

Turning On the Tuning In: Using Media Studies to Energize 2D Design

*All television is educational television.
The only question is what is it teaching?*

Nicholas Johnson, Federal Communications Commission

According to Nielson Media Research, by the time that the average 18 year old college student walks through the door of their first visual design course they will have spent well over 20,000 hours in front of the television.¹ Usually statistics such as this are trotted out as indications of the sorry state of contemporary culture or as explanations for what is “wrong” with today’s young people. As startling (or not so startling) as we may find this figure to be, from an educational perspective, using facts like this to rail against the media industry or to lament the quality of current students accomplishes very little other than to give an instructor a sense of moral or intellectual superiority and to prime the nostalgia pump so that the instructor feels obliged to spout riveting classroom anecdotes that begin with, “When I was your age...”

There is a more constructive way for design instructors to think about all those hours our students spend consuming broadcast TV, films and videos. Those 20,000 hours can be thought of as the equivalent of a ten-year, 40 hour-per-week apprenticeship in visual design. Granted, this apprenticeship has been a largely passive, one-way affair, resulting in a superficial, “dash board” kind of knowledge. Most incoming students understand visual design similarly to the way that they understand the family car. Most are familiar with the controls and have enough practical knowledge of what the gauges, pedals and levers do to get them to where they want to go. They know that the car will move forward when they shift the car into “drive” even though most have little real knowledge of what is actually going on under the hood. Similarly, students are intimately aware of the effects of the media even though they may not have pondered the formal characteristics of design, editing and juxtaposition that made these effects possible.

Now some may argue that the kind of unreflective, passive exposure that characterizes “dashboard knowledge” hardly deserves the name knowledge at all. In response, I will offer an analogy: The average American preschooler, armed with only a dashboard knowledge of the English language not only has a remarkable ability to understand spoken language, but is in fact an active user and a *creative producer* of language long before they can tell a noun from a verb, diagram a sentence, or tie their own shoes for that matter. They accomplish this amazing communicative feat primarily through so-called “passive learning” activities such as unstructured play, emulation, and immersion, which for most of us and our students meant lots of exposure to the media. In another forum I would use this analogy as a jumping off point to discuss what this might mean in terms of rethinking whole structure of visual design curricula. For our purposes here, it is enough to recognize that by incorporating examples from time based media such as television, film and video, design instructors take advantage of a very powerful teaching tool. They gain access to the vast vocabularies of shared visual forms, styles, and techniques that have been instrumental molding our students’ perception and in developing the visual logic that allows them to comprehend our media saturated world.

Obviously an in-class screening of *Citizen Kane* or watching another episode of *Sienfeld* isn’t going to make our students better artists or designers. What is needed is the critical apparatus that can take advantage of what they already know, and mobilize it to create more sophisticated and innovative solutions to the visual problems that we pose to them. Space limits me to offering only a couple of examples from a whole grab bag of concepts that I borrow from film theory and media studies to help accomplish this. Those who might be interested in a more complete list can email me at marrigo@bgnet.bgsu.edu and I will happily pass them along. For now, here are a

few concepts that I have found particularly useful in my beginning classes to transform their dashboard knowledge of the media into the nuts and bolts mechanics of visual design.

Marshal McLuhan

Marshal McLuhan is to media studies what Darwin is to evolutionary biology or what Freud is to psychology. Like these giants, McLuhan's visionary insight gave birth to a whole new field of study, media studies, and also like his predecessors, his writings have been among the most influential, controversial, and misunderstood in his field. The bulk of his most important work was done in the mid sixties, just as television was starting to come into its own. Trained as a literary critic, he turned his attention from examining the ideas of writers and poets to investigating the means by which these ideas were disseminated, transformed and received. He became convinced that specific ideas have far less impact on the course of human intellectual evolution than do changes in the strategies and technologies by which these ideas are communicated. McLuhan was one of the first, and certainly the most vocal and prolific, to contend that content mattered far less than form. His essays from this period are by turns prophetic and anachronistic, idealistic and cautionary, giving them, in 2003, a decidedly "back to the future" flavor. They are dense with impassioned rhetoric, encyclopedic references and now, painfully dated examples. While personally I find these qualities only add to the appeal of his writing, I also recognize that these essays are far too unwieldy to assign to beginning students. However, I have found that a few of his key concepts to help my design students to understand some of the complex ways in which visual images function. Here are two of them:

