VISUAL LITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE – COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Małgorzata Wieczorek-Tomaszewska
Bibliotheca Nostra
Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. Jerzego Kukuczki w Katowicach
m.wieczorek.tomaszewska@gmail.com
ORCID 0000-0002-7493-4071

Abstract: *In the paper, the author presents the results of comparative research conducted in the academic environment of Poland and Italy, the aim of which was to diagnose the state of knowledge and skills in the field of visual competences. Visual competences are the subject of education in the form of comprehensive literacy containing both aspects of visuality – knowledge of the image as a mental object and knowledge of the form that determines the shape and structure of the record, as well as informational conditions for the creation, retrieval, dissemination, collection and use of visual content.*
The cultural perspective of the conducted research on the level of visual literacy, which determines active visual communication, is closely related to the past, the pictorial and audiovisual civilization formation of the past, and the digital media of the present time. Contemporary communication is transforming and requires information competences. Visual reading and writing skills provide tools for the understanding and contextual analysis of cultural space in a pictorial aspect. The skills are based on intellectual, aesthetic, ethical and technological qualifications acquired through literacy.

Keywords: visual literacy, visual communication, visual competence, visual culture, comparative research.

INTRODUCTION

Research on visual literacy of contemporary youth covers those aspects of individual human resources that are the result of his intellectual development and depend on socio-cultural and historical factors that shape the personality. They are a set of features of the human habitus, elements of cultural capital that is accumulated during life. Seeing is one of the forms of communication such as reading, speaking and listening that enable you to function in society. In the course of education and up-

bringing, a man uses the visual skills of understanding, interpreting and applying the information obtained in this way for personal development and social acceptance. Visual literacy, as it was analyzed, is a comprehensive set of culturally dependent attitudes and behaviors, it is part of our visual knowledge that determines cognition and enables effective communication. The research is part of the wide current of popular contemporary debate on the quality of image culture, its impact on the level of participation in social life and the educational possibilities of targeting visual activities. They are an analysis of cultural dispositions in relation to traditional and modern forms of imaging.

The established research program was carried out on the basis of research analyzes: exploration, description and explanation of the causes of variability, and its aim is to determine the scope and quality of the phenomenon of communication in the sphere of symbolic communication through art. The results of the comparative research conducted in the academic environment of Poland and Italy are used to define the priorities of visual literacy teaching as an element of general knowledge, which enables understanding and contextual analysis of the visual space of contemporary culture and, in practice, effective information management (Wieczorek-Tomaszewska, 2014). The main implication resulting from the research is educational needs in the field of visual literacy education, relating to the transformations of contemporary information culture and its impact on the shaping of image culture and the educational process. Visual competences in this area are determined by the ability to recognize the forms of image messages and creativity in their application, combined with the ability to create information structures.

The state of research

In contemporary culture, there is a belief that the word is the primary carrier of content and intellectual values. The fact that the users of information were attached to the word meant that visual literacy as a research discipline could not achieve a rank adequate to its abilities for a long time. The term visual literacy in the context of visual knowledge was first used in 1969 by John Debes – the co-founder of the International Association of Visual and the creator of the definition – and defined the stock of basic skills and knowledge relating to the influenza of human visual competences that can develop through vision while integrating other sensory experiences.

Another aspect of contemporary visuality is visual communication, which in 1973 became the subject of analysis by D. A. Dondis. It enables the transfer of information by means of various media (images, press, books, posters, television, the Internet, etc.). The omnipresence of the image we witness today is based on visual forms of communication, such as illustration, photography, infographic, typography, animation or film, which are designed in such a way – according to artistic, aesthetic and, above all, functional principles – that they properly influence the recipient. DA Dondis' attention to the principles of constructing images, explaining the relationship between forms, the meaning of color and the semiotics of utterances and the theory of perception made it possible to look at the image as a work, which, if properly de-

signed, can be an alternative to the word, and the recognition of structures that build picture can be comparable with learning a language.

