Franz Billmayer (ENViL)

Visual Competencies Required in a Certain Situation

Report on an Annual Company Outing

In the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) we are working on the development of a European framework for visual literacy. Trying to find relevant competencies in the field, we decided to focus on competencies required in certain situations. By focusing on one specific situation we hope to find common competencies that might otherwise get overlooked.

The situation

Competencies are described as a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable us to act aptly in specific situations. A situation is a set of circumstances involving a set of resources and limitations. We might say situations very often appear to us as a set of problems. We always act in situations; the specific circumstances influence how we are going to act / react. Looking at these circumstances and problems and the way they are solved can give us a useful tool to filter out general competencies required in visual (multimodal) communication. This is a pragmatic approach: competencies are needed for problem solving.

For the ENViL meeting in Copenhagen in January 2013 we made a short list of situations to analyse and discuss:

- designing a bag for working on a ladder
- taking a holiday picture for sending to family back home
- meeting an unknown work of art at an art museum
- welcoming a colleague back to work after a prolonged hospital stay
- illustrating a fictional text
- making a design for a corner seat
- drawing a location plan
- acquiring information about hotel rooms from the internet
- making a report on an annual company outing.

This paper takes up the "report on a company outing" and the competencies required for producing a corresponding visual documentation. Such a report is multimodal (Kress) with different components such as images, text, fonts, composition and colour. All these components have to complement each other.

Case Study: Someone is working for a company or a school. The principal / boss asks for a report on the annual school excursion / company outing. It could be for the staff room, the company's facebook site, or the company's annual report. When discussing the competencies needed for the job we came no further than that it has to be done in an apt way related to the situation of that particular company. So in my presentation I am trying to draw a clearer picture of this aptness ("aptum" as the ancient Roman rhetoricians called it). I would like this to be understood as an exemplary research/inquiry.

Dimensions

In step one we[1] were looking for dimensions where competencies showed up or were needed. These dimensions are important not only in visual communication, but in more or less any situation where images and pictures are used.

Genre

Utterances are realized in a framework of rules and expectations. They are realized in a genre. It defines the rules or conventions to be followed in a specific type of text (communication, documentation, fiction, rituals etc.): what can be expressed and how this has to be done. In a way the genre is a kind of meta dimension. It more or less influences all the following dimensions.

Content / Story

A report or documentation is always intended to reduce complexity. Putting together a report or documentation in an apt way therefore means you have to make decisions: how much and what information will be included and what needs to be cut. PR texts for example will focus on different aspects of an event than newspaper articles.

Form / the way the story is presented

In communication possibly the main task of form is to show us what genre of the utterance, so we know how to understand what is said, how it is framed. The speaker's tone tells us whether the meaning is ironic or serious. The sharpness of a photograph tells us if it is an ad or a journalistic image. The colours of a drawing indicate if it is meant for children or for adults.

Rhetoric / generating attention – showing attention

Rhetoric is the art to convince an audience by "speech" and arguments. To begin with you have to get the attention of

the audience; but you also have to show attention towards the audience so they trust you.

Technique / the way pictures and text is generated

The technical aspects of the report are on the one hand important for the documentary purpose (sharpness, lighting and size of the images, readability of the fonts and so on). On the other hand they also generate meaning. This meaning is mostly rhetorical: the person who made the report is capable, focused, thorough, accurate … In a wider sense these characteristics are then transferred onto the company by people from outside (customers).

Legal Aspects

When you do such a report – especially when it is posted on the internet – you have to comply to the so called rights of the individual.

Ethics

Photographic images are fleeting moments cut out of the flow of time - shorter than a wink. In the image those moments are frozen for a long time. The publication of images, especially when they show people, always has an ethical impact.

Culture

Culture can be described as a set of values, beliefs and behaviour patterns within a smaller or larger social group. Thus culture is somehow similar to genre. For apt communication one has to be familiar with the culture of the audience. So even culture can be described as a kind of meta dimension important to all the other dimensions. Cultural circumstances are the limitations of what is possible and apt in specific situations – what you can do or express in a special genre. For example during the 1970s there was a much higher content of sex and erotic scenes in many Hollywood movies than there is today – the genre was the same but cultural circumstances were different.

