Conversations on Visual Literacy, Resonance, and a Found Cat

Tedi E. Asher; Peter Carpreau; Lode Vermeersch; Ernst Wagner

Abstract: In this paper four experts, all involved in art education but with different backgrounds, analyse, apply, and challenge the concept of visual literacy when it comes to museum education. They do so in four conversations based on four different pieces of the visual world. Those are the starting points of the conversations because the authors are convinced that visual literacy offers specific tools that invite people to use their competencies and at the same time helps them to question the act of seeing. In the series of 'tetralogues' some often overlooked elements of visual literacy are articulated and discussed, such as immersion, attention, metacognition, metaperception, embodiment, initiation, and resonance. The ultimate aim of the paper is to spark the readers' interest and invite them to join this philosophical reflection process on how to turn the act of seeing of an image into a meaningful experience. Thus, the tetralogue becomes a polylogue.

Key words: visual literacy, perception, resonance, museum education, art mediation

Introduction

Visual literacy: a new journey into a known territory

When we hear the word 'literacy' we usually think of verbal or text-based literacy. It is not often that people use the notion of 'literacy' when referring to visual information. There is, however, a clear analogy between the act of reading or writing a text and the way we handle images. In both cases we focus on something that was created by man, a specific form of information that can be passed from one person to another, often detached from place and time, information that needs interpretation in order to be understood. All of these essential steps of a literacy process (the creation of visually perceptible information, the distribution, and the interpretation) are abilities that are

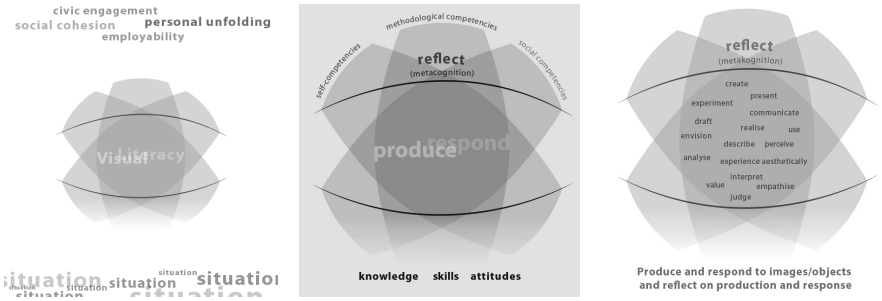
not innate. And even though we are confronted with an array of images from an early age, learning to handle them skilfully is not a process of mere spontaneous development (Vermeersch & Wagner, 2019). Visual skills are learnable and teachable (Avgerinou, 2003) and in fact they should be taught and learned; if not, people – young or old – might misunderstand the meaning of a certain image. To a large extent, this literacy learning process happens in an informal way. We simply pick it up intuitively by living our lives. We teach ourselves or we copy others. However, in some cases, we also need help to fully understand what visual information can mean. Even though, as a population, we can see, we still need training in how we see and how to see (Kennedy & Deetsch, 2019).

Since the late '60s, 'visual literacy' has evolved into a specific domain of research and a related body of knowledge. As early as 2002, the first attempt was made to make visual literacy fruitful for art education (Fulkova, 2002). The exact definition of 'visual literacy' is, however, still rather fluid, and the question of how this visual literacy should be taught or learned is still a topic of debate. Some scholars focus on the analysis of the underlying rules of visual language (i.e. the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and semantics of visual data) while others examine the function of images in society today and how information is visualized in a specific cultural context.

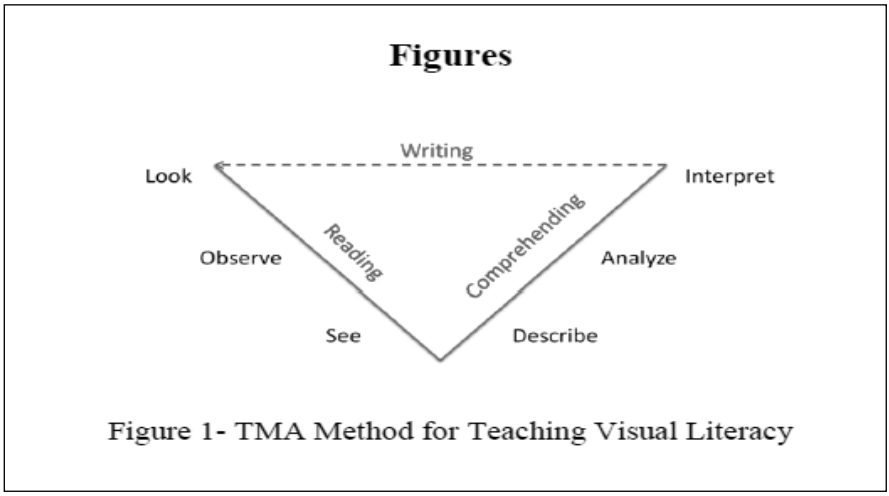
In this article we will not go into great detail about the range of different approaches to visual literacy, but rather will talk about the subject in a less academic and more direct and spontaneous way. In a series of conversations, we will highlight some (but certainly not all) aspects of visual literacy. We will show that art is a specific tool that not only invites us to use our visual literacy competencies but at the same time helps us to question and analyse the very act of seeing. Through these conversations, we will also question how a specific context can support the development of visual competencies; the place where art is shown as that specific locus with a strong emphasis on the visual – and, as we will illustrate in this paper, this can be a museum but also a chapel or metro station.

