From Power 2 Empowerment was the first of what we hope will be a series of inter-disciplinary conferences that will critically examine what it now means to be literate in a world that is continuously being re-shaped by the enormous array of printed, digitized and transmitted images and visual communications systems that contextualize our perceptions of ourselves and our world. Understanding the relationship of literacy to power is central to this challenge. Meeting it will require the creation, thorough examination and amalgamation of new types of knowledge. In light of this, an essential question to attempt to answer is this:
How does achieving, demonstrating and maintaining visual literacy subject us to power wielded by those who create, foster, or participate in the exchange of visual culture, media and communication?

This conference sought to break down barriers separating theory and practice to achieve a clearer understanding of the created visual environment as it has been shaped by a wide variety of power practices and techniques. In light of the hegemonies currently being exerted through visual culture, the conference asked how critical thinking, viewing and making should be practiced, and in what arenas this should occur. A redefined literacy that empowers rather than subjugates subjects of visual culture began to emerge in the ideas and issues that were presented at From Power 2 Empowerment, and a carefully selected array of these are documented in the articles that appear in these Proceedings.

Contextual Overview
What is visual literacy and why should so many different kinds of people care about it?
Simply put, people who are visually literate know how to construct meaning from visual images. To do this, an individual must be able to interpret the content of visual images, examine whatever social, cultural, political or economic impact they may have, and then articulate the purpose(s) served by these images from the viewpoint of both the audience that they have been created to affect and the image-maker(s) who created and disseminated them.

A visually literate person understands not only how to decode and derive meaning from what he or she observes, but also how to create and effectively disseminate visual communications that can be clearly understood and acted upon by a given audience.

“To communicate effectively in [contemporary society], you have to be able to interpret, create and select images that convey a wide range of meanings.”


How does this affect the manner in which we interpret imagery that we encounter on a daily basis?
Depending on exactly which source you choose to cite (Consumer Reports, the website of the Union of Concerned Scientists, The Texas A & M Digital Library, David Schenk and the website of the Newspaper Association of America, to name but a few), most people in so-called developed modern societies encounter between 240 and 3,000 visual messages every day. Between half-and two-thirds of these are transmitted to us through television screens or computer
monitors, and they come to us in real time from sources all over the world. These visual messages can be comprised of gestures, objects, signs and symbols, or systems that combine some or all of these.

We make thousands of personal judgments every day based on how we have been conditioned to decode meaning from hairstyles, interior design, what people wear and how they wear it, automotive styling, computer games, the interface designs of websites, advertising, architecture and the way people walk, speak and assume physical postures. We have become conditioned to “read” all of these indicators in a manner that allows us to convert information into what we believe is knowledge that we can then act upon much more quickly and decisively than we ever have. The store of internal image-based information that we now can access is more broadly and eclectically informed than it has ever been, whether we’re comfortable with or truly understand the ramifications of this state of affairs or not.

What drives our need to critically examine visual literacy, and to increase our understanding of it?
We feel that this question is best addressed by contextually framing our answers underneath three primary rubrics.

one: globalization…
The wired world has created a daily reality wherein the people who have access to it can virtually experience a proximity to other cultures that has never before been possible. This has the potential to enlighten or to reinforce stereotypes, depending on a given individual’s level of visual literacy. Schoolchildren in current events classes around the US can easily monitor the evolution of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan by accessing the websites of either Al-Jazeera or the BBC or by viewing a select variety of YouTube™ clips, and in so doing gain a very different perspective on America’s involvement in these conflicts than they could by viewing only imagery sanctioned by the mainstream US news media. They can also spend the time they could have devoted to this activity interacting with groups of real and “virtual” friends in MySpace™ or Facebook™, or blogging and reading blogs, which (lest we forget) are only subject to the vetting and editing criteria of the individual blogger.

The world has become a very flat place because of the virtual proximity that now exists between individuals and groups that had existed at great distances from each other both in terms of geographic location and access to sophisticated communications technology only a decade ago. However, this decrease in the essential logistical intervals and barriers that have traditionally separated political factions, socio-cultural and socio-economic groups and religious populations has yet to effectively increase the ability of billions of people to increase their understanding and acceptance of the viewpoints of those whose essential beliefs differ markedly from their own. This also means that our ability to speedily send and receive visual or visually enhanced messages from an enormously diverse array of peoples and places in the world has yet to imbue most of us with the social and cultural wherewithal, much less the critical ability, to interpret them effectively.
two: technological advances…
We now possess the ability to capture, manipulate, store and disseminate images more easily than ever before in human history. With that stated, just because we can does not necessarily mean that we should. Even though only slightly less than a quarter of the world’s population has relatively easy access to the internet, a bit more than half of its population can now gain access to the means to make visual images simply and quickly due to the global proliferation of some of the technologies accounted for in the following factoids. To wit:

· there are now almost 3 billion cell phone connections in the world, and the number of new connections per month stands at just under 45 million (source: Wireless Intelligence);

· worldwide camera phone shipments will be very near 850 million units by July 2009 (InfoTrends/CAP Ventures);

· Facebook has more than 60 million active users worldwide, and reports that it facilitates the upload of over 14 million images per day (source: Facebook);

· MySpace users upload more than 1 million images per day, and the total volume of images stored in this resource now exceeds 1.5 billion (source: MySpace);

· There are now more than 2 billion photos on Flickr (source: Flickr);

· More than 50 million digital cameras now exist in the world (source: InfoTrends/CAP Ventures).