A critical position in relation to the metaphorical ambiguity of the image and the role of the visual language in conveying information was taken by M. F. Cassidy and J. Q. Knowlton in *A Visual Literacy: A Failed Metaphor?*, triggering a discussion about the legitimacy of creating a research area for the interpretation of visual forms that cannot be analyzed by definition (Cassidy& Knowlton, 1993). The polemic caused by this text is still the source of numerous statements illustrating dualism in relation to the problem of contemporary visuality, visual communication, image culture and visual culture. On the one hand, the image is defined as an independent form of expression subject to formal, iconographic and iconological analysis, according to the methodology derived from the scientific history of art; on the other hand, the role of visual representation is defined as subordinate to verbal and textual statements, fulfilling the role of complementary sense and meaning transmission. It should be emphasized that the educational meaning of visual literacy combines these two interpretative approaches, using on the one hand the cognitive potential of the image and the possibilities of iconological, semiological and informational interpretation, and on the other hand the complementarity of the visual form in relation to the text. The combination of both research attitudes allows for the practical application of visual literacy in the design of information and educational tools, e-learning and blended learning courses for the needs of current education. Today, visual literacy is the basic element of hybrid models and innovative methods of education (Pater-Ejgierd, 2010). The requirements for raising the level of visual literacy necessary to receive messages posted on the web have been defined by a set of competences in the document *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Visual, 2011).

Visual literacy research in educational environments (IVLA) shows the effectiveness of combining different methods of using the image. Currently, M. Wilkowski in *Introduction to digital history* (2012) draws attention to the difference in the perception of textual and visual information, which constructs the reception of written text on the basis of data ordering and a critical analysis of its elements. They are combined into linear sequences (sentences) focused primarily on facts – unlike the image interpreted with the help of context and analogy, based on the synthesis of the totality of knowledge, supported by a network of connections, subordinated to the structure of the statement (form).

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The conducted research was aimed at determining the scope and quality of the phenomenon of communication in the sphere of symbolic communication through art. They included the stage of: exploration, description and explaining the causes of variability. The results of comparative research conducted in the academic environment of Poland and Italy were to be used in defining the priorities of visual literacy teaching as an element of general knowledge, which enables the understanding and contextual analysis of the visual space of contemporary culture and, in practice, will enable effective information management.

The descriptive research was to answer the following questions: What?, When, Where and How?

The exploration of the social world from the level of understanding symbolic messages allows you to collect information about the scale of the phenomenon. The research covered communities at the level of national group divisions; comparative methods were applied to them, which enabled them to create, on the basis of differences and similarities, an image of the world perceived through symbolic communication, based on images decoded with images.

The attitude of societies to the world of images observed in the context of socio-historical development is the basis for determining the usefulness of symbolic communication today. The aim of descriptive research in this field will be to indicate the degree of connections between the way of perceiving reality through art, resulting from evolutionary and historical continuity, and the contemporary, postmodern character of social communication. In the exploration part, the so-called Aesthetic (Morawski, 1988) invariants that have shaped the way of thinking about art over the centuries, supported by research in related scientific fields, such as cultural history, art history, aesthetics, philosophy and anthropology.

The explanatory research included in the work was aimed at finding an answer to the question: why? – there are observed regularities and what are their consequences for the symbolic interaction determined in this case by art, consisting in the mutual, contextual adjustment of its participants, interpreting meanings and reading intentions (Kmita, 1982). In a broader, intercultural approach, this means comparative research on territorially and nationally diverse populations, in communication of which there may be barriers such as ethnocentrism, prejudices, stereotypes and language. Answers to these questions could be obtained after defining the attitudes of social communication participants in the context of dependent variables in the questionnaire interviews and interpreting them on the basis of knowledge about culture and cultural communication. The main aim of the research was to understand and compare the phenomenon of communication in the area of virtual communication by young people from Poland and Italy.

The most important research goals are presented in Table 1.