The art museum: a place for leveraging the visual literacy curriculum?

It is only recently that museums have started to use the notion of visual literacy and started to build a pedagogy around it. Especially since the turn of the millennium, various museums and academics have started to think about what the goal of educational efforts in art mediation at museums or art education at schools could be. Triggered by the initiative of Museum M in Leuven (Belgium), the Toledo Museum of Art (USA), KU Leuven (Belgium), and ENViL (the



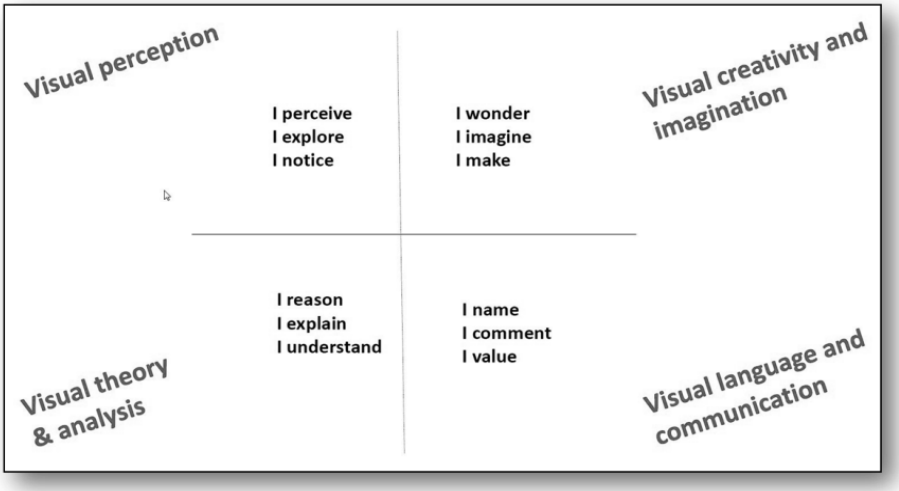
Picture 1. ENViL (Wagner & Schönau 2016)



Picture 2. Toledo Museum of Art

European Network for Visual literacy) came together to start a joint reflection on this topic. Each group brought their own basic theoretical model covering the elements of visual literacy.

Invited by Museum M and Pinakothek der Moderne Munich, workshops and conferences were held to work with these models in order to gain a better understanding of what art education at



Picture 3. Lode Vermeersch/ M Leuven/ KU Leuven (based on Vermeersch & Vandenbroucke, 2015)

a museum could mean and to develop ideas for how the concept of visual literacy could be adapted to the specific context of a museum, taking into account the design/curation of the display, the concepts of the educators, and the interests and abilities of the visitors.

Four conversations on visual literacy and art

The rest of this article contains transcribed excerpts of four stand-alone conversations among four people who are strongly involved in this ongoing process. Tedi Asher is an art museum neuroscientist at the Peabody Essex Museum (USA), Peter Carpreau is director of the Old Masters Department at the M Museum (Belgium), Lode Vermeersch is a senior research fellow on arts and cultural education at the University of Leuven (HIVA-KU Leuven, Belgium), and Ernst Wagner is a lecturer and senior researcher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (Germany); he also co-founded the European Network for Visual Literacy. Inspired by four different images of artworks (three of them personally photographed by three of the participants), these four scholars share their personal ideas, observations, and questions on

Picture 4. Charles Sandison, Figurehead 2.0, 2020, Boston, installation view (Photo: Brian Kennedy)

how to handle artistic imagery today. The aim of these conversations is not to answer one specific research question or to build a framework for visual literacy, but to invite the reader to join this dialogue on how to turn the act of seeing an artistic image into a meaningful experience.

