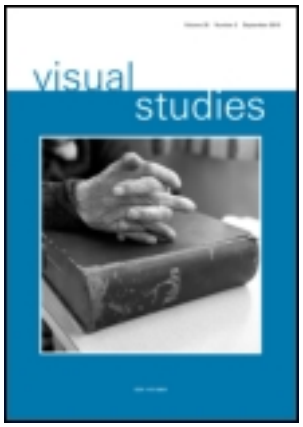

Visual Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rvst20

Visual competence: a new paradigm for studying visuals in the social sciences?

Marion G. Müller

Published online: 21 Aug 2008.

To cite this article: Marion G. Mller (2008) Visual competence: a new paradigm for studying visuals in the social sciences? , Visual Studies, 23:2, 101-112, DOI: 10.1080/14725860802276248

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725860802276248

Visual Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2, September 2008

Visual competence: a new paradigm for studying visuals in the social sciences?[1]

MARION G. MÜLLER

This introductory article provides an overview and theoretical anchor for the following contributions in this special issue. The article discusses, first, the necessity for introducing a new research paradigm – 'visual competence' – in the social sciences (anthropology, communication science, media and social psychology, political science, sociology), arguing that the actual transformations of reality triggered by processes of globalisation and digitisation require a closer scrutiny of the visual. In a second step, the new paradigm 'visual competence' is introduced, focusing on four dimensions: visual production, perception, interpretation and reception competencies. A new model, the visual competence cycle, is suggested. The article concludes with a specific application example for studying visual interpretation competence in a case study of the humanising and de-humanising effects of portraiture.

Any attempt to formulate a new paradigm in visual research is a risky endeavour. No single scholar is capable of covering this vast and eclectic field. Thus, the omissions and shortcomings in the following text are the responsibility of the author alone. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile trying to move visual research ahead, by embracing a new concept that is rooted in a social scientific approach. Reality is to the social sciences what truth is to philosophy. Reality is the basic concept from which the social sciences derive their relevant research paradigms. Social and political reality as it presents itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not only highly complex, but also highly visual in appearance. Current trends like globalisation, digitisation and the rise of electronic media have changed both the scope and the modality of human interaction and communication. All areas of social visual communication are affected by this fundamental transformation. Traditional production structures of the media are challenged by an ever-growing sophistication of visual production and dissemination technology, ranging from video to digital photography to electronic publishing, turning more and more visual consumers into visual producers. The production and global distribution of visuals, which were formerly structured by press agencies and the mass media, are more and more driven by non-expert producers and publishers who disseminate visuals independently of the media via electronic networks. Thus, the production, dissemination and communication of visuals are no longer confined to their originally intended audiences. The dissemination of visuals can no longer be controlled, either by governments or by the mass media. As demonstrated by the cartoon controversies in 2006, visuals 'travel' the globe, eliciting very different reactions in audiences for which they were not originally intended, in this case either by the Danish cartoonists or by the newspaper which commissioned the cartoons (Müller and Özcan 2007). Considering another example of a global conflict instigated by visuals – the torture scandal surrounding Abu Ghraib, the US prison in Iraq (Eisenman 2007; Zimbardo 2007) – those 'trophy shots' produced by the torturers were distributed globally, damaging the image of the United States for many years to come.

A different example of a social and political conflict related to visual perception is the 'headscarf controversy' deeply dividing laicist countries like Turkey and France, but also affecting other European countries with Muslim minorities. The controversy is anchored in the visual appearance of females in the public sphere (Göle 1996; Özcan 2008). The headscarf elicits emotional reactions both on the side of religious women who interpret the ban on the headscarf as an infringement of their right to religious self-expression, and on the side of women and men alike who fear that allowing the headscarf in public is only the first step towards an Islamist state that will institute the religious Shar'ia law, forcing women to wear headscarves in public.

As illustrated by the above examples, the new global divide of the twenty-first century seems to pin 'the West' against 'the Muslim' world. What all three ideological controversies have in common is that the conflicts surface in the form of visuals. Visual portrayal is highly contested, and no longer restricted to intended audiences. Any visual published has the potential to be disseminated to audiences in very different cultural

Marion G. Müller is Associate Professor of Mass Communication at Jacobs University Bremen, Germany and current chair of the Visual Communication Studies Division of the International Communication Association (ICA). She is interested in bridging the disciplinary gaps in visual theory and research, and organised the international symposium 'Visual Competence – Facets of a Paradigm Shift' (2007) funded by the German foundation VolkswagenStiftung.

ISSN 1472–586X printed/ISSN 1472–5878 online/08/020101-12
DOI: 10.1080/14725860802276248

contexts who interpret these de-contextualised visuals in very different ways.

Thus, the stipulated necessity for a new visual research paradigm in the social sciences is based on specific observed changes in our contemporary social and political reality that affect social and political communication structures globally. Three basic elements of this communication shift can be distinguished:

- Amateur visual productions on the rise
- Global dissemination of visuals
- De-contextualisation of visuals

As Karen Ritzenhoff illustrates in her article in this special issue, the ever-growing availability of visual technology can be interpreted both as a positive and as a negative development. However, this trend illustrates the fundamental change to which visual communication in the public sphere is currently subject. While visual production structures were once confined to professionals, and reception processes happened more or less in the private sphere, today the inverse is true – production is privatised, while dissemination is globalised. The global dissemination of visuals that were originally produced in and for a particular local, regional or national context puts the same visuals into very different contexts. This process of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation leads, in turn, to transformations of the particular meanings attributed to the visuals, because the cultural reception context differs from the original production context. Those processes of meaning transformation are difficult to study from a text-based literacy point of view. Visuals are seen, perceived and interpreted also in non-literate contexts, and it is precisely because the textual component is oftentimes missing that the global transfer of visuals is accompanied by a huge potential for misunderstanding, if not outright conflict, as in the cases mentioned above.