Report on an annual company outing as genre

Such a report can be understood as a documentary or report subgenre. Initially I thought there was some kind of reference model for the (main) genre with the subgenre being a variance of this and then the single report in turn being a variance of the subgenre. The aptness – I thought – can be expressed in the variation of the reference model. But how could we possibly define the reference model without stressing the impact of a specific social background and thereby the question of power and politics? Therefore I found it more useful to work with oppositions. In the report I stressed "serious – funny", "positive / friendly – critical /negative" and "prosaic – poetic". (fig. 1)
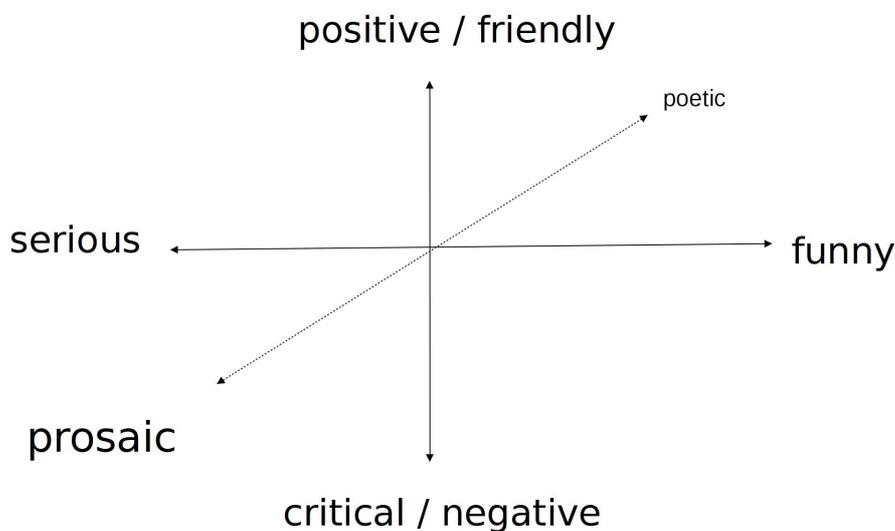

Fig 1: Possible oppositions in documentary genre

The report on an annual company outing needs to be friendly and positive and usually kind of funny, playful or "easy". By contrast a newspaper report is expected to be more critical.

The aptness depends on what the report aims to bring across and who the target audience is:

- representation of the group / company
- communication (towards the company and towards the customers)

- (historical) document for the company's archives

Content, form and technique but also legal aspects and ethics are depending on what the aim is. Very often we have a combination of the aims mentioned above. The report can be made looking to be addressed to an inside audience (the company) but in fact its target are an outside audience (the customers of the company). And there are countless possibilities to make mistakes (fig. 2).
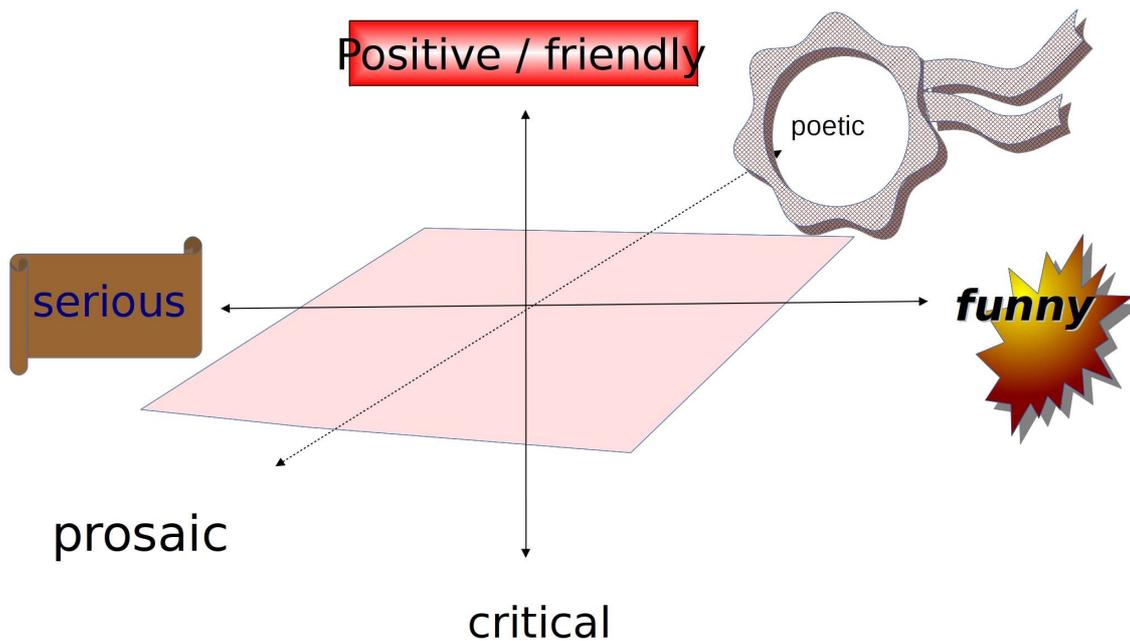
Oppositions

Positive / friendly

poetic

serious

funny

prosaic

critical

Fig. 2: … there are countless possibilities to make mistakes by using decoration in a scientific presentation like this.

Aptness and content

Theoretical background: photos are made with a camera, thereby documenting reality with the help of an apparatus. Photos therefore count as proof of reality. The images represent the people pictured, so they make utterances on social relations.