Lode: We only see things because of the light that is reflected off the objects around us and subsequently bumps into receptors in the back of our eyeballs. Without any light we see nothing. Being visually literate starts with that contextual condition, a condition we usually only think of when there is not enough light to see what we want to see. Most museums, however, are well aware of the huge impact of the illumination of a room or the lighting of a specific artwork. In the case of this artwork, the artwork *is* the light as the work involves a number of projectors projecting data onto the museum walls, floor and ceiling. They create a starry nebula of codes, words, and images. The fact that the projections are oriented in different

directions forces the visitors to look at the artwork in a very specific way. The visitors step into the work of art and are inevitably also lit by the rays of light. This makes them part of the work, but it also shows that not only are they looking at the piece, but the artwork also seems to be looking at them. For this experience the word 'immersion' is often used. In terms of visual literacy, immersion occurs when people say: "I don't know what to look at first!" However, to me, this is an important element in becoming visually literate: deciding what you want to see. In his seminal work 'Ways of seeing' John Berger describes it this way: "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice." (Berger, 1972) In a work like Charles Sandison's, it is hard to make that choice because so many things happen at the same time. Fortunately, our eyes and brains are fast. And they have to be, because they have to do more than absorb and interpret the light that is caught by our eyes. In the act of seeing, we also "situate ourselves in relation to what we see", Berger claims. So not only do we perceive the light, we also connect it to one or more narratives (based on our knowledge, our stories, our intuition, our memories, etc.). In other words, the artwork surrounds us with bundles of light as much as we surround the artwork with bundles of narratives.

Peter: The idea that we choose what we look at is a very interesting element in the concept of visual literacy. And, indeed, we link what we see with other elements in order to be able to give an interpretation. However, we should be aware of the powerful unconscious dynamics in this process. The act of seeing is in large part directed by one's interests and other elements, some of which one may not be aware of. Eye-tracking research demonstrates that both viewer interest and the context of the visual experience can inform our perceptions without our awareness.

The same can be said of meaning-making processes. It is accepted that people make meaning of something in the form of a narrative. Yet the construction of a narrative implies a kind of conscious awareness. However, images, and certainly art, actually appeal in large part to our intuitive mind. Research indeed shows that we have one part of our mind that navigates us though the world in an automatic way, and a second part that works in a more conscious and rational way. I do believe that a large part of our visual processing through which we make meaning is done in an automated way.

Close to the left wall of the room we can see four sculptures. We can also see the architecture of the room. But all these real and material elements are covered by the digital images of the installation. The two spectators in the lower left corner of the picture are looking at both the material and the intangible images in the

room. We can see that the woman is holding a smartphone and is about to take a photograph of the room. In doing so, she reduces a spatial and sensorial experience of material and projected visuals to a mere photograph that certainly cannot capture the embodied experience of the installation. It is not unthinkable that she is aware of the fact that her photograph is a very flawed and reduced copy of the reality, but she's recording this moment so that she might remember it later. Upon viewing the picture later, she may have not only a visual experience, but a multisensorial one, because the picture will unlock the memory of the multisensorial and spatial experience that she had in the museum. This is a real-life illustration of the ideas of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty: the importance of the body in the act of perception (Merleau-Ponty 1945).

Ernst: If I see it right, Lode and Peter propose different 'literacies', the ability to be immersed (Lode) and the ability to stay out (Peter). Lode's concept of immersion refers to the experience of a work as a poetic space enveloping the visitor, allowing them to dream in space rather than discursively pinning the art work down. Only then can the poetry of a "night sky full of stars" come into its own. The movement of the (dematerialized) space around the visitor makes the body light. His perception changes to a diffuse blur, there is no sense in selecting discrete points of focus. In order to experience the work in this way, the visitor must surrender. He must be able to open himself to the sensual experience.

Peter, on the other hand, emphasizes interest-led attention which sets mental activity in motion. With Sandison this may actually make sense here and there, for example when one discovers an interesting detail that one wants to follow, but which one cannot follow because it disappears, again as we see in PEM's video (PEM 2020). This transience in the artwork highlights the critical importance of the viewer's own receptivity to dynamic engagement. The literacy needed here is thus the ability not to fixate, but rather to be immersed, to be touched, to consciously give up cognitive control.

However, the viewer needs to know a great deal in order to understand the complexity, the depth of the work beyond this immersion: the history of the museum building, the history of Salem, the mechanisms of the computer codes, the origin of the pictures and writings, the allusions of the title. Knowledge, however, is first of all the control of cognition over the senses. But even here, no meaningful focusing can take place. The iconographic, decodable meanings do not meet in one interpretation, one thesis, but rather generate an associative shimmering in an iconographic decentralized network.

Perhaps the literacy we are looking for is the ability to switch between the two modes, the mode of sensual immersion emphasized by Lode and the mode of focusing cognitive penetration emphasized by Peter.

Tedi: This conversation articulates the multiple facets that underlie "an experience". Lode addresses a visual experience as a product of the individual and the external context influencing one another. Peter addresses the multiple processes *within* an individual (cognitive, emotional, embodied) that cumulatively constitute their contribution to the engagement. Ernst highlights this latter juxtaposition between the contributions of an individual's cognitive knowledge and embodied knowledge, and the ability to "switch" between them, as central to the notion of visual literacy.