Detailed problems are included in the following questions:

What image is in your life? In what situation would you like to get a painting? How do you perceive the socio-cultural reality in the context of the image culture? Can the religious image provoke reactions of transcendence? Does the image shape attitudes? What is the educational function of an image? Do works of art transfer national or universal values? What is the social knowledge of creating art collections?

The operationalization of the presented issues in the field of visual literacy, which entered the contemporary communication space of new media, subjected empirical control to the perception of the image – the information relay – shaped by the traditional system, based on ontological and epistemological foundations, which is part of today's times. The overriding assumption of the research has become the identification of contemporary phenomena, including the formation of a new way of perceiving various methods of visual presentation.

Operationalization of factors and changes

1. Environmental exploration covering three generations	**2.** Study of the respondents' aesthetic dispositions (model of aesthetic experience (Leder and other, 2004):
the grandparents / of the parents / of the children	pictorial literacy skills
3. Ways of perceiving reality: psychological aspect anthropological aspect informative aspect	**4.** Researching attitudes based on the factors of choosing to own a work of art: fascination / interests creative snobbery / reflexive-aesthetic negation
5. Hierarchy of the image function in the mediated perception of reality: mirror image / function expression / function cognitive and educational function	**6.** Determination of the impact of the transgression function on a three-point scale: domination of religious experiences / reflective nature / realistic nature
7. The influence of the image in shaping attitudes and building models of behavior. Research based on: tolerance / sense of humor solving the conflict / Conservatism an atmosphere of approval	**8.** Checking the scope of understanding the educational function of the image defined by: values / knowledge / persuasion/indoctrination
9. Defining the attitude to identity in the context of cultural pluralism by its: negation (conservatism) / acceptance (pluralism)	**10.** The theory of collecting as an element of the sociology of everyday life and participation in culture. Collecting Motivations: business / prestige (fashion) / snobbery family traditions / expertise aesthetics / science

S o u r c e: own study.

The following research techniques were adopted in the diagnostic procedure: For quantitative research: questionnaire, text analysis, projection technique. For qualitative research: participant observation – research by collaborative experience. For the implementation of selected research techniques, a questionnaire and a questionnaire for the projection technique were used (Pilch, 1995; Babbie, 2006).

The survey questions were asked in order to identify mentally in the context of historical, social and cultural changes and the level of participation in visual culture in

the contexts of social life, at home, at school, in a peer and professional environment, in church, on the road, etc. The full range of questions in Polish (Survey) and Italian (Inchiesta) is available to respondents on the website.

1.1. Environmental exploration

Exploratory research was conducted on selected groups of young Poles and Italians. The respondents commented on the paintings they had stored in their homes over the years. It is an attempt to make an initial, general recognition of the relationship between the respondents and the work of art, and to determine the degree of aesthetic awareness. This is the penetration of the social environment of the respondents in the dimensions of cultural capital in terms of their status signs, such as the number of owned works of art, their origin, motives for purchasing, collecting and inheriting.

T a b l e 2

A set of questions for environmental exploration

1. How many paintings are in your family home (you can give an approximate number)		**3.** Author (enter if you remember the author of the painting)	
2. Title (provide a title for the image or describe what it represents)		**4.** Technique:	
a. still life_e. religious scene		a. oil painting on canvas	h. collage
b. portrait	f. abstraction	b. oil painting on cardboard	i. poster
c. group portrait	g. information	c. watercolor	j. reproduction
d. genre scene	h. other	d. pastel	k. photography
		e. crayon	l. infographic
		f. drawing	m. other g. graphics
		g. graphics	n. I don't know
5. Date of creation / style / epoch (please indicate the approximate time of creation)		**6.** Since when the painting is in your home: a. from „always", b. is a picture of my grandparents c. my parents put him at home d. is home thanks to me	
7. If the painting has a story, describe it			

S o u r c e: own work.