Since those perceived changes in communication structures and in conflict potentials are visual, an incorporation of the visual into social scientific research methodology appears to be paramount. While anthropology, sociology as well as media and communication sciences have already developed independent approaches to incorporating the visual, other social sciences like political science and social psychology have yet to realise that their theoretical and methodological tools need to be amended in order to analyse and interpret visual material (Müller 2007). To discuss both synergies and differences between the different disciplinary approaches to studying the visual, an international symposium was held at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany on 6–8 July 2007.[2] The contributions assembled in this volume reflect this fruitful interdisciplinary exchange.

What is missing so far is an overarching visual approach that unites all social sciences. To sketch such an encompassing concept is the objective of this article. Like a majority of the contributions in this special issue, the style of the article is more conceptual and less empirical. Its intention is to spark an academic debate about visual theory in the social sciences.

The following arguments are structured into two major sections. The first part is theoretical; it will provide an overview of the new concept 'visual competence', its origin, scope and intention, and how this approach could function as a research paradigm in the future. In the second part, the specific meaning of one dimension of visual competence – visual interpretation competence – will be illustrated with visual examples in order to make the potential application of the visual competence paradigm palpable for social scientific research.

FROM VISUAL LITERACY TO VISUAL COMPETENCE

Arguably, the field 'visual literacy and media literacy' already covers questions relating to visual competencies by audiences of different age and gender. So why is a new paradigm necessary at all? While this question is already covered in depth by Michael Griffin's contribution in this volume, it is also apparent that both concepts, visual literacy as well as media literacy, are rooted in the humanities – in pedagogy, language studies and semiotics in particular (see e.g. Dondis 1973; Braden and Hortin 1982; Curtiss 1987; Messaris 1994, 1998; Doelker 1997; Hobbs 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006; Hobbs and Frost 2003; Siber 2005; Messaris and Moriarty 2005; Seppänen 2006). In this context, textual literacy is often taken as a pattern that is applied to visuals, thereby confounding the differences in modality, structure and logic between textual and visual communication. Certainly, media literacy in general, and visual literacy in particular, is a necessary corollary of visual competence, but the 'literacy approach' misses out on many aspects of visuals that the new paradigm covers. The limitations of treating visuals with a textual approach are well established, and in the field of linguistics and semiotics the 'cure' is multi-modality, a concept discussed in Theo van Leeuwen's article in this special issue. As much as the concept of multi-modality can be interpreted as a further development of the media

literacy approach, 'visual competence' could be termed a social scientific response to the questions raised by visual literacy research since the 1980s. While 'visual literacy' has an important applied objective – namely, to educate people, and particularly younger generations, thereby raising the level of visual literacy – 'visual competence' is primarily a paradigm for conducting basic research. Visual literacy has been defined as 'the viewer's awareness of the conventions through which the meanings of visual images are created' (Messaris and Moriarty 2005, 481). While meaning attribution, or visual interpretation competence, is a crucial element of the visual competence paradigm, the concept itself is more encompassing.

WHAT IS VISUAL COMPETENCE?

'Visual competence' is a paradigm for basic research on the production, distribution, perception, interpretation and reception of visuals, aimed at understanding visual communication processes in different contemporary social, cultural and political contexts. The above-mentioned visual interpretation competence is just one of four intertwined dimensions (see Figure 1):

1. Visual production competence
2. Visual perception competence
3. Visual interpretation competence
4. Visual reception competence

Visual production competence relates to any form of visual production – from artistic to amateur or private visual productions, from commercial to scientific, from journalistic to political production of visuals (Müller 2003, 22). The study of visual production competence implies that diverse production contexts follow different visual production logics. For example, the production of an artwork happens under different conditions from the production of a news magazine. While for the artist – ideally – her or his individual production skill, experience, as well as the individual expectations towards the artwork count; for a press photographer, professional skills are only one element. The expectations of the news magazine's editor, editorial selection processes, and competition from other press photographers heavily influence the production process. Researching visual production competence entails investigating the particularities as well as the different types of visual production contexts.

Visual perception competence involves questions relating to the individuals' as well as groups' competencies to see and explore visuals. Age, gender, experience, and social as well as cultural factors influence the way in which visuals are perceived. Psychological perception research, as elaborated in the article by Arvid Kappas and Bettina Olk in this issue, points out that the same visual is seen and perceived differently. How different individuals as well as groups or whole cultures attribute meaning to the perceived visuals is an even more complex question that is explored by research on visual interpretation