This discussion leaves me wondering about the centrality of this *multiplicity* (lack of a singular cohesion) as core to the concept of visual literacy – what it is, how to practise it, and why. Perhaps there is a parallel between one's experience of the Sandison piece and one's experience of visual literacy. As Ernst wrote of the former, "the iconographic, decodable meanings do not meet in one interpretation, one thesis, but rather generate an associative shimmering in an iconographic decentralized network." Perhaps it is an awareness, willingness, and know-how to loosen our grip on the expectation that there is *a* (one) representation of visual literacy that is key to formulating a functional and relevant framework for it. The metacognitive factors and dynamics expounded upon in this conversation may be useful strategies for how to go about engaging visual literacy in this way, but might not themselves equate to the notion of "visual literacy".

Tedi: This image captures the perspective of someone (presumably the wearer of the shoe) whose view of the gallery below is obscured by opaque white spots on the intervening glass floor, which effectively filter out bits of the observed scene. By contrast, the people in the gallery are depicted as unhampered by any such perceptual obstructions. In fact, the interaction among multiple perceptual "filters" shapes the nature of any given perception, giving rise to the vast variability among human perspectives. These filters take many forms: the kinds of information relayed by the engaged senses (e.g. light, sound, texture); the allocation of attention; thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; the perceiver's background and past experiences.

Given the immersive fast-paced way that we move through the world, we often experience our idiosyncratic perceptions as "reality", without consideration of the implicit subjectivity or the perceptual processes that shape it. To account for the relative nature of any reality requires a metacognition of sorts – a de-

Picture 5. Riga, Latvian National Museum of Art (Photo: Ernst Wagner)

liberate attempt to *perceive perception* (a "metaperception", so to speak).

This image leaves me pondering the significance of the apparent contrast in awareness between the wearer of the shoe and the people he observes in the gallery. What role might such "metaperception" play in shaping the way we engage with the world around us – works of art, one another, the environment – and with our own fundamental understanding of "reality"?

Lode: I agree, Tedi. Reflecting on our own perception and the perception of others is without a doubt an important component of visual literacy. It allows us to place our perception in perspective – perhaps the way we see the world is not the way someone else sees it? It also implies that we have to understand that looking is not just a matter of objective perception, but of personal creation. We may think the shoes in the picture are the shoes of the photographer, but are

we really sure? We continuously recreate the image we have of the world, or, on a smaller scale, the image we have of a museum or a work of art. In other words, there is something fundamentally subjective about visual perception (and all other forms of perception), and it is important to reflect on that from time to time. "You can never step into the same book twice, because you are different each time you read it," John Barton famously said, and perhaps we could say the same thing about the visual arts.

That being said, this meta-perception is clearly not easy. It is like trying to bite your own teeth. How can we create enough critical distance to scrutinize our own process of perception? How can we assess the knowledge yielded by perception? And what can museums do to help that process?

Peter: I have the impression that a few of the most fundamental questions of epistemology are raised here. What can we know and how can we know it? It might be interesting to tackle that question from a visual perspective. Let's say there are different stages through which we achieve knowledge through visual experience. First you have the pre-critical stage: you see the picture and you give it a meaning without being aware of how this meaning is constructed through your own filters. In this stage you are at the mercy of the rhetoric of the image. In this image that would mean that you see the foot, an element that is very present in the image, and immediately assume you are looking through the eyes of the photographer. You don't immediately pay attention to the reflection of the person in the glass floor because the first thing you do is try to see what you think the photographer is looking at. That's why, as Tedi already stated, you filter out the white dots on the glass and immediately focus on the room underneath. You immediately believe that it is a museum room under the glass, yet you probably did not notice the labels next to the paintings. And so on.

The second stage is metacognition. In this stage you are aware of the way meaning is created. You have a trained brain and you understand that your own circumstances determine what you see and understand in this picture. Like Lode, you question if we are standing in the shoes of the photographer. You consider all the possible options. You also take into account your own preferences that made you think the photographer was male (for you identify the shoe as such) and consider all the other logical options (maybe the shoe was worn by a woman). Ultimately, you will have scrutinized the picture and your response to the picture so extensively that you probably end up with more questions than answers. You question whether you have gained knowledge and what knowledge that would be. The knowledge you have gained will be the result of a rational

and reasonable process of your logical consciousness. Congratulations, you are fully visually literate.