The Medium is the Message

This is one of the most pithy, far-reaching, and just plain quotable of McLuhan's many pronouncements. Artists most often invoke it as a means of bringing back together the artificial, but useful, split that we make between form and content, a distinction necessitated by our habits of thought and the restrictions of language. Many instructors, myself included, recognize the pedagogic practicality of distinguishing form from content when critiquing work. At the same time, however, I try hard to impress upon my students that this split is artificial, that form is inextricably linked to content, and that the terms "form" and "content" are simply labels that we use to refer to two different methods of describing the same visual phenomena. This is where "The medium is the message" can come in handy, and the context in which it seems to be most often cited. It works as a catchy and memorable way to remind students of the fundamental unity of form and content, and frankly, with its alliterative appeal, "The medium is the message" sounds a lot sexier than, "The form is the content."

In addition to this common usage, however, there is another, deeper meaning to this quote, one that is more in keeping with McLuhan's original intention. The "message" he was referring to is not, as indicated above, the specific content of any particular article, program or artwork. The message that he had in mind is the meaning that is embedded in, and implied by, the medium itself. The forms that our communications take are the result of the ways that we perceive, think and attach value to world around us. As new forms of communication arise, they result in a reordering of individuals' perceptions, thoughts, and values. Think about the ways the cell phone is currently altering our perception of time and transforming our conceptions and values regarding such things as work, leisure, and privacy. It is the medium itself, not the actual phone conversations, that does the bulk of the "communicating" by transmitting these new values, molding our sense perceptions, and by shifting our patterns of cognition-- albeit in largely unconscious ways. "The medium is the message" is McLuhan's concise formulation of one of the primary mechanisms by which human consciousness evolves and reflects his fundamental principle that human beings think differently when confronted with different kinds of media. Furthermore, it is an invitation to look at the formal aspects of our cultural products to see what they can reveal about the ways that we sense, think and feel about the world and each other.

In the classroom, “The medium is the message” is my way of leading into a discussion about the many fundamental differences between the ways that we process visual language and spoken/written language. We use different parts of our brain to process these two kinds of information in radically different ways, in completely different time frames, with dramatically dissimilar emotional effects. The most prevalent mistake that first-year students make is to attempt to apply the linear, rational logic of language to understand the affective, atemporal and multi-layered logic of vision. The real message of “The medium is the message” is that our processes of cognition and perception shift in response to visual media. In order to be successful producers of visual language our students need to stop tapping their pencils on their foreheads and trying to reason their way to a solution. Effective producers of visual language need to think visually.

McLuhan’s Impact Theory of Technology

In *Understanding Media* (1964) McLuhan theorized that contrary to popular conceptions, technology is not as a series of inventions to which humans are forced to adapt, but instead, technologies should be understood as amplifications of our human faculties. They are not imposed on us from the outside but rather are extensions of ourselves. In his view, technologies arise as “counter irritants” in response to specific societal pressures or irritants. But in spite of the fact that a technology might successfully neutralize and “soothe” the original irritation, it will itself always become a driving force behind new, unforeseen pressures and irritations. This is due to the fact that the effects of a new technology are rarely felt at the “site of impact”. Like a drug that anaesthetizes the injured site, new technologies mask the original symptoms (takes care of the original irritation), but gives rise to unforeseen side effects in other parts of the system. Communication technologies in particular don’t merely scratch a societal irritation or simply make things easier-- they completely alter cognition and the balance of perception.

