The Significance of Visual Language in Academic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The phrase, visual discourse, gives rise to a myriad questions: Does instruction in the handling of a given medium, or the laying down of rules and procedures, or the testing of theories empirically, initiate a visual discourse? What does the teaching of art appreciation entail? And, conversely, how is a work of art appraised; by reasoned argument or by mathematical proof? What exactly is involved in studio teaching? These make some, query the teaching of fine (or visual) arts in a technical university; is it significant in today’s tertiary education?

The medium of teaching and research is language; we often narrow this down to the verbal and written (text) variant. However, text is insufficient, making numeracy (mathematical language) supplement academic discourse especially in scientific studies; mathematics has become the underlying philosophy for all hard sciences. But not so with visual language! Academia is ambivalent about drawings, illustrations, pictures, diagrams and other types of images; it allows them a merely supportive role, hence the misnomer 'visual aids' though never statistical or textual aids.

The discipline of visual æsthetics is absent in the prevailing academic set up. [TUK –like other local universities– has no department of Fine Art]. Æsthetic discourse may be introduced through the visual arts which term denotes practical inquiry into the nature of the beautiful, as opposed to the useful, scientific or emotional; æsthetics has developed into a philosophy of the fine arts. [æsthetics incorporates literary, performing and visual arts; this discussion, however, is restricted to the visual arts]

This paper highlights some benefits of introducing visual studies. Its aim is to enrich our culture of knowledge by demonstrating that academics can be intelligent viewers, perceptive critics and sensitive interpreters of visual data; that an æsthetic education is less embellishment and more central to research and learning.

Keywords
æsthetics, visual arts, academic discourse, studio teaching, art appreciation