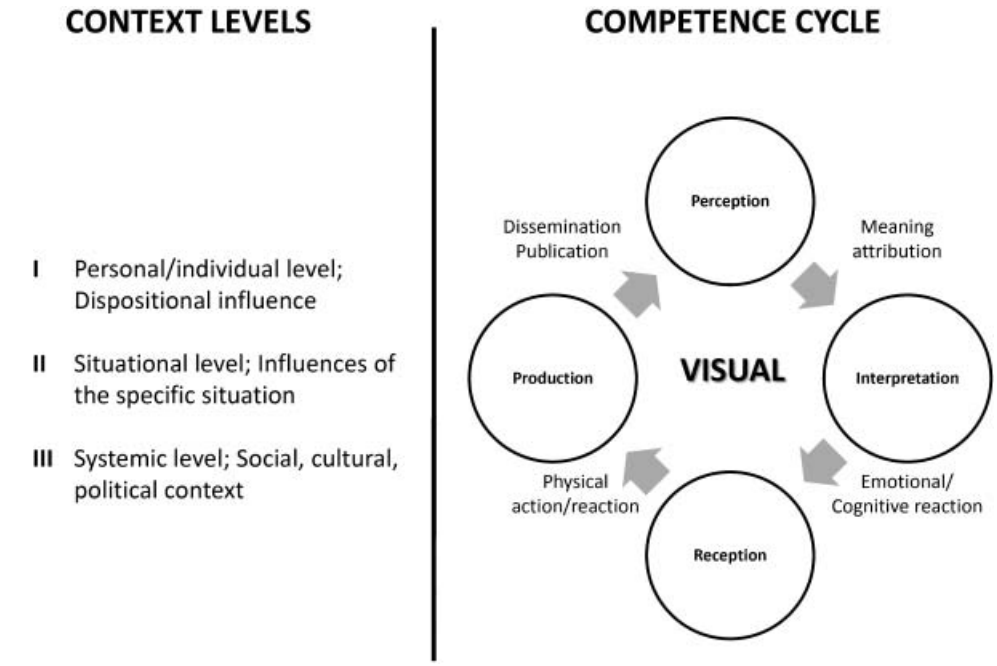

FIGURE 1. Visual competence cycle.

competence. Last but not least, visual reception competence focuses on cognitive and emotional reactions (Kappas and Müller 2006) that might, in some cases, motivate people to physically take action with, for or against the perceived visuals.

Figure 1 is influenced by three typological predecessors focused on interpretation as a method. First, the art historian Erwin Panofsky (1982), who already in the 1930s devised a three-dimensional interpretation scheme for the analysis of visual artwork. Second, Sol Worth and Larry Gross's symbolic communication strategies of interpreting visual encounters with the world. Worth and Gross (1974) differentiate between three different types of meaning of sign-events: existential, ambiguous and symbolic meanings, and two types of strategies, either attribution or communicational inference. The third influence on the visual competence cycle in Figure 1 relates to the 'background' of the cycle, presenting complex contexts that shape and influence the four visual competencies: social psychologist Philip Zimbardo's differentiation between individual or dispositional, situational and systemic forces that determine social behaviour (Zimbardo 2007).

Visual production, perception, interpretation and reception competencies are connected in a cycle. The cycle itself unfolds its dynamic not in a vacuum, but in a social, political and cultural context that is shaped by three factors: individual or dispositional factors, shaping, for example, the production competencies of a particular artist, photographer, television director; situational factors that determine the production, perception, interpretation and reception competencies; and systemic factors that predispose certain production, perception, interpretation and reception contexts.

Visuals are produced, using particular skills. Following their production, processes of dissemination and publication lead to people perceiving those visuals, to which they then automatically attribute or infer particular meanings shaped by dispositional, situational and systemic influences, leading to cognitive and emotional reactions, which in turn might motivate the beholders to take actions or to react to the perceived and interpreted visuals. One of those actions might be to produce further visuals. Thus, the cycle is coming to a close, triggering again visual production, perception, interpretation and perception competencies.

The articles in this issue connect in different ways to those four dimensions of visual competence. Karen Ritzenhoff's contribution focuses on the transformation in visual production competence. Arvid Kappas and Bettina Olk's article illustrates potential access points to studying visual perception and reception processes. Luc Pauwels provides a new model of how visual competence can be applied in processes of scientific knowledge building and knowledge dissemination, touching upon both visual production and interpretation competencies. Both Michael Griffin's and Theo van Leeuwen's contributions are conceptual and try to position the new paradigm in the context of already established concepts like media literacy and multi-modality research. The second part of this article will give particular examples relating to visual production and interpretation competencies.

As encompassing as this field appears at first glance, the social sciences do have a particular role as well as a particular interest in this multi-disciplinary endeavour. Not only does the topic require a methodological approach that deals well with contemporary social problems and issues, but, conversely, the study of reality, being the focus of all social scientific disciplines, necessitates a closer scrutiny of the visual. This focus on contemporary phenomena as well as the applied problem-oriented approach places visual competence at the heart of the social sciences.

On a phenomenological level, both the production and the reception patterns of visuals have undergone considerable change in the twentieth century. Globalisation and digitisation have affected all communication patterns, transcending media types and national borders as well as diverse publics. This widening of scope urges the social sciences (communication science, sociology, political science, social and media psychology, anthropology) to develop theories and methodological tools to cope with the challenges of an ever more visual world that is no longer self-explanatory. The technological ease with which cultural boundaries can be crossed does not necessarily mean that the original, intended meanings travel so well. On the contrary – the same visuals elicit very different meaning attributions in different social, political and cultural contexts. In order to capture the whole process of visual communication – from production to distribution to perception, meaning attribution and emotional reactions – the collaboration of all social scientific disciplines appears to be necessary. This article argues that the concept 'visual competence', as defined below, offers the chance to bridge those disciplinary traditions and to provide a common paradigm to study visuals, uniting the particular strengths of the above-mentioned social scientific disciplines.