However, …

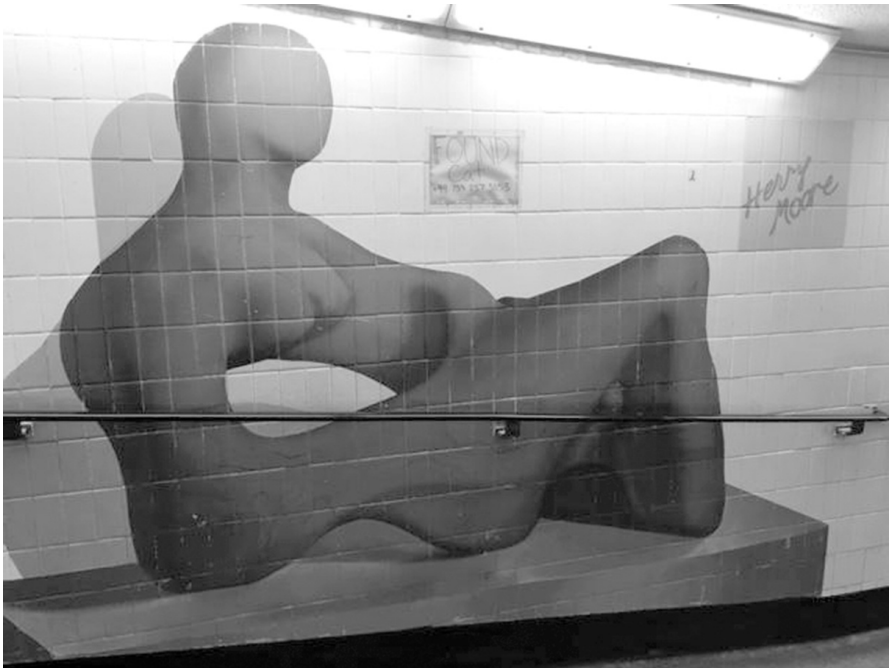
I think that metacognition is not the final stage in getting knowledge from a visual source. All experiences are embodied experiences, so this visual image also gives me knowledge of other things, like the hard smooth surface of the glass or the smell of a museum room. So, this must also be taken into account. Yet this is all still a result of the personal experiences you have as an individual. I think an even more intense form of perception exists when one can get past the use of one's past experiences to make meaning of the image. Those experiences are very rare. Sometimes they are described as 'sublime'. It is what Wassily Kandinsky tried to explain in 'Über das Geistige in der Kunst' (Kandinsky, 1911). I believe (and I intentionally use the word believe) that this takes us to a level where words and language are not sufficient any more, for their structure is logical and therefore falls short of grasping the full potential of that experience.

Ernst: Sometimes I stop on the street because I see someone looking at something, spellbound. It remains a mystery to me what he is looking at, but I imagine what he is seeing. I have this experience again and again in museums. In the early 1990s, the artist Thomas Struth created a wonderful series on the subject of "looking in museums" (his cycle 'Museum Photographs'). On the first level, as articulated by Peter above, this picture shows such a situation – albeit disturbed: a photographer is photographing a gallery space below him. Some museum visitors are gathering; presumably a guided tour is about to start.

In exhibitions, I especially like visitors who often change their distance from the object, exploring different spaces. Their body tone changes in the process. Their gaze is visibly curious, open, discovering. When I observe such visitors, I perceive the 'encounter between' the work and the viewer, the tension that exists between them. This is often much more interesting than the work alone. The person and the work are in resonance (Rosa, 2019). Seeing becomes the creation of the work, as Lode writes, and the work arouses the viewer.

This 'encounter between' is perhaps also what Tedi says about the photo, addressing what lies between the photographer and the observed situation: it "captures the perspective". A view, a dynamic relationship, something immaterial is grasped. This addresses the level of meta-perception (Peter's second level).

An unrealistic proposal for the further development of the concept of visual literacy: the highest form of visual literacy is when I see attentive observers in a museum looking at a work and I can guess what kind of work they are looking at. Imagination, i.e. the 'creation'



Picture 6. London Underground, Henry Moore and 'found cat' (Photo: Lode Vermeersch)

of the work from the observation of the 'encounter between'. In the observed observer (who becomes a 'medium' that intertwines me and the art work) the difference between the work and me is cancelled out.

This is perhaps what Peter means by a "more intense form of perception". The multiplication of perspectives and at the same time the understanding of seeing as creation, as Lode called it. The photo shows that there is still a long way to go – like a metaphor: "The view of [the people in] the gallery below is obscured by opaque white spots on the intervening glass floor (…)" (Tedi).

Peter: Although it does not seem like it at first glance, this is a very complex image. We see a photograph of a painting of a sculpture by Henri Moore (Recumbent figure, 1938) on a wall in the London Tube, which implies three different media. Another complexity is the pictu-

red space. The initial image is a sculpture. This was transposed onto a 2D surface by the painting. Yet the railing in front of the painting or the lightboxes unintentionally act as a *repoussoir*. Finally, it is all flattened again by the photograph. So, we have a 2D photograph of a 3D wall on which we see a 2D painting of a 3D sculpture. A last fascinating aspect of this picture is the 'Found Cat' sign.

