



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2014 Volume I: Picture Writing

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## Introduction

They did it again. Like the Fellows in seminars that I led in prior years, the teachers participating in the seminar that I led in 2014 exhibited stunning powers of observation: when asked to read the picture writing of a painting in the Yale Center for British Art, they developed an analysis that, in its thoughtfulness and complexity, put to shame traditional interpretations. They did so at least in part, I would like to think, as a result of our discussions about how images communicate meaning; but the proximate cause for this display of originality was an experiment that let a picture speak for itself. Describing the curriculum units that the Fellows wrote in response to the topic of our seminar goes a long way, I think, toward explaining how that remarkable session in an art gallery came about.

By designating the subject of this seminar as "picture writing," I meant to include not only the ways in which pictures make meanings without the aid of words but also the ways in which words and images come together in communicative acts. For nearly three thousand years, philosophers have been fascinated by and worried about the relation between words and images. Some formulations stress the similarities between the two media, as Simonides did in the sixth century BCE when he called poetry "a speaking picture." Other theorists emphasize the differences between word and image, as Lessing did in the eighteenth century when he called them "friendly neighbors" who, despite their neighborliness, should always be separated by a strong fence. More recently, the literary theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has argued that there is no image without words and no word without images: all representations, verbal and visual, are "imagetexts." In a similar way, the research of current vision scientists confirms, at least to some extent, Aristotle's aphorism that "there is no thinking without images"; but that argument is countered by postmodern theorists, who contend that we live in an age of simulacra, an age in which images have taken the place not only of words but also of things.

The 2014 seminar entertained all those options by stressing that words and images can be combined in a variety of different ways: pictures may constitute languages like those built up out of words, pictures often make claims or tell stories, words can morph into pictures, and, most often, words define or explain pictures, just as pictures illustrate words. In the readings that we did, we looked at examples of each of these combinations. Molly Bang's *Picture This* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* both examine the specific visual language whereby certain shapes or forms or conventions evoke certain responses from the viewer. William Hogarth's mid-eighteenth-century engravings in *Industry and Idleness*, as well as, some two centuries later, Lynn Ward's groundbreaking graphic novel *Gods' Man*, demonstrate how a compelling story can emerge from a series of striking images. Theoretical essays like Susan Sontag's introductory chapter in *On Photography* and excerpts from Mitchell's *Picture Theory* allowed us to consider the extent to which pictures do or do not depend for their meanings on accompanying words. Along with such iconic images as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, we read newer classics such as Chester Brown's *Life of Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip*

*Biography* and Edward R. Tufte's *Visual Explanations*, the former representing an historical figure in the medium of graphic fiction and the latter showing how information can be effectively displayed in graphic form.

While doing these readings, it became clear that we were dealing not only with the opposition between image and word but also the opposition of viewer and viewed. Scott McCloud notes, only half humorously, in *Understanding Comics* that if a violent action has taken place in the gutter between one comic-book panel and the next, the reader is the one who has made it happen by supplying in imagination what the graphic artist only suggests. In a similar fashion – and quite seriously – the Fellows and I often ended a discussion by realizing how thoroughly we had proved that the viewers of a picture create the meanings that they attribute to it.

The units developed by the participants in this seminar treat various forms of picture writing, often stressing, as we did in our discussions, the power of the viewer. One group of units – by Joan Meehan, Moira Cotlier-Cassell, Barbara Sasso, and Naomi Pettway – treat images as vehicles for the comprehension of verbal texts. Focusing on what education specialists call "transfer," the application of a skill developed in one content area to another, these units take *understanding* as their keyword. Joan demonstrates how teachers in grades 2 through 5 can inculcate habits of "close looking," habits that will strengthen reading and writing; but she also explains that asking students to tell a story by looking at pictures is a way of helping them grasp such subtleties of plot as foreshadowing. In her unit for 9th-grade students of English, Moira also writes about habits of "close looking," and she does so in the hopes that her students will slow their response time to whatever text they are reading so that they can observe carefully and question deeply. Barbara Sasso similarly explains how students in her 10th-grade English classes can use their cell phones to forge a link between visual literacy and reading comprehension. Naomi, the last of this group, writing a unit intended for students in grades 3 through 5, explores the visual forms through which information is typically conveyed: graphs and charts and tables and pictures. In quite specific ways Naomi makes the point that so many of the other Fellows either state or imply: by emphasizing the importance of open-ended questions, she demonstrates her sense that the teacher's role is often best fulfilled when he or she learns what the student is thinking – and not the other way around.