Both anthropology (Collier 1967; Banks and Morphy 1997; Belting 2001; Banks 2001; Pink 2003) and sociology (Becker 1974; Henny 1986; Pauwels 2000; Ludes 2005) have developed specific visual methods and research approaches that put the visual at the centre stage of research. Visual anthropology, visual sociology and visual communication are established sub-fields of their general disciplines, with affiliate organisations and genuine publications (for an overview, see Müller 2007, 33–4). For political science and social psychology this is not the case. In political science, individual researchers have embarked onto 'visual territory' (Baringhorst 1996, 1997, 2000; Müller 1997, 2001, 2003, 2004; Arnold, Fuhrmeister, and Schiller 1998; Schiller 1998, 2002; Hofmann 1999, 2004; Knieper and Müller 2004; Drechsel 2005; Müller and Özcan 2007), but visuals are not central to the discipline, despite the fact that many politically relevant fields like political campaigning and foreign policy do have a visual component. For social psychologists, visuals can be a certain type of stimulus material, but hardly the topic of research. Yet, for media psychologists (e.g. Bente and Vorderer 1997; Frey 1999; Zillmann, Gibson, and Sargent 1999; Schwab, Unz, and Winterhoff-Spurk 2001, 2005; Zillmann, Knobloch, and Yu 2001), who do study image material, the major category of scientific inquiry is not the visual, but the 'nonverbal' or 'media' in general, and particularly the interaction between media's complex multimodal communication contents and its users and recipients. It is the integration of these various social scientific approaches that contributes towards the strength of the new concept 'visual competence'.

The term itself was first used in the context of media pedagogy, by the Swiss author Christian Doelker (1997), and then applied to the particular use of media pedagogy at an art academy by the German art historian Hans Dieter Huber (Huber, Lockemann, and Scheibel 2002). Both authors use the term in its narrow sense of pertaining to the design and deciphering of material images, or pictures. 'Bildkompetenz' (image competence – see also Haake et al. 2003; Hecht 2003; Sachs-Hombach 2003) has been the dominant term in this respect. Visual competence is the more encompassing concept by comparison with image competence. The former covers not only all aspects related to the material image, but also the cognitive, emotional and receptive processes related to visual communication (see Figure 1).

In 2004, the concept 'Visuelle Kompetenz' was taken up by a research group at Jacobs University Bremen, and transferred into English, as well as extended to cover a more theoretical and multidisciplinary field, further developing the concept, encompassing not only the social sciences, but extending it to the humanities and incorporating art history and language and media studies, as well as cognitive psychology, neuroscience and information visualisation.

Competence is not considered a static skill, but a universal potential of humans that unfolds in a context of socialisation, acculturation and tradition. Visual competence needs to be scrutinised as a holistic process in all of its dimensions, from visual perception to the attribution of meaning and interpretation, including processes of visual production and visuals as the basis for human communication and interaction. The essential issue at hand is the understanding of the functional aspects of the process of visual competence in current societies. Visual competence, as defined by Jacobs University's research group, is subdivided into four intertwined, but still distinct competencies: perceptual competence, decoding and interpretation competence, production competence, and intra- as well as intercultural perception competence.

It is important to stress that the term 'competence' is not considered as a static entity, not as something that a person, a group of people, a society or a culture either possesses or does not possess. 'Competence' is a dynamic measure that changes over time and space. The level of visual competence as well as the characteristic type of competency is influenced by the respective social, political, communication and cultural context in which this human potential either unfolds or is infringed in terms of limitations set by the respective context. The underlying, but hitherto unproven assumption is that an open-minded democratic environment in which children, but also adults, are free to express themselves both verbally as well as visually is promoting a high level of visual competence, while, for example in a religiously fundamentalist and iconophobic context the skills of visual production and critical analysis are not trained, and thus are underdeveloped.

But even under free and democratic conditions, visual competence cannot be taken for granted. The definition of visual competence includes certain modes of 'seeing and perceiving', but also the competency of critical analysis and interpretation. To be visually competent does not just mean to 'recognise' the depiction, but to put this visual into context, and to grasp the hidden meaning levels as well as to assess the type of visual and its production and reception context. The visual scholar

Robert L. Craig was not dramatising the visual incompetence of communication students when stating:

> One of the most important skills of humankind is visual communication. It is 'pre-historical'; we all know about Native American image making and European cave paintings. Written communication with alphabets and characters is a comparatively young invention.
>
> Yet, in school the pupils are educated in reading and writing, mainly focusing on textual literacy. The general public is left to intuitively learn visual literacy. Today, we constantly hear how students in the post-modern era are increasingly visual. This is nonsense. While these students have been born into a period when highly advanced technology for creating the most sophisticated visual imagery is readily available, it does not follow that they have a critical understanding of this imagery. My experience is that students and the public are, in fact, almost totally visually illiterate when it comes to analysing visual messages. This is not to say that they don't understand the messages. To the contrary, they quickly understand the sense of these messages. But if you ask them to explain how they interpret visual messages by outlining the codes they've accessed and inferences they've made in the process of communication, they show little categorical or critical understanding. Students simply are not taught to take apart visual messages and to analyse them. Instead, we read visual messages quickly and without a lot of thought. (Craig 2000, cited in Müller 2003, 178–9)

To illustrate the importance of critical meaning attribution, or visual interpretation competence, the example of portraiture and its relation to empathy with the depicted is explored.