These different visual layers highlight different layers of meaning. The sculpture and the painting refer to a 'classic' artistic tradition. The elements that identify the layer of the tube station wall, like the 'Found Cat' sign or the railing, inspire a more popular image approach. The 'Found Cat' sign extracts itself out of a cultural meaning and infuses the picture with a more prosaic meaning (someone found a cat). The composition as a whole tells us something about the intention of the photographer. We see the sculpture/painting as the most striking part of the image, but the 'Found Cat' sign is almost in the middle of the 'composition', standing out in part thanks to its very striking colour. The photographer was clearly triggered by this opposition between 'high' art, 'popular' culture, and the prosaic. Therefore, his picture leaves us little choice but to also question the photographer's juxtapositions.

Ernst: What Peter did in his text is the celebration of a highly reflective approach to visual phenomena. He alienates an amateur's photo by declaring it a work of art. This allows him to analyse its composition, mediality, motifs, and references. (It is interesting those aspects that he omits in the process, such as the iconography of the elements in the picture, e.g. the recumbent female figure.) Then he superimposes an intention of the photographer, to avert something that turned him on. Very sophisticated, indeed.

I am tempted to undermine this strategy. After all, the photo is documentary – and not a work of art. We see a typical Underground exit, probably near a museum. On the tiles an image of a Moore art piece: presumably advertising for the nearby museum and at the same time embellishing the exit. The workmen probably screwed the railing into it later, disrespectful and ignorant of art. This breach of taboo makes it possible to make Moore a cat-finder. Graffiti would then be expected.

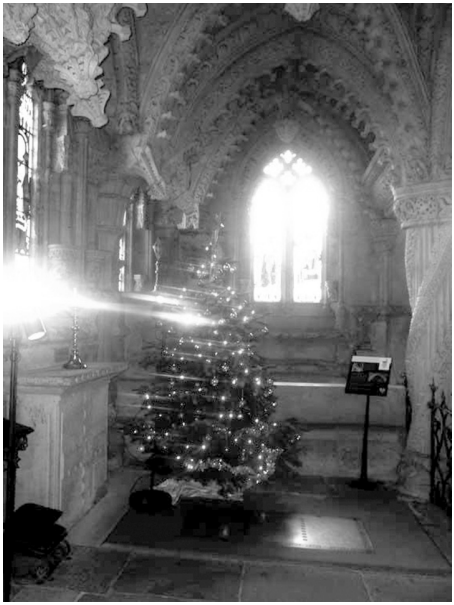
This context for the painting reveals the simple banality and at the same time the tristesse of art representation in public spaces. What makes the picture interesting nevertheless is that the way Moore's work is perceived by passers-by hurrying to the Underground is probably very similar to the way originals are perceived in a museum. The inscription "Henry Moore" in the upper right-hand corner reinforces this effect: as we know from visitor research, visitors look at the sign next to the work longer than at the picture itself.

Tedi: Looking at this image for the first time involved my own process of distinguishing the 2D from the 3D, and establishing confidence in my conclusion. Brief though it was, there was a split second in which I perceived the Moore as volumetric. I think part of this impression came from an early glance at the bottom left corner of the photo, where the black paint designating the side of the sculpture's platform was indistinguishable from the black band running along the bottom of the wall. So, initially, I saw an actual platform sticking out from the wall. My understanding changed as I looked to the right and observed the spatial relationship between the grey platform front and the black strip. The linear alignment of the wall tiles and grouting supported this latter observation; they wouldn't appear so linear were they part of the sculpture's curvy surface. I subsequently noticed the overhead lights and their glimmer on the black rail, corroborating my growing suspicion that there was in fact no sculpture.

This experience, at most a couple of seconds, tickled me. I caught myself in the process of perceiving my own perceiving process; a humorous and eye-opening experience. Who knows what commuters see as they walk this corridor? But, isn't there something meaningful in offering Tube-goers a chance to experience their own experience, to smile and laugh to or at themselves and/or to ponder *how they know* what they are *certain they know* for the next couple of blocks?

Lode: Thank you for your reactions to my photo, Peter, Ernst, and Tedi. Your responses cover a lot of possible perspectives on one and the same image, and also offer three different ways to look at this one image. Inspired by what is depicted here, it is interesting to peel back the different layers of the image, an image that mixes 2D and 3D in such a way that it might even function as a trompe l'oeil painting for just a moment. At the same time the image is also clearly part of the big city life in London. It is a painting on the wall of an Underground station, where people rush by every hour of the day on their way to work, to the shop or, perhaps, to the museum. The difference between the uneven and rough surface on which this painting is executed and the clean museum room where the real work by Moore can be seen (Tate Britain, just a few blocks away from where this picture was taken) could not be any bigger. With the fluorescent light fixture above it, at the top of the picture, the scene can probably best be described, as Ernst does, with the word 'tristesse'. Only the fact that a lost cat has been found and that someone made the effort to put up a poster to find the owner might brighten up this dreary scene.