In order to determine the respondents' aesthetic dispositions through the information provided by them about the actual state of having or not having paintings in their home, the formal quality of works (type, authorship, date of creation, topic) and the degree of visual activity of individual groups of respondents (grandparents, parents, children) in the field of image acquisition, a survey form consisting of closed questions was created (Table 2).

Visual literacy tested the respondents' knowledge analyzed in terms of their knowledge resources on the situational context of images; in this case, it referred to events and ex-

periences related to the existence of an image in a specific environment of the family home. The classification of painting according to the theme was adopted on the basis of Janusz Kębłowski's Classification of Fine Arts (Kębłowski, 1973) (cf. Table 2). The conducted analyzes involved the respondents' interpretative apparatus, in relation to the aesthetic experience, which is "a manifestation – a permanent testimony and celebration – of the life of civilization, it draws the resources of its development from it, in which it finds its final evaluation of its value" (Dewey, 1975). According to the *Model of aesthetic experience* (Belke, Leder, 2001), they are composed of previous experiences related to art (knowledge, interests, taste) resulting from interaction and social discourse. The classification and assessment procedure within visual perception uses the methods of image analysis (sensory identification, iconographic, iconological and semiological typology) in order to understand – as a result of cognitive and emotional processes.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH

The presented scope of research was developed and carried out in 2016–2017 and repeated in an electronic version in 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 in Poland and Italy. Both the first research of Polish and Italian youth, as well as the following ones, registered and revealed aspects of social life within the image culture, which aspire to be called informational behavior.

Online surveys were made available to respondents on the following websites: http://mwt.eu.interia.pl/polska.html and http://mwt.eu.interia.pl/italiano.html.

The measurements were preceded by a pilot questionnaire tested on a group of 47 people recruited from among academic youth up to 36 years of age. The consequence of this diagnosis was the specification of a set of closed and open questions, understandable to the respondents, as well as the development of a research strategy.

2.1. Characteristics of Polish research

The study, in the Polish edition, covered a group of students defined as the future elite of Poland, who, after graduation, obtain a status that enables them to exert real influence on shaping attitudes and ideas in society. The selection of the research group from the group of students was made due to the social representativeness and the cross-sectional nature of their defining personal patterns, as well as the possibility of determining their origin through mental and environmental penetration in three generations: the generation of grandparents, parents and children.

As a result of the methodological choices made, a group of 253 students of the Pedagogical University in Krakow at various fields and levels of education was explored: social and welfare pedagogy, social pedagogy, preschool and school pedagogy, social work, physical education, history, Russian language and library science and from the Jagiellonian University. in the field of European Studies.

2.2. Characteristics of Italian research

In a study in Italy, questionnaire forms were sent electronically to e-mails of students and academic staff provided by Italian universities, such as: architecture, urban plan-

ning, planning, history, contemporary history, history of medieval science, modern history, religious studies, town planning, pedagogy, medicine and others.

The study covered 48 universities in 20 Italian provinces: Arbuzzo [3], Basilicata [1], Emilia Romagna [4], Friuli Venezia Giulia [3], Calabria [3], Campagna [7], Lazio [10], Liguria [1], Marche [4], Molis [1], Piemonte [3], Puglia [5], Srdegna [2], Sicilia [4], Sydney [12], Toscana [7], Trentino Alto Adige [2], Umbria [2], Dalle d'Aosta [1], Veneto [4]. In total, 852 questionnaires were sent to Italian respondents. When designing the website form, the recommended strategies aimed at arousing the interest of the respondents were applied to obtain the maximum percentage of complete, returnable surveys. The introductory text contained the identification of the research center as well as the personalization of the survey's author's activities. Information about the type and purpose of the study was given, as well as acknowledgments for cooperation and participation in the study. As a result of the organizational and logistic activities undertaken, 132 responses were received, which is 15.5% in relation to the number of forms sent and is a greater value than the average results of received responses among the conducted online surveys of this type (5–10%). 132 people, aged 20 to 36 and studying or working in academic centers, took part in the Italian edition of the survey.

