

The Age of the Image: Redefining Literacy in a World of Screens

By Stephen Apkon

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An urgent, erudite, and practical book that redefines literacy to embrace how we think and communicate now

We live in a world