But that is not the reason why I took this photo on an early January morning in 2020. I took the photo because I was



Picture 7. Rosslyn Chapel, Midlothian, Scotland (Photo: Peter Carpreau)

surprised by the fact that, like cats, references to art can be found anywhere, also in places where one would not expect them. So, I was indeed triggered, as Peter suggests, by some kind of opposition or strange juxtaposition that grabbed my attention (art/tube, sculpture/cat). Although quickly glancing at this painting is in no way to be compared with a real museum experience, it nevertheless might, as Tedi says, open the eyes of the commuters, reminding them that the next thing of beauty might be just around the corner.

Ernst: Not a good photo. The backlight. Clearly the worst photo of Peter's suggestions. And yet I chose it. The light dazzles: A spotlight on the left, daylight through the window. It is unpleasant to look at, repellent. Against this light a room bathed in darkness – like a cave. A room on a human scale. Hardly noticeable that it is fantastically and exuberantly decorated. The candles on the Christmas tree glow gently, the stone loses its hardness. In the room, no human being; I can enter even if the light dazzles me. Kitschy memories: Christmas,

childhood, family, magic spaces of the imagination in a dark night.

But why did I choose this photo for a text on visual literacy? For me, the picture is more than an individual memory, it symbolizes rather a collective experience: the often painful crossing of a border, the entering into another space, into which I can immerse myself, after overcoming the glare. This reminds me of initiation; thus I chose this photo. I understand initiation is a 'rite of passage' marking a process of transformation in which the initiate is 'reborn' into a new role or state of consciousness.

Is the approach to a work of art not quite similar? As a 'visually literate person' I have to overcome the border, the blinding, the rejecting, the threshold, in order to immerse myself in the work. This is a physical experience where visual literacy has a place, but it is not enough.

Tedi: The room in the image is 'like a cave', conjuring Plato's Cave and the inherent linkage between idiosyncrasies of perception and reality. For me, Ernst's reference to a "rite of passage" that transforms an individual "into a new role or state of consciousness" points to the process of incorporating another's perceptions/reality into one's own. To broaden one's perspectives in this way, one must "overcome the border, the blinding, the rejecting, the threshold, in order to immerse [oneself] in the work".

When broadening perspectives, one might conceive of a "border" separating one's own and another's reality, creating an antagonistic divide that may catalyse a protective "blindness" to the latter. This blindness hinders consideration of the alternate perception/reality, leading to the "rejecting" of it. Overcoming these obstacles requires a certain magnitude of effort to facilitate the "painful crossing" of the border ("threshold") into that "new role or state of consciousness".

Ernst concludes that "visual literacy has a place" in this endergonic (energy-absorbing) process, "but it is not enough". The term "literacy" references *abilities*, which are often based on (context-specific) knowledge/understanding. He characterizes this process as a "physical experience", positing the insufficiency of knowledge/understanding derived solely from cognition without corporeal processing to carry any individual across the transformative threshold.

I wonder about the merits of (visual/perceptual) literacy education that is grounded in cultivation of *self-literacy* – an understanding of how we as humans and individuals process our experiences into knowledge/understanding. Might self-literacy enable navigation across thresholds that separate our own reality and that of *any* other?

Lode: In my opinion, the answer to your last question is yes, Tedi. One must have insight into the perception process in

order to experience that one's own reality is not equal to another person's reality. Visual literacy is therefore certainly more than a physical activity, it is also a cognitive process that is influenced by both personal memories (kitschy or not) and broader processes of enculturation. So, when we see a Christmas tree, we inadvertently take a dive into our own childhood memories, but the meaning also depends on what our Western society has made of that holiday (a celebration of consumer capitalism). In other words, a Christmas tree is never just a Christmas tree. And through attributing meaning to the image, we also develop a sense of self. This self-literacy is, to me, an important aspect of visual literacy. It refers to the moment when a personal preference or culturally shaped taste or habit turns into an educated understanding of what we see and why we see what we see. This moment of questioning yourself is sometimes painful, of course, like staring into a bright light. And like all moments of initiation, it might be preceded by some hesitation, it does after all take some courage to step into a cave like this. But the result is worth the effort: a new form of seeing that is more detached and contemplative, or as Alva Noë calls it, 'aesthetic seeing' (2015).

Peter: When I took this picture at Rosslyn Chapel, my first concern was the contrast between the marvellous architecture of the chapel and the banality of the Christmas tree. Or how an almost mythical place can be demystified by something as vulgar as a Christmas tree and all the commercial and kitsch connotations that come with it. One must also admit that the mystique of the chapel is also enhanced by popular culture. So, that created an interesting tension.

