
> *Not only bounded to peculiar arts,*
>
> *But oft in those confined to single parts.'*

> Alexander Pope – *An Essay on Selected Criticism* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004)

The Just an Image workshop was an exploration of a variety of types of images – paintings, photographs, Soviet cinema, French New Wave, Hollywood films and home movies (of a specific kind). Although each was criticised within its 'medium' it is hoped that we have gone beyond the confinement of the single parts and are seeing the relationship between each type of image and how each medium constructed images in a way that was 'fit for purpose'. The workshop aimed at reviewing developing ways of seeing images in a new light.

Alexander Pope could not have imagined the variety of texts, the variety of images that would be available to a reader in the twenty-first century. The 'single parts' in 1711 have expanded beyond his expectation but the approach to studying the image, although through an ever-vaster art, can no longer be confined to 'single parts'. Our sense of the vastness of 'art' and the relationship between the various 'peculiar' parts, and their feeding off each other sets the agenda for image study in the twenty-first century.

As TS Eliot says in 'Little Gidding', we '…know the place for the first time'. We start at images that surround us but, through exploration via the critical process, we understand them in a different way - by making identifying and understanding the relationships between what we have already experienced. The images and films chosen for this workshop tried to avoid those that are usually used within lessons – images that challenged, were difficult in places.

We need the courage to expose our students to a variety of images but within a constructive process that will allow them to make sense of what they see.

> *'We shall not cease from exploration*
>
> *And the end of all our exploring*
>
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
>
> *And know the place for the first time.'*

<div align="right">T S Eliot – *Little Gidding V* (Four Quartets. Faber and Faber, 2001)</div>

Ian Wall started teaching at London Comprehensive School, Holland Park, where he held the posts of Head of English, Head of Film and Media and Deputy Head of Humanities Faculty. In 1986 he co-founded Film Education where, as Director, he is in charge of developing educational policy and ideas for publications, events, CD and DVD-ROMs and television programmes. In 2004 Ian and the Film Education team were winners of a BAFTA for their King Arthur Interactive Educational CD-ROM.

Ian Wall also a founder member of the European Association for Audio Visual Media Educators, was a member of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Film Education Working Party and has served as a jury member for the BAFTA Children's Drama Award.