VISUAL INTERPRETATION COMPETENCE: HUMANISING AND DE-HUMANISING PORTRAITS

The concept of visual interpretation competence owes much to the distinction in visual meaning attribution drawn by two pioneers of visual communication research – Sol Worth and Larry Gross (1974; see also Griffin 2001). Michael Griffin's contribution in this issue will refer in more detail to their theory of different signs and different modes of meaning attribution.

The general theme of the visual examples in Figures 2–11 is portraiture. The depiction of a human being with the intention to show the visual characteristics of an individual at a given time points already to the complexity of researching visual competence. Sociology and communication studies use a different set of key categories than psychology. While from a psychological point of view the individual – both as the producer of a visual and the recipient – is key, for sociology, society as a whole is the major analytical frame in which visual artefacts are analysed. Adding to this complex scale of analysis – from the individual to society – is the important question of whether a visual is approached from a production perspective or rather from a perception, interpretation or reception perspective. The research questions with which the visual material is confronted differ, as does the methodological framework and research design, depending whether production, perception, interpretation or reception is the focal point of research. The motif, content, medium and style of the visual make a huge difference. Is the researched visual a photograph or a drawing? Are the visuals under consideration 'moving images', and the pictures printed in an article just screen shots of television or other film material? Sculptures, architecture, graphic design, even posters and graffiti are all visuals, since they are human expressions in visual form.

In his seminal work on 'Portraiture' the art historian Richard Brilliant (1991, 10) describes the complex interaction between portraits as artefacts and social life in the following way: 'Portraits exist at the interface between art and social life and the pressure to conform to social norms enters into their composition because both the artist and the subject are enmeshed in the value system of their society'.

Visuals are thus considered to be sources of inquiry and analysis. In a social scientific context – and this is the major focus of this article – visuals are sources of information on the larger social, political, cultural and communication context. Treated as such, Figure 2 shows a professional photograph of the author of this article. In its colour version this photograph also features on the website of the university where the author is employed as professor of mass communication. From a production perspective, the hired professional photographer intended to create a visual that is appealing to the university's corporate design, particularly since the photographer was paid for by the department of corporate communication.

The intention was to portray the depicted professor in a favourable manner that appeals to potential students and donors alike. The image has thus an advertising purpose – the subject smiles into the camera and looks

FIGURE 2. Photograph of the author. © Marion G. Müller, IUB/Jacobs University Bremen, 2005.

FIGURE 3. Portrait of the author.

directly at the beholder. The light background positively contrasts with the dark colours of hair and clothing and creates an 'enlightened' ambience. This public portrayal contrasts with the private depiction of the same person in Figure 3. This portrait was drawn by a child. The female subject is again smiling and faces the beholder directly. By comparison with the official photograph, the drawing also shows the upper part of the body and the arms of the woman. The hairstyle on the drawing is different – the long black hair just hanging to the right side of the head. The left ear is visible both on the drawing and on the photograph, but as opposed to the machine-made image of Figure 2, the drawing in Figure 3 displays also the ear in a frontal perspective, thus giving the drawing an 'unrealistic' twist by comparison with the photograph. Additionally, in the drawing both earrings are visible while in the photograph just the left one can be seen. The face in the drawing is dominated by a pair of glasses. What appears, at first glance, like a 'drawing mistake' – eyelashes that are not connected to the eyelid, but to the glasses, turns out to be a characteristic pattern of the glasses – black and white 'rays' on the rim of the glass frame that were taken up by the child drawing the portrait.

Obviously this six-year-old girl has quite a high production competence, despite the fact that the child does not use an all 'natural', realistic perspective. The picture carries across an emotional relationship between the portraying child and the portrayed woman – the daughter portraying her mother, an emotional relation not necessarily associated with the comparatively 'slick' photograph of the same person.

The attitude and relationship towards the portrayed also becomes apparent in the following drawings (Figures 4–8) – again portraits of the author of this article, made at the occasion of a public lecture on portraiture by the audience. The children's drawing in Figure 4 and the portrait below (Figure 5) depict the woman in a favourable manner, while the drawings in Figures 6–7 are less favourable; in particular, the anonymous creator of Figure 7 displays difficulties in attributing a facial expression to the portrayed person. The face appears bloated, the head 'propped up' on the neck, rather more like a puppet than a human figure. While the production competence of the creator of Figure 5 is rather high – all proportions appear in the right dimensions, and the portrayed appears like a human being, the production competence in Figure 7 appears rather low – apparently an untrained lay person, who has not drawn since school, and maybe never drew a portrait before. The creator of Figure 7 is not a singular exception of low visual production competence, but rather characteristic for the average population, members of which, after leaving school, are not further trained in the manual production of visuals.

The portraits on the top and on the bottom right have the quality of caricatures, exaggerating certain features, using abstraction as a tool to poke fun – in a positive sense – both at the portrayed and at the 'awkward' situation of drawing a person in public, knowing (and agreeing) that their products will be displayed and

FIGURE 4.

FIGURE 5.

FIGURE 6.

FIGURE 7.

FIGURE 8.

FIGURE 9. From the website of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union) (http://www.cdu.de/politikaz/integration.php).

published later on. The circumstances and conditions under which visual material is produced have a huge impact on the meanings those visuals have. For a comprehensive understanding of visual competence it is thus important to take the production and reception contexts into consideration.