An annual company outing plays an important social role for group or team building. One of the intentions is to make forget the hierarchy. For the content this means that equal representation of the participants is a basic rule for all types of reports on annual company outings. These outings usually follow some kind of rituals. The images in the report have to depict situations and places central to the story: landscapes, landmarks, places of interest, shared meals, adventures and funny situations. They have to show laughing, happy people and natural gestures in relaxed situations; and beauty of course: landscapes, buildings and sites, everything shown in the pictures has to be beautiful. What gestures are apt and how beauty is defined may depend on the company's culture (fig.3)[2].

fig. 3: By the way. The woman with the child on the left side of the image is not part of the group. This is "content mistake" copyright Axel Brocke.

It depends on the circumstances if the report has to be more serious or funny. On the content side the gestures and situations that are chosen decide if it is nearer to the one or the other. It is the same with the oppositions of prosaic (chronological report) or poetic (aesthetic impressions), even if prosaic or poetic is very much depending on the visual form.

Aptness and form
The aptness in form can also be described in opposites; here: serious – funny. In a way "funny" very often means a kind of deviation from standard.

	serious	funny
lens	standard	side-angle; special effects
camera angle	distant; at arm's length	close up
point of view	breast height	bird's or worm's eye view
images	rectangular	cut outs
fonts	standard font	decorative fonts
colours (photos)	natural	manipulated
colours (fonts)	fewer; monochrome	lots
intersections	none or few	lots
composition I	parallel, rectangular	leaning
composition II	empty spaces	dense

NB Funny and serious are always social categories.

It is possible to describe the formal code used in different purposes. This code can be taught and learned.

Rhetoric
Generating attention in general means to make the audience look at the utterance and involve them in the story. Size, content, colours etc. used to attract attention depend on circumstances and target audience. To convince an audience one also has to show that the message is important. In this context it is important to show that the report was carefully arranged. This means that it looks tidy, neat and well thought through. In short the code for this extravagance: spending more resources on it than is usual with regard to the amount of time, money, discipline … (fig.4) that is put into it. This is mostly valid for analogue communication. What does this mean for the digital world where a neat and tidy presentation is easy to achieve and an untidy and irregular look needs a lot of extra work in programming?

	extravagance	phenomena
cleanliness	time	No stains, no marks,
neatness	time	
exactitude	Time / technical skills	Directions, „gluing", style
material	Expensive, difficult to handle	
technique / medium	Traditional, difficult to handle, new	
decoration	Time to produce and to look after	Style, symbolic, details,

Fig 4: Showing attention means extravagances in different fields.

As mentioned above this kind of report may be aimed at a different type of audience, so it can be difficult to find the right content and tone to attract a wide-ranging audience.

Different audiences may have different aesthetic models. Architects for instance may possibly be more attracted to the idea that "less is more" or to empty spaces, while employees in a florist shop might prefer decoration and density of information.

What else is the challenge of reporting on an annual work's outing telling us about competencies?

By investigating this specific situation we found some additional dimensions of competencies:

- For acting correctly (aptly) you have to know the company's culture. If you are new to the company you have to ask.
- You have to be aware that every decision made in the field of design and semiotics is producing meaning which you cannot fully control.
- You have to be aware of differences; that means you have to know and accept that other people may use different semiotic resources in different ways.
- You must be able to argue your point for the decisions you make. That means you must have a set of technical terms you can use.
- Decision making requires thinking and thinking requires (technical) terms.

Conclusion

Thinking about competencies needed in the context of specific situations is productive, because it allows us to see aspects that might otherwise easily get overlooked. The competencies identified can be transferred onto other domains. You can practise them and work with them on.

Reference:

Gunther Kress, *Multimodality- Exploring contemporary methods of communication*, London: Routledge, 2010.

Fig.3 copyright Axel Brocke

http://www.flickr.com/photos/abrocke/1478229268/sizes/l/in/photolist-3fCj4w-4L3U4N-acViA4-5wuZzr-6sS8T6-dmaBwn-6sS8Nk-uX2p2-6DAWhQ-4Nspoj-2jZfMV-8uBGr-57qSp6-57v5RE-57v5eu-57qSta-57v5UA-57v67d-57qSEF-57v61j-57qSMc-57qSgZ-57v4FA-57v54m-57v4QE-2Hsish-5o635K-c8btny-4wjLxW-3fZSDw-4o4aBm-8GgGMt-9VQehz-eUvRvR-dzdtG5-ekfbM5-7Ep1eg-ek9qu2-dz9bKF-bLkci4-9i7sNZ-9UfNpS-9UfNn9-9UfNhy-deMS5k-8gp3N8-9ad1GU-4vDaSQ-4vz2Wr-4vz3xD-4vDae7/

1. With my colleague Karsten Arvedsen from Copenhagen
2. By the way. The woman with the child on the left side of the image is not part of the group. This is "content mistake".