Nancy Frey & Douglas Fisher (eds.) (2008). *Teaching visual literacy: Using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills.* **Thousand Oaks, California Corwin Press. 195 pages. ISBN 978-1-4129-5311-5, 978-1-4129-5312-2**

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There is broad consensus among scholars that our culture is more visual than ever before. High school or college students, among other groups, inevitably need to access images for their daily lives. However, teaching the language used by these images continues to be largely ignored as an issue in academia. Despite finding ourselves immersed in a veritable audiovisual abyss, the learning of this grammar is conspicuously absent and undervalued as an area of knowledge, like writing, that may be taught and learned.

Teaching Visual Literacy is the title of a work, edited recently in the United States by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, which seeks to approach this specific need. Professors at San Diego State University, with years of teaching experience, international prizes and books related to education, Frey and Fisher assemble a compilation of various articles written by and for specialists in the so called realm of "visual literacy". Throughout the book, they seek to provide a series of strategies to help increase students' involvement in the classroom through rarely used tools, such as illustrated books, *manga* comics, graphic novels, anime films and other visual sources of information.

The book's main objective, in effect, is based upon the recommendation for different contributors to utilize this type of materials, previously considered "inappropriate" because of their content or underappreciated artistic merit. These materials, primarily comics and cartoons, have proven their detractors wrong by gaining ground in the classroom, probably due to their undeniable popularity, thematic diversity and cultural status attained over more than a century as "minor" genres. Although they cannot avoid using their critical judgment as educators, all of the authors express their preference towards the use of such tools, explaining throughout their contributions the processes that have led them as educational professionals to discover and overcome their biases.

Going more deeply into the book's specific content, the first part delves into a certain theoretical load that justifies the significant permeability between visual and theoretical content. Models are addressed that are based primarily on human physiology in relation to color and perception of forms and our particular cognition (with frequent mention of Paivo's dual model (1978), which remains an undeniable reference in the field of cognitive psychology). In the first chapter, for example, Lynell Burmark introduces the expression *visual literacy* and explains how images influence our comprehension. Lawrence Baines provides suggestions on how to use students' interest in movies to motivate and involve them in education, capture their attention and foster their critical thinking skills. And Paula Kluth analyzes how approaches through visual literacy may succeed by helping students with disabilities demonstrate their knowledge. Many of those students exhibit clear visual orientation, so they are better equipped to understand and remember content when they are able to see it represented visually.

Kelly Chandler-Olcott, in the fourth chapter, is the only author in the book who focuses on a genre (animation) and a specific style (Japanese anime), breaking from the tendency among many contributors to this work, and other books, to group together the same virtues and defects with products as disparate as American film, comics, graphic novels or animated film. Accordingly, this author takes a special interest in tracing the peculiarities of the Japanese market, if not in showing its stylistic or language differences (McLeod, 2006) relative to its Western counterparts. Her perspective is most closely aligned to authors (Jones, 2004; Poitras, 1999) who primarily sympathize with Japanese products and laud their excellent production, maturity and great diversity of subject matter as well as the country's long history in other "major" arts, film, painting or literature.

Another block of authors in the book, in turn, orient the discourse towards a less conventional concept of literature, in the line of "multi-literatures" (concept coined by the New Group of London around 2000), which furnish visual language with more abstract symbols, such as linguistic markers. These contributors criticize the elitist view of education that focuses only on conventional materials and denigrates more modern artistic genres in considering them to be less intellectual. One idea is justified in part by addressing media that are more accessible to the student, who finds them to be more intelligible compared to conventional literature. Nonetheless, the former ends up being marginalized for the simple reason that "*students enjoy them more*".

Within this block, for example, Jacquelyn McTaggart addresses the subject of graphical novels, a literary form different from traditional prose, which nonetheless offer excellent potential for classroom use, as the author argues. Rocco Versaci provides a history of comics, asking if reading and discussing them could be a behavior which facilitates literacy. And James Bucky Carter offers an interesting theory regarding how literacy is represented in education in order to explain the reasons for resistance towards use of materials such as graphical novels or comics to promote literacy. Additionally, each chapter generally describes the experiences of its author and provides educators with several examples of how to use and apply these materials in the classroom.

In conclusion, the work is a far cry from a sequential study of language, although it does mention some of its syntactical mechanisms and introduces the history of different proposed genres (we should not forget that its overall purpose is to provide elementary through high school classrooms with new materials for "*transmitting knowledge and skills*"). As a result, the book clearly develops thematic rather than stylistic aspects in "cleaning up" the image of a product traditionally considered to be pernicious. Like all books made up of different contributions, it also runs the risk of being excessively heterogeneous. In any case, the concept of *visual literacy* is employed by different areas within academia, centering on fields related to education and psychology, yet also used in sociology and the arts. However, this multidisciplinarity is perhaps the concept's most valuable aspect, which both enriches and hinders consensus towards a common definition.

Overall, the book's greatest utility is not its theoretical load, but instead its role as a blueprint that provides a considerable list of excellent products taken from the world of

comics and film and makes them available to the educator. This list, however, is somewhat disorderly without stylistic, chronological or even thematic categories. Moreover, these references were already well-established, since they correspond to great authors in each medium who have won prestigious awards through their works, such as Art Spiegelman, Neil Gaiman or Alan Moore (icons in the world of comics) or Hayao Miyazaki, Katsuhiro Ôtomo and Mamoru Oshii (also icons, not only in animation, but in the world of film).

Finally, according to this book, it is interesting and undeniably enriching that school curricula are structured for analysis of these materials, even if this is only done with respect to their content. There is no doubt that comics, movies and cartoons are vehicles for imparting knowledge, abilities and even values in education. However, the manner in which they should be administered, their actual contents and appropriate age ranges are issues which this book only begins to pose.

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