A very different treatment of female portraits can be observed in Figures 9–11. Figure 9 shows an online press photograph from the official website of the ruling German conservative party, the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union). The photograph in landscape format has an interesting composition, divided into two halves: two male and one female pedestrian approaching the beholder on the left side, and two female pedestrians seemingly walking away from the beholder on the right side. The two women on the right are shown in a back view. Thus, their faces are invisible. The headscarves contribute to the 'alienation' of the portrayed women, whose identity is 'veiled'. Similar types of stock photography can be found in German newspapers, usually accompanying articles on migration or on Islam. The female headscarf has turned into a potent symbol that is not explicitly communicated, but rather associated on a subtle level of interpretation. A similar scheme is used in the Neonazi propaganda material of the German right wing extremist party, the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party) (Figure 10). The picture shows four women in the foreground seen from the back, all wearing headscarves and carrying large plastic bags. The intended insinuation is that 'Fremde' ('aliens') are looting Germany, exploiting the German welfare system, and that they should be sent 'home'. The slogan on top of the photograph – 'Gute Heimreise!' – translates into the sarcastic wish: 'Have a safe trip home!' Both female depictions (Figures 9 and 10), although ideologically not intended in the same way, conjure up negative emotions of alienation, strangeness and xenophobia.

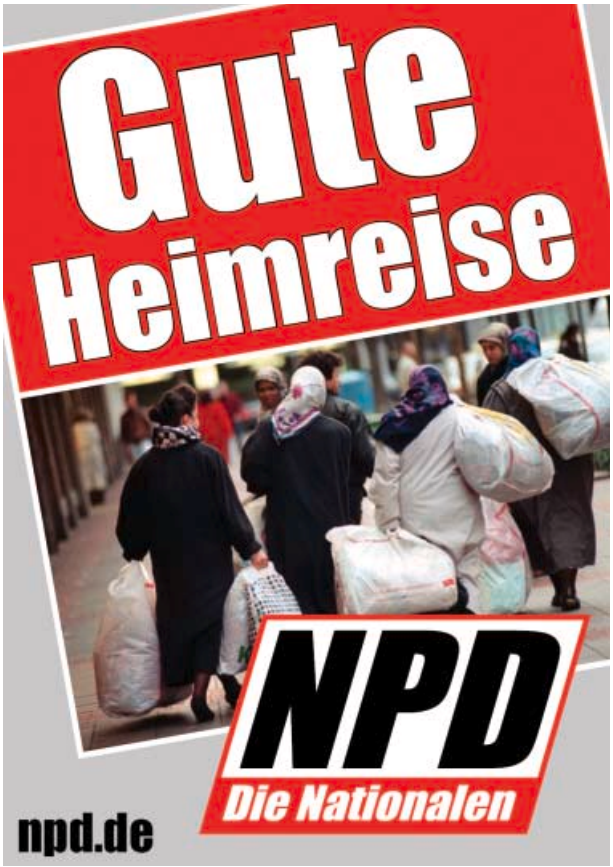

FIGURE 10. Neonazi campaign poster, NPD Berlin, Germany. From the website of the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party) (http://www.npd.de/medien/pdf/gute_heimreise.pdf).

FIGURE 11. Detained Iraqi man sits in garden during a raid in Tikrit, 30 October 2003, *Guardian*, 18 November 2005, p.19. Photograph: REUTERS/Damir Sagolj.

Depriving the depiction of an individual of a facial expression as in Figures 9–11 comes close to visually 'dehumanising' the depicted. The many cruel depictions of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal and press photographs from Iraq, where prisoners are not only blindfolded, but completely hooded (Figure 11), testify to this powerful visual effect. 'Veiling' the face in a human portrait might be interpreted as a visual de-individuation that not only affects the depicted person, but also hampers identification with the depicted, and thus stifles compassion on the part of the beholders.

CONCLUSION

Visual competence is an important, yet understudied field of social scientific research. The four dimensions of visual competence – production, perception, interpretation and reception – are intertwined, influencing each other in a cycle of visual competence. The suggested paradigm is complex, involving the visual expertise of all social sciences – from communication and media studies to sociology, from anthropology to social and media psychology as well as political science. The input of all social sciences is necessary because the interactions between the four visual competence dimensions are highly complex and knowledge of the contextual background, ranging from individual-dispositional to situational to systemic, requires the input of all aforementioned disciplines in order to gain a better understanding of the role visuals play in the construction, cohesion and communication of contemporary reality.

NOTES

[1] This article owes a tremendous amount to the critique and input of Michael Griffin, who reviewed previous versions of this manuscript. He also alerted the author to the relevance of the work of Sol Worth and Larry Gross for the development of interpretative visual communication as suggested in this article.

[2] The international symposium 'Visual Competence – Facets of a Paradigm Shift' was funded by the German foundation VolkswagenStiftung. See the following website: www.visualcompetence.org.

REFERENCES

Arnold, Sabine, Christian Fuhrmeister, and Dietmar Schiller, eds. 1998. *Politische Inszenierung im 20. Jahrhundert. Zur*

Sinnlichkeit der Macht [*Political choreography in the 20th century. The sensuality of power*]. Wien: Böhlau.