A second cluster of units – those by Jean Capacetti, Valbona Karanxha, and Laura Rais – enlists images in the teaching of world languages, particularly in the enrichment of their students' vocabularies. *Engagement* is the keyword of this group, particularly important when one is trying to enlist the interest of students required to study a language in the context of a specialized content area like health sciences, as in Jean's case, and engineering, as in Laura's. Developing a pedagogical approach that uses the target language as much as possible with students of Spanish in grades 9 through 12, Jean offers a unit that will help them learn grammar by visualizing its complexities; and Val, who faces the challenge of teaching native speakers of Spanish in 7th and 8th grade how to master the so-called standard version of that language, offers pictorial representations of Latin American history so that she can connect her students to the richness of their diverse heritages. Laura, like Jean, takes as one of her goals the exclusion of English from her 6th to 9th-grade world-language classes; but her unit differs from his by moving from one iconic image of French culture to another, the cave painting at Lascaux leading ultimately to the pictures in two 20th-century comic books. In these units pictures are both a means to an end and representations that deserve analysis in their own right.

Similarly, a third group of curriculum units – those by Rebecca Looney, Melissa Rhone, and Shaunquetta Johnson – all emphasize the ability of images to encourage a range of skills. In her Kindergarten to 3rd-grade art classes, Rebecca plans to use wordless picture books and prints of art works to help her students develop the kind of vocabulary that will make it possible for them to discuss art; and she focuses specifically on

prepositions – a not surprising emphasis given the difficulty that that part of speech causes English language learners. Melissa intends to turn the 4th-grade students in her writing workshops into photojournalists so that they can use the photos that they take to help them understand that writing can be an exciting rather than onerous activity. Shaun wants to give her 3rd-grade students a grasp of difficult mathematical concepts, specifically those dealing with fractions and the various functions that they represent, by asking her students to visualize their five basic constructs.

Like Shaun, Elizabeth Nelson teaches math, but in her case to first-grade students. Elizabeth's curriculum unit joins that by Robert Schwartz to constitute the final grouping, units that cast students in the role of image creators. That is true of many of the pedagogical approaches throughout all the units: Shaun plans to have her students develop their own two-dimensional visualizations of fractions out of paper plates, Melissa has her students take photographs, and Laura has her students create a mural. Yet Elizabeth plans to depend wholly on the images that her students will draw for the instruction that she will offer them: when they try to put in pictorial form their understandings of such operations as addition and subtraction, she will be able to tell whether they have reached, for instance, a symbolic rather than pictographic level of conceptualization. In a similar manner, but at the other end of the spectrum of grades and subjects, Robert, like Barbara, intends to make productive use of the personal communication devices that often seem to have only destructive effects on students and their classes. "Take out your cellphones" is the battle cry of this unit; and Robert conceives of his 12th-grade students in his English classes not only as the seekers of images when they are doing research on the Internet but also as their creators when they compile a research paper actually written in images. Robert's final project therefore crystallizes one of the meanings of picture writing: pictures can take over the place of words as the medium conventionally thought to be particularly suited to the communication of information.