3. COMPARISON OF POLISH AND ITALIAN RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the conducted exploratory comparative studies of Polish and Italian environments, a picture emerges of two populations that are comparable in many respects. The social origin of the respondents, recorded over three generations (grandparents, parents, children), in both analyzed groups does not diverge from the moral norm in terms of the education of individual family members, initially patriarchal with the distinctive, dominant role of a man and, in subsequent stages, an emancipating woman. Also, the study of higher needs, defined by the symbolizing skills represented by the works of art, turned out to be a common need of both surveyed groups. Quantitative comparisons show a greater accumulation of cultural goods among Italian respondents and their families, with a 10% advantage over the Polish group of respondents. This advantage persists in all quantitative situations related to the so-called Basic imaging skill, i.e. the skill of visual perception involving observation, classification, typologizing and attributing images. The recorded results indicate that these skills were better mastered by Italian respondents who identify images through their authors, recognize performances, techniques of performance and are able to date images, often with style and form. They also remember situations related to images, which may indicate a more developed skill of symbolization.

The selection of the images possessed differentiates the studied environments in terms of their worldview and defines them by means of satisfying higher needs. Italians represent the realistic type in the pursuit of self-realization, reflected in the preferences for landscape, portrait, still life and genre scenes. On the other hand, the surveyed Poles indicated, next to the landscape, religious themes as the dominant images in the perception of reality, which fully reflects the world-wide diversity of Polish society. Both groups treat the possession of a work of art as a situation of social ennoblement, a manifestation of the bourgeois sense of wealth, or even a capital investment.

Unfortunately, they found it difficult to match their paintings with traditional painting techniques such as oil painting, watercolour, crayon, drawing, graphics. In the case of the Polish group of respondents, reproduction was ranked high. In Poland and Italy, the parent generation is the group that finances the purchase of works of art and at the same time influences the aesthetic choice. In Italy, parents most often buy 20th-century works, in Poland, similarly, children together with their parents choose the latest works from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, probably reacting to contemporary cultural and artistic events. Apart from parents, the young generation also influences the shaping of aesthetic preferences in Poland. In Italy, the generational message is stronger – it is family traditions and works of art owned and passed on to others that shape the sense of aesthetics.

Among the factors motivating to action, Italian respondents first declared their fascination, probably due to the common contact with works of art in their country. Nowadays, it is also justified by mass visual communication (the invasion of images on the street). Next, it is verified by interest, sometimes even snobbish, that may cause rejection of the original feeling of delight but evoke specific reflections.

Poles react less spontaneously than their Italian colleagues. First, the object must interest them, then it turns into a fascination, often conditioned by, say, creative snobbery – at this point a critical negation may appear – and finally, only at the end, just like in Italians reflection. In order to balance the above-noted consumerism of behavior, the respondents ambitiously and unanimously recognized the cognitive function as the main goal of visual perception of reality in both target groups. The cognitive processes triggered in this way construct a value-oriented knowledge structure and animate behavior.

A large differentiation occurred when defining the worldview of the respondents, verifying the earlier statements qualifying Italians as rationalists and Poles as defined equally by religion and reason. The analysis of the responses confirmed the Italian marginalization of religious needs in the context of meeting higher needs, but did not rule out reflection and romanticism in emotional behavior. Poles also distinguished reflection – an attitude of in-depth contemplation, and only secondarily, faith in mystical revelation as axioms of religious experience.

A separate research issue was the educational function, in which all respondents saw the potential of using the image to transfer knowledge. Then the responses differed, the Italians, in line with their pragmatic approach, recognized persuasion as an educational method of effective visual expression. Poles focused on the values that a simple visual message can elevate to the rank of an axiological message, e.g. regarding cultural pluralism, for which all the interviewees found a place in the visual space.

The most symptomatic research exploring the environment in terms of mentality turned out to be the hierarchy of factors that motivate collecting.