Banks, Marcus. 2001. *Visual methods in social research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Banks, Marcus, and Howard Morphy, eds. 1997. *Rethinking visual anthropology*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Baringhorst, Sigrid. 1996. Das Spektakel als Politikon. Massenmediale Inszenierungen von Protest- und Hilfsaktionen [The spectacle as political issue. Mass-mediated choreography of protest operations]. *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 9(1): 15–25.

———. 1997. Symbolische Politik. Politische Kampagnen neuen Typs als Medium demokratischer Öffentlichkeit [Symbolic politics. New types of political campaigns as a medium of the democratic public sphere]. *Transit 13. Europäische Revue* 13: 42–56.

———. 2000. Kampagnen gegen Rassismus. Strategien der symbolischen Inklusion von Fremden in Deutschland und Großbritannien [Campaigns against racism. Strategies of symbolic inclusion of foreigners in Germany and Great Britain]. In *Migranten und Medien. Neue Herausforderungen an die Integrationsfunktion von Presse und Rundfunk*, edited by H. Schatz, C. Holtz-Bacha and J. U. Nieland. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Becker, Howard. 1974. Photography and sociology. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1: 3–26.

Belting, Hans. 2001. *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe einer Bildwissenschaft* [*Image-anthropology. Drafts of a new image science*] München: Schirmer/Mosel.

Bente, Gary, and Peter Vorderer. 1997. The socio-emotional dimension of using screen media. Current perspectives in German media psychology. In *New horizons in media psychology. Research cooperation and projects in Europe*, edited by P. Winterhoff-Spurk and T. Van der Voort. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Braden, R. A., and J. A. Hortin. 1982. Identifying the theoretical foundations of visual literacy. In *Television and visual literacy*, edited by R. A. Braden and A. D. Walker. Bloomington, IN: International Visual Literacy Association.

Brilliant, Richard. 1991. *Portraiture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Collier, John. 1967. *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method*. New York: International Thompson Publishing.

Craig, Robert L. 2000. Visual communication in the third millennium. One of the most important skills of humankind. *Aviso. Informationen aus der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft* 26: 4.

Curtiss, Deborah. 1987. *Introduction to visual literacy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Doelker, Christian. 1997. *Ein Bild ist mehr als ein Bild. Visuelle Kompetenz in der Multimediagesellschaft* [*A picture is more than a picture. Visual competence in the multi-media society*]. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Dondis, D. A. 1973. *A primer of visual literacy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Drechsel, Benjamin. 2005. *Politik im Bild* [*Politics in the picture*]. Frankfurt: Campus.

Eisenman, Stephen F. 2007. *The Abu Ghraib effect*. Chicago: Reaktion Books.

Frey, Siegfried. 1999. *Die Macht des Bildes. Der Einfluß der nonverbalen Kommunikation auf Kultur und Politik* [*The power of the visual. The influence of nonverbal communication on culture and politics*]. Bern, Göttingen, Toronto, and Seattle: Verlag Hans Huber.

Göle, Nilüfer. 1996. *The forbidden modern: Civilization and veiling*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Griffin, M. 2001. Camera as witness, Image as sign: The study of visual communication in communication research. In *Communication yearbook* 24, edited by W. B. Gudykunst. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Haake, Rainer., et al. 2003. Podiumsdiskussion III: Bildkompetenz und Bildwissenschaft – Fragen zur Institutionalisierung [Plenary discussion III: Image competence and image science – questions relating to institutionalization]. In *Was ist Bildkompetenz? Studien zur Bildwissenschaft*, edited by K. Sachs-Hombach. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag.

Hecht, Heiko. 2003. Bildkompetenz als Wahrnehmungskompetenz am Beispiel virtueller Räume [Image competence as perception competence – the example of virtual spaces]. In *Was ist Bildkompetenz? Studien zur Bildwissenschaft*, edited by K. Sachs-Hombach. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag.

Henny, Leonard M. 1986. Theory and practice of visual sociology. *Current Sociology* 34: 1–76.

Hobbs, Renee. 1998. Building citizenship skills through media literacy education. In *The public voice in a democracy at risk*, edited by M. Salvador and P. Sias. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

———. 2000. *Media literacy*. New York: Newsweek Education.

———. 2001. Media literacy skills: Interpreting tragedy. *Social Education* 67: 406–11.

———. 2004. Does media literacy work? An empirical study of learning how to analyze advertisements. *Advertising/ Society Review* 5(4): 1–28.

———. 2006. Non-optimal uses of video in the classroom. *Learning, Media and Technology* 31(1): 45–50.

Hobbs, R., and R. Frost. 2003. Measuring the acquisition of media-literacy skills. *Reading Research Quarterly* 38(1): 330–55.

Hofmann, Wilhelm, ed. 1999. *Die Sichtbarkeit der Macht. Theoretische und empirische Untersuchungen zur visuellen Politik* [*The visibility of power. Theoretical and empirical research on visual politics*]. Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verlagsgesellschaft.

———. 2004. Die politische Kultur des Auges. Der ''pictorial turn'' als Aspekt des 'cultural turn' in der Politikwissenschaft [The political culture of the eye. The ''pictorial turn'' as trait of the 'cultural turn' in political science]. In *Politikwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft.*

Theorien – Methoden – Forschungsperspektiven, edited by B. Schwelling. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

Huber, Hans Dieter. 2003. "Kein Bild, kein Ton? Wir kommen schon" – Visuelle Kompetenz im Medienzeitalter ["No picture, no sound? We'll be around" – visual competence in the media age]. In *Was ist Bildkompetenz? Studien zur Bildwissenschaft*, edited by K. Sachs-Hombach. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag.