These curriculum units, for all their diversity in subject and grade level, stress the importance of letting students determine the writing that pictures do. For that reason, wordless images – picture books without text and iconic images from such works as the Bayeux Tapestry – are central to many of these innovative methods for teaching reading or a world language or art or math precisely because an image seems less able than words to dictate how it will be comprehended. Many of our discussions therefore focused on the kind of teaching that is made possible when students confront an art object or cultural artifact and try to use their words to make sense of what they are seeing, and that was precisely the kind of experiment that we undertook at the Yale Center for British Art.

The Fellows, whom I had divided into two groups, looked at a Victorian painting – or, rather, a double painting – by Augustus Egg called *The Life and Death of the Duke of Buckingham* .



Augustus Egg, *The Life and Death of the Duke of Buckingham* (exhibited 1855),

oil on canvas, 29 ½ x 36 inches each, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Without letting the Fellows see the wall label or learn anything about the artist or title of the painting, I put into practice a pedagogical method used by the Curator of Education at the YCBA, Linda Friedlaender, and her colleagues: over and over, I asked, "What do you see?" By identifying all the pertinent details of *The Life of Buckingham* without rushing to an interpretation, the Fellows remarked on the centrality of the figure in white, surrounded as he is by items of luxury and carousing companions. Once encouraged to develop an interpretation, the Fellows arrived at a reading of the painting that is strikingly original. Art historians tend to see in this painting a typically Victorian dual impulse – an overt condemnation of Restoration sexual excess and a covert fascination with its appeal. Moreover, this depiction of a powerful aristocrat and his king, Charles II, is taken to be a parody of the Last Supper: Buckingham, the seated figure, has usurped the proper place of the king, who stands behind him, almost as if in waiting on his inferior – an upsetting of hierarchy that would no doubt have been upsetting to the original Victorian viewers of *The Life of Buckingham* .





Yet what the Fellows in our seminar focused on was quite different: for them the crucial features of the painting are the danger with which the Duke of Buckingham is surrounded and the fragility and uncertainty of his standing among a group of people who are his enemies. Just as Egg no doubt hoped all viewers would, the Fellows mistook Buckingham for the king: the light in and the composition of the image both invite that misapprehension so that it can be reversed when the famously swarthy countenance of the standing figure is recognized as that of Charles II.

Yet both groups of Fellows, independent of each other, went beyond that fully justified misapprehension to see something quite different in this image of a late-night revel. They put the recognizably ominous nature of the relationship between king and subject into a larger context by developing from the picture writing of *The Life* a conspiracy narrative that identifies the duke as a lonely and threatened figure among badly chosen companions who wish him nothing but harm. From this perspective, *The Death of the Duke of Buckingham* depicts the body of a man who has perhaps been poisoned by his enemies, not, as Victorians would have seen, a man who has been undone by his own debauchery. When I shared that reading with two experts in the field, their reactions were "Wow!" and "That's great!" What is so startlingly compelling about this interpretation is both its originality and its pertinence. As one of those experts said, the Duke of Buckingham, the object of a number of assassination attempts, was surrounded by his enemies. Because the Fellows in the

seminar let the painting speak for itself, they were able to see in Egg's portrayal of Buckingham an appeal to their understanding of and even concern for a man living in very dangerous times. Sympathy overturned the conventional response of judgment; and the painting became a much richer, deeper expression of the relation between Restoration and Victorian cultures than I had ever seen it to be.

Near the end of our seminar, therefore, picture writing developed its full potential as picture reading - but only when the Fellows had an opportunity to elicit meanings from a painting, to find their words for that meaning, without being told what to think or how to respond. Our discussion that day then turned, as most would, to what scholars know about the lives of Buckingham and Charles II and about the career of Augustus Egg - but not until after the Fellows had had a chance to provide their own construction of the meaning of the painting. Our experiment offered us a pedagogical lesson that I hope we all take away from our explorations of how insightful words emerge from the viewing of images - and, more particularly, how they do so when we let our students see what they see rather than what they are told to see.

Janice Carlisle

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