Poles, monumentally and a bit snobbish – as usual – placed prestige first. Then patriarchal – family traditions, and finally, in the third place – coupled with expertness, eruditionally conditioned – beauty. Placed in this context, at the end business, according to them, is an unjustified and unnecessary value, and perhaps even an anti-value. Italians spontaneously, in accordance with the rules of collecting and the definition of art, put beauty in the first place, reflecting the charm of a centuries-old cultural herit-

age, taken over from the Greeks – beauty. Further, they placed, family, which distinguishes traditional Italian society –. Only in the third place, resulting from the definition of the position of family did they put prestige, but based on expertise, which logically and consistently conditions business.

CONCLUSION

The summary of the research once again shows the diversification of the perception of visual reality as a synonym of the symbolic world by Italian and Polish respondents. In Italy, attitudes, opinions and actions are justified by the evolutionary continuation resulting from the direction of development of modern Italian society subject to changes and modernizing transformations. Poles do not have such eloquence and intuitive lightness in interpreting visual activities. Their perception is burdened with axiology, erudition and educational role played by the image in communication. Interpretation of contemporary visual messages, dominated by a modern form of communication, requires elementary knowledge of the principles of decoding meanings in contextual cultural areas. The visual knowledge needed to read messages, deepened axiologically and formally, may constitute the qualitative potential of modern society and image culture.

The reference to the conducted research exploring the family, professional and social circles of young Poles and Italians and verifying their qualifications of searching, organizing, interpreting, evaluating and using information are the issues of visual competences and visual knowledge. The profile of an information user functioning within the information culture and media civilization has been defined in terms of information and education.

The visuality of the studied environments, observed in everyday life situations defined by work, education and entertainment, attitude to norms, principles and values, and determined by needs and ambitions, shows the competency and personality profile of respondents in terms of visual literacy and adaptation to the observed tendency of the dominance of pictorial knowledge in contemporary information space. The results of the research showed that to a higher degree than Poles, the studied Italian youth copes with adaptation in an environment where the quality of the perception of the visual message determines the level of the communicating community. Their assessment related to skills at the first level of pictorial identification was much more correct, which later affects the iconographic interpretations of topics. It is also much easier for her to relate the interpretation of the image to a wide cultural spectrum and transfer visual content to other levels of knowledge – intuitively without having to refer to great theories, ideas and values, as was the case with Polish respondents. The Polish youth surveyed turned out to be more ambitious, setting themselves more serious goals, but not having the ability to implement them and adapt to modern living conditions. The assumption of the study was to relate dependent variables (the so-called aesthetic invariants) to various forms of imaging, ranging from works of art through various spheres of visual activity within the iconosphere.

The cross-cultural research comparisons carried out indicated among the analyzed groups mental differences in behavior, attitudes and priorities, but at the same time confirmed the common cultural basis for both national research units. Operating the same research categories and the same interpretative scale for various populations made it possible to create a uniform cultural model of the contemporary young generation, referring to the model of the future social elite, justified at the beginning of the research, predestined in the future by education and cognitive attitude to reality, to influence and shape attitudes .

In view of visual behaviors within the information culture, based on digital information and communication techniques, the surveyed young people show knowledge of new instruments of transferring knowledge in the form of images (infographics). On the basis of a comparison with the results of Internet research in terms of media and visuality, it is possible to distinguish similar behaviors indicating that the visual knowledge possessed by young people is very often used to structure information, data and concepts. When analyzing the attitudes towards innovative forms of graphic recording and the transfer of data, information and knowledge – infographics, one can get the impression that graphic motifs, more complicated in terms of visual structuring, cause interpretation chaos and disruptions in the flow of content.

Therefore, and in view of the growth and dissemination of visual methods in the creation and transmission of knowledge, both in education and in mass communication, there is a justified need to shape visual competences among the young generation, based on visual knowledge, as well as deepening the knowledge of structuralizing images .

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