Huber, Hans Dieter, Bettina Lockemann, and Michael Scheibel, eds. 2002. *Bild, Medien, Wissen. Visuelle Kompetenz im Medienzeitalter* [*Picture, media, knowledge. Visual competence in the media age*]. München: Kopäd.

Kappas, A., and M. G. Müller. 2006. Bild und Emotion – ein neues Forschungsfeld. Theoretische Ansätze aus Emotionspsychologie, Bildwissenschaft und visueller Kommunikationsforschung. *Publizistik* 5(1): 3–23.

Knieper, T., and M. G. Müller, eds. 2004. *Visuelle Wahlkampfkommunikation* [Visual Campaign Communication]. Köln: Von Halem.

Ludes, Peter, ed. 2005. *Visual hegemonies: An outline*. Münster: LIT.

Messaris, Paul. 1994. *Visual literacy: Image, mind, and reality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

———. 1998. Visual aspects of media literacy. *Journal of Communication* 48: 70–80.

Messaris, P., and S. Moriarty. 2005. Visual literacy theory. In *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media*, edited by K. Smith, S. Moriarty, G. Barbatsis and K. Kenney. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.

Müller, Marion G. 1997. *Politische Bildstrategien im amerikanischen Präsidentschaftswahlkampf, 1828–1996* [*Political image strategies in US presidential campaigning, 1828–1996*]. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.

———. 2001. Bilder – Visionen – Wirklichkeiten. Zur Bedeutung der Bildwissenschaft im 21. Jahrhundert [Images – visions – realities. On the relevance of Bildwissenschaft in the 21st century]. In *Kommunikation visuell. Das Bild als Forschungsgegenstand – Grundlagen und Perspektiven*, edited by T. Knieper and M. G. Müller. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.

———. 2003. *Grundlagen der visuellen Kommunikation. Theorieansätze und Analysemethoden* [*Basics of visual communication. Theories and methods*]. Konstanz: UTB.

———. 2004. Politologie und Ikonologie. Visuelle Interpretation als politologisches Verfahren. [Political science and iconology. Visual interpretation as political science method]. In *Politikwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft. Theorien, Methoden, Problemstellungen*, edited by B. Schwelling. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

———. 2007. What is visual communication? Past and future of an emerging field of communication research. *Studies in Communication Sciences* 7(2): 7–34.

Müller, M. G., and E. Özcan. 2007. The political iconography of Muhammad cartoons: Understanding cultural conflict and political action. *Political Science & Politics* XL(2): 287–91.

Özcan, Esra. 2008. Female visualization in the Turkish public sphere: A comparative visual analysis of six Turkish newspapers. PhD diss., Jacobs University Bremen, Germany.

Panofsky, Erwin. 1982. *Meaning in the visual arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pauwels, L. 2000. Taking the visual turn in research and scholarly communication. *Visual Sociology* 15: 7–14.

Pink, S. 2003. Interdisciplinary agendas in visual research: Re-situating visual anthropology. *Visual Studies* 18(2): 179–92.

Sachs-Hombach, Klaus, ed. 2003. *Was ist Bildkompetenz? Studien zur Bildwissenschaft* [*What is image competence? Studies on Bildwissenschaft*]. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag.

Schiller, Dietmar. 1998. "Westminster – live on screen!" Zur televisuellen Inszenierung von Politik an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert [On the televisual choreography of politics on the threshold to the 21st century). In *Politische Inszenierung im 20. Jahrhundert. Zur Sinnlichkeit der Macht*, edited by S. R. Arnold, C. Fuhrmeister and D. Schiller. Wien: Böhlau.

———. 2002. *Brennpunkt Plenum. Die Präsentation von Parlamenten im Fernsehen. Britisches House of Commons und Deutscher Bundestag im Vergleich* [*Focus parliament. The presentation of parliaments on television. A comparison between the British House of Commons and the German Bundestag*]. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Schwab, F., D. Unz, and P. Winterhoff-Spurk. 2001. "In the mood" – zur Kultivierung der Emotionen durch Fernsehen [On the cultivation of emotions via television]. *Universität des Saarlandes Magazin Forschung* 2: 20–33.

———. 2005. MEDIASCOPE – Ein System zur Inhalts- und Formalanalyse medialer Angebote [A system for the content and form analysis of media offerings]. *Zeitschrift für Medienpsychologie* 3: 110–17.

Seppänen, J. 2006. Reading pictures. In *The power of the gaze: An introduction to visual literacy*, edited by J. Seppänen. New York: Peter Lang.

Siber, M. 2005. Visual literacy in the public space. *Visual Communication* 4(1): 5–20.

Worth, S., and L. Gross. 1974. Symbolic strategies. *Journal of Communication* 24: 27–39. Reprinted in S. Worth (1981) *Studying visual communication*, edited and with an introduction by Larry Gross, 134–47. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Zillmann, D., R. Gibson, and S. L. Sargent. 1999. Effects of photographs in news-magazine reports on issue perception. *Media Psychology* 1: 207–28.

Zillmann, D., S. Knobloch, and H. Yu. 2001. Effects of photographs on the selective reading of news reports. *Media Psychology* 3: 301–24.

Zimbardo, Philip. 2007. *The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil*. New York: Random House.