three: the speed at which so many contemporary lives are now being lived…
We now live in a world where, as Malcolm Gladwell reminds us, instant gratification takes just a bit too long. This contributes greatly to the belief that using images to facilitate essential communications is a good thing to do simply because it can be done quickly and efficiently. We contend that if you’re not visually literate, you may possess the skill and the technological resources necessary to communicate efficiently, but this by no means assures that your quick and efficient attempt (a key word in this context…) at communication will be effective in terms of how well it will be interpreted and acted upon by others. The proliferation of image-capture, image-creation and image-dissemination technologies described in the previous sub-section means that it has become easier than ever for the visually illiterate—many of whom have art or design degrees—to contribute to a broadening in a variety of gaps of understanding that exist between the ever-diversifying population groups that now comprise our world.
Why has it become so important to understand (and promote the further understanding of) how specific population groups derive meaning from images?

Images are interpreted very quickly and on multiple levels of understanding, depending on a complex array of sociologically and psychologically informed factors that affect processes of encoding and decoding and the manner in which given individuals semiotically connote meaning from specific stimuli. Because of this, being visually illiterate in the early 21st century is somewhat akin to being unable to read if you lived in Europe in the middle of the 16th century. Being illiterate put (western) Europeans of this time at such a severe disadvantage socially, politically and economically that it became impossible for them to function or have any hope of advancing in these arenas in a society where the rapid and widespread advance of movable typography and printing technology demanded a level of thinking that only literacy could facilitate.

A similar change in what it meant to be literate and its subsequent effect on world society occurred a hundred years ago when new technology such as wireless telegraphy, telephones and motion pictures enabled more efficient communication. Those who could not evolve their abilities to making or adapting meaning effectively by transforming the information provided by the new technologies were unable to effectively communicate, much less compete with, those who could not. What is very, very different about those who now possess the means necessary to create, capture and disseminate images and those who were striving to effectively utilize emerging communications and communications technology in eras past is that it is no longer necessary to be able to read and write effectively to articulate essential meaning. All you need to be able to do now is find a means to upload your imagery, and in a world where cell phone towers are being constructed in areas that had been all but off-limits to communications technologies that required the stringing or laying of cable, this is becoming much easier to do.

In turn, this has resulted in images easily travelling across cultural, political, economic and language barriers, but whether or not they are interpreted by particular viewing audiences in the manner that was intended by their creators is another matter, and one that several authors in these Proceedings have explored from various perspectives. One of the recurrent themes of From Power 2 Empowerment is that possessing the skill sets necessary to access and process visually transmitted information quickly does not mean that a given individual has accrued the knowledge required to understand all of the contextual factors that have affected and are affecting how they are interpreting what they are seeing. This has made it very easy to manipulate the behavior of large numbers of visually illiterate people around the world very quickly and efficiently. The gravity of the consequences of this are beginning to be seen in places where hundreds of millions of people new to the middle class suddenly have ample means to visually measure and communicate their social standing to others by displaying what their (relatively) new increases in spending power now allows them to own and consume.
What are the consequences of living in a world where so many personal and collective mindsets and courses of action are shaped by the relative ability to decode imagery as opposed to engaging in critical reading or dialogue? A generational disconnect has come to exist between people who have grown up using imagery as a means to send and receive essential messages and those who have not. This is glaringly evident not only here in the US but in emerging economies such as China, where children of high school age and younger are becoming very adept at using technology to navigate through and communicate with the diverse array of people and communities that populate their worlds. Many of these children are under fairly to extremely intense pressure to compete for academic and social standing, and being visually literate has become a new and extremely cogent metric that young people now utilize as a means to measure their self-worth against not just the middle- and high school-aged children in their own schools and geographically defined communities, but in communities around the world from which competitors can and will emerge.

As this has occurred, the perception of what constitutes a public and a private life in many societies around the world has been drastically altered, as has the understanding of what constitutes reality and what constitutes the illusion of reality. Since it is much easier to construct and maintain the illusion of reality if you possess the skill to effectively utilize the visual image creation, manipulation and dissemination technology necessary to achieve this, the creation of the perception of truth has sufficed to supplant the real thing for millions of people around the world who do not possess the foresight, critical analytical ability, self-awareness and communication skills necessary to deal with the latter. In this manner, using images to communicate has contributed greatly to the now common phenomenon of allowing perception to displace truth in the minds of many population groups around the world. The fact that it was so easy to depict Sarah Palin as a viable candidate for the second highest office in the US government when in fact she was and is grossly underqualified to hold a position of this level of import and responsibility is a glaring example of this. It has also contributed to the idea that analyzing written information to obtain usable and actionable data that can be converted into usable and actionable data that can be converted into information that can in turn be converted into knowledge is less effective than the simpler-and-less-mentally-taxing practice of allowing complex issues that require well-articulated explanation and qualification to be reduced to a few bullet points accompanied by an image. We wonder how many Power Point presentations and their ilk were used to convince risk managers at places like Citi™ and AIG™ and Lehman Brothers™ that it was all right to expose themselves to such a high volume of essentially unsecured and high-risk-of-default securities? Or how many well-crafted images of oversized and overpowered American pickup trucks pulling railroad cars or large airplanes and having giant boulders dumped into their beds it took to brainwash both the American public and their lawmakers that not designing and building more fuel-efficient and eco-friendly vehicles was a good thing to continue to do…

—mrg, ko