One of the more interesting implications of this “Impact Theory” of technology occurs when a sense is targeted by a new communication technology. Following McLuhan’s conception that the initial site of impact is numbed, it is the *other senses* that are most keenly affected. Radio was “aimed at” the ear but its initial effect was primarily visual. (Recall *War of the Worlds* or such serials such as *The Lone Ranger* or *The Shadow*.) Photography was “aimed at” the eye but its effect was primarily auditory. (In the sense that we don’t so much look *at* a photo as see *through* it to a *description* of objects or a *narration* of events.) TV is audio/visual but McLuhan argues that its effect is largely tactile. (With TV distant things events, places are brought into intimate proximity, they are *felt* as if experienced first hand.)

Although I am not entirely convinced of the ultimate phenomenological truth of this model, I do find it intriguing—and it seems that many of my students do also. I have found that it is a very useful way to open an animated classroom discussion about the important roles that our other four senses play in visual design, and of examining the fact that visual works have largely non-visual effects. After a brief ten-minute introduction to the Impact Theory concept, I ask my students a couple of questions: “Let’s assume that McLuhan is right. Is there evidence to support his contention that visual works actually do impact our senses other than sight? When we create or interpret 2-D artworks do we rely upon visceral responses that we usually associate with hearing, smell, taste and touch, or even other bodily sensations such as balance, weight and tension?”

Over the course of the class period we discuss the ways in which we speak of designs as if we could hear them: Compositions are loud or quiet or noisy, and can have metered or syncopated rhythms. To describe color we often appeal to taste and touch. Colors are perceived as warm or cool, and in combination, colors might be described as acidic, tangy or sweet. Shapes are understood tactilely as sharp or soft or sculpted. Complex patterns of value are visually transmitted to us as texture, as though we had run our fingers over actual rough, spiny, or metallic surfaces. In short, the class discovers the often-overlooked fact that it is very difficult to describe

visual works without appealing to words and sensations that were originally associated with senses other than sight. As instructors I believe that it is vitally important for us to focus on this synaesthetic aspect of the visual arts because most of what our students will choose or will be called upon to represent in their artworks have no visual referent in the world whatsoever: Honor, duty, justice, beauty, kindness, coolness, pain, jealousy, the good, bad and the ugly, just to name a few.

Normally students' first response to deal with the problem of making the invisible visible is to use mediating symbols as a way of invoking or picturing these intangibles. As most of us know all too well, culturally accepted symbols can be tricky, and in the hands of beginners, the results of appealing to symbols are usually unreflective, un-nuanced, and painfully cliché. A complex and elusive concept such as death gets reduced to the symbol of a skeleton with all the intellectual depth of a Grateful Dead sticker and the emotional resonance of a Halloween costume. As an alternative to this symbolic approach I encourage my students to engage their other senses, to become imaginative synesthates, translating smell, hearing, touch and taste into vision. Does death have the acrid, sweet smell of moldering flesh or the smooth, serene smell of lilies? What does that smell *look* like? Does death have the tension of *rigor mortis* or the repose of release? Does it have the blackness of mourning or the whiteness of transition and purification? Is death as solid and weighty as packed earth, as open and airy as a picked carcass, or as ephemeral as a cold breath on your cheek? Does it sound like a hushed and empty silence or have the stretched, rounded sonority of a funeral dirge? Is death as spacious as the unknown or as claustrophobic as a casket? Given opportunity, encouragement and a handful of design principles, I am amazed at how adept first-year students are at translating non-visual sensations into visual counterparts leading to more creative, diverse, rich and formally successful projects.

I have found that McLuhan's Impact theory to be a successful way to help convince somewhat skeptical students that they need to rely on more than just their eyes and their intellect when faced with design problems. Visual works have largely non-visual effects. Students need to marshal all of their senses and sense memories to help them to create compelling artworks or invent visual designs that will communicate the invisible concepts, qualities and values of their future clients.

The Kuleshov Experiments

Americans such as Edwin Porter and D. W. Griffith are normally cited as the key figures who shaped early cinema, with Griffith receiving special attention for his ability to actualize film as a mass media by freeing filmmaking from the narrative conventions it had inherited from journalism and theater. As important as these contributions may be, the man most responsible for the look and feel of contemporary Hollywood film was not an American at all; rather it was the little known Russian born director and educator Lev Kuleshov.

Kuleshov was a product of the heady spirit of artistic experimentation that flourished in the relative calm between the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of Stalin. Kuleshov would have been a notable figure in the history of film if for no other reason than two of the more important directors of the 20th Century, Pudovkin and Eisenstein, were among his many students. In fact, the international acclaim of his two pupils was so great that they were regularly credited with many of Kuleshov's innovations. In the last 20 years, as an effort to set the record straight, his discoveries of the cognitive and emotional effects of editing have come to be called the "Kuleshov Experiments".

One of these experiments involved what Kuleshov referred to as "re-created space", where a single dramatic line is used to bring radically separate places and locals into close proximity to one another. Scenes were shot throughout Moscow, Leningrad and the surrounding countryside. These were then edited together to create the impression that these sites were within blocks of each other. Today, the radical nature of this discovery is almost lost on us, numbed as we are to the irony of what the phrase "shot on location" has come to mean. In contemporary films, India

is often presented to us as the jungles of Africa. New Zealand offers more believable moors than those of Ireland, and Montreal regularly functions as an ersatz New York. As a rule, cinematic geographies are cobbled together from multiple sources, real and imagined. Exteriors shot in New Jersey and St. Paul, are combined with interiors filmed in Chicago and a sound stage in Burbank, these are then frequently blue screened together with artists' renderings of an apocalyptic landscape or an exotic extra-terrestrial terrain. Kuleshov made it possible of us to regularly experience cities that can paradoxically exist everywhere and nowhere, and not even bat an eye.

By 1925, Kuleshov and his students at the State School of Cinema were prepared perform on humanity the same movie magic that they had brought to geography by conjuring a vivacious primping beauty from a canful of celluloid. In 1965, at the age of 70 Kuleshov recalled the event.

I shot a scene of a woman at her toilet: she did her hair, made up, put on her stockings and her shoes and dress... I filmed the hair, the hands, the legs, the feet of different women, but I edited them as if it were all one woman, and, thanks to montage, I succeeded in creating a woman who did not exist in reality, but only in cinema. Hardly anyone has written about this last experiment. I kept the montage for a long time, until it was lost during the war. Everything has been lost. I never repeated the experiment, or tried to repeat it. The fact is that do it you have to be very young, as I was at the time. Then I could handle the film with such boldness!²

Boldness, eh? This last bit of the quotation might sound a bit like an old man's self-serving puffery in an era where the use of hand models, stand-ins, body doubles, and stunt people has become stock-in-trade, but we must struggle to cast our minds back some eighty years. The closest contemporary parallel to what Kuleshov was doing with film can only be found in the synthetic cubism of Braque and Picasso. Here too multiple views and perspectives of a scene were assembled together by the artist into a single unified vision. The viewer of these paintings was challenged to reconstruct the original subject from the fragments, a process that most viewers found difficult, unfamiliar and decidedly unreal. By contrast, Kuleshov, using a similar technique in film, was able to construct a vision that also demanded the participation of the viewer to piece together a fragmented subject, but here there seemed to be no difficulty whatsoever. The viewer was left with an image of a figure or a landscape that seemed to comfortably conform to their experiences of such things, appearing as a real and natural representation of its subject as opposed to the unreal and abstract one that it actually was.

As important as these discoveries were, the most profound experiment that Kuleshov conducted was the one that got this whole line of visual research started. We have discussed how juxtaposition can conjure believable illusions of visible things such as people and places. However, Kuleshov's initial concern was with how it might be possible to represent much less tangible quantities, invisible things such as thoughts, motivations and emotions, without resorting to the usual practice of relying on stock, symbolic conventions such as an actor rubbing his belly and licking his lips to indicate hunger. To answer this question, he enlisted the assistance of Russia's most famous actor, Ivan Mosjoukin.

Kuleshov made of Mosjoukin an odd and surprisingly difficult request. He asked him to completely empty his head and make the most blank and neutral expression that he could muster. Little in his training had prepared him for this role, but being the consummate actor that he was, Mosjoukin's face eventually became the very picture of blankness, which Kuleshov's assistants then promptly captured on a few seconds of film. In the darkroom this short scene was duplicated many times over, and then spliced together with other fragments of film: a bowl of soup, a prison gate, a child's coffin and the like, to create several mini movies that were then screened before unsuspecting audiences. Afterward, audience members were asked to describe what they had just seen. Rather than replying with the factual answer: a man's face followed by a bowl of soup,

viewers' responses were much more dramatic. They claimed to have witnessed hunger, or in the cases of the prison gate and the baby coffin, they spoke of longing, or anger or grief. These very different emotions were ascribed exact same facial expression. Remember, Misjoukin neither felt nor acted out these emotional states. Instead, it was the viewer who experienced, or at least identified these emotions. From this point forward, filmmakers have become increasingly aware that it is no longer a straightforward matter of literally presenting meanings and emotions on the screen. More visceral and affective responses can be achieved if instead they present the context and conditions that allow the audience to create the meanings in their own minds.

Superficially, the Kuleshov Experiments explored montage and juxtaposition as aspects of filmmaking, but these formal devices are not limited to film. Equivalent techniques are to be found in every visual medium. Editing serves here to highlight the contextual nature of meaning production. This is the foundation of the visual logic that makes it possible for any artworks to communicate at all. The implications of these three experiments for designers and artists are so numerous and vital that I introduce Kuleshov on the second day of my beginning course as a lead in to a lecture on meaning and visual communication. These experiments clearly illustrate several of visual logic's "first principles": 1. Meaning is not a matter of a dictionary definition nor is it an essence or attribute of objects or symbols. Regardless of whether you're dealing with triangles, trilobites or traffic signs, things don't mean, only people do. 2. Meanings are not fixed and stable. Meaning can only be reliably ascribed by taking into consideration the entire context of the situation. A wrench in my workshop is a tool. Embedded in my neighbor's skull, it's a weapon. A bowl of soup on the table is a meal; paired with a Russian, it's hunger. Even the most rigid of symbols can be made to mean its opposite, provided you juxtapose it with the right information. 3. We perceive, generalize, and assimilate information using the gestalt principles of proximity, similarity, closure, and continuity. One can find clear illustrations of each of these principles at work in the Kuleshov experiments. 4. The most effective visual artworks attempt to strike a balance between providing enough information so that the intended meaning can occur but not providing so much information that the viewer is left with nothing to do other than bear passive witness. The artist's job is to create the conditions in which the intended meaning can occur. The circuit of meaning needs be complete, but never closed, so that the viewer's participation can serve as the final, electrifying link.

Admittedly, this is pretty heady stuff for a roomful of freshmen on day two. But I don't have to actually teach or convince them of these things. They have had 20,000 hours of TV and film to do that. I just have to make them aware of what they already know, and Kuleshov helps to pave the way.

¹ Neilson Media Research, based on weekly TV viewing by age for 1992. As stated in the 1994 Information Please Almanac, electronic edition. 1993 Houghton Mifflin Company.

² Lev Kuleshov, *The Origins of Montage*, Cinema in Revolution,. Luda Schnitzer, Jean Schnitzer & Marcel Martin, ed., (London: Da Capo, 1973), 70.