In the discussion above, other elements are associated with this picture. A first and very important distinction is the fact that I, as the photographer, was physically present in the room, whereas Lode, Ernst, and Tedi are seeing it through a dreadful photograph. Curiously enough, it is exactly this horrid image that sparks the discussion about the physical aspect of visual literacy. Ernst talks about overcoming a boundary in order to be able to get immersed in the image. Ernst describes this as a 'physical experience'. Tedi turns this idea towards the intersubjective space. Or the elegant idea that one must understand one's personal perceptual experience in order to understand the reality of the other. Lode links this understanding of a personal perceptual experience to the understanding of the construction of the self, partly from memories, partly from broader processes of enculturation. And it is always difficult to scrutinize one's self honestly.

The most remarkable feature of the discussion, for me that is, is the element of 'pain'. 'Pain' is used in different ways, from emotional unease to physical pain.

It brings a notion of embodiment to the table. The ideas of Merleau-Ponty are still very relevant today. The mention of Alva Noë by Lode is a good example. Noë takes a stand against the approach that only focuses on the brain and not on the rest of the body.

Conclusion

The previous models of visual literacy, addressed in the introduction, assume too much that there is the visitor (as a subject) who has to become "literate", and that the works of art (as objects) provide the occasion for this. However, this view does not do justice to a more complex interaction between work and viewer. We propose this latter resonant relationship here as the primary goal of education in a museum.

In educational processes (thinking of e.g. an inattentive school class full of pubescent kids) this is, of course, difficult to achieve. To convince those kids requires metacognition, which could be achieved by observing others in the museum. The students will relate themselves to these others automatically. In this way the perspectives multiply and seeing becomes creation.

To come back to the concept of visual literacy, we understand it as one channel through which we pursue "resonant relationships" – with people, objects, art works, our environment. All agents in such relationships reciprocally impact on one another, such that each leaves in some way changed relative to when they entered the encounter. Fundamental to this notion of resonance is that it cannot be forced. An *unwillingness* or *hesitancy* (conscious or not) to engage in an encounter with an art work in a productive way is not the same as a *lack of ability* to do so or a lack of visual literacy.

Therefore, in our own quests for such resonance, and in our efforts as educators and museums to facilitate experiences of such resonance for students/visitors, we cannot convey specific recipes or protocols with which to reliably and universally reproduce it; we must instead explore, identify, and create conditions favourable to the emergence of resonance. The main condition is that curators and educators know (explicitly) what kind of interaction they want and thus which model they apply. With this in mind, the objective of this article was *not* to articulate a newly formulated model of visual literacy, but rather to articulate elements of visual literacy unaccounted for by existing models (introduced in the beginning) that may be critical to cultivating resonant experiences with art, as long as our educational goal is to instigate this experience of resonance.

The fundamental question at hand is how to deal with the uncertainty that often arises during encounters with art, and how museums can support visitors in productive engagement with these

experiences. Our approach to addressing this question offers an understanding of what visual literacy (in museums) could be: an exploration of perspectives and understandings the nature of which is dependent upon both the *context* in which it occurs and the *characteristic features* of those participating.

Retrospective analysis of the four image-inspired conversations found above reveals (at least) four elements critical to the concept of visual literacy that remain to date largely unaddressed. These elements consider visual literacy as…

(1) … a product of the constructive/creative act of seeing;
(2) … informed by embodied experience;
(3) … reflected through metacognition;
(4) … acknowledging an encounter between two active agencies (that of the art work and that of the observer).

As reflected in the conversations presented here, each of these elements can be examined and understood from the perspective of different disciplines that, when interwoven, have the potential to provide composite views of visual literacy that offer unprecedented insights into *what* it can be, *how* to practise it, and *why*.

As researchers, educators, and practitioners continue to push at the edges of the visual literacy field, expanding into a multidimensional frontier, we propose consideration of a broader view of visual literacy. Rather than a concept defined by a static set of elements articulated in a single model or theoretical framework, might there be merit to the notion of visual literacy as an instance of Wittgenstein's resemblance family (Wittgenstein, 1953), with any given manifestation of visual literacy reflecting some, but never the same set of, elements characteristic of the concept itself? Embracing such a fluid and dynamic conception of visual literacy may imbue it with enhanced resilience, allowing it to evolve continuously and iteratively. Thus, it would possess adaptive capacities that may endow it with sustained relevance and utility within and across dynamic contexts and practitioners.

We invite readers to engage their duty to carry on the conversation(s) initiated here – in classrooms, universities, and museums; to explore, identify, and develop new elements and perspectives of visual literacy that will collectively drive its continued evolution. These contributions will, on the one hand, enrich our understanding of engagements with art works (e.g. what happens in a gallery) and will, on the other hand, advance the educational goal of making the experience of resonance accessible for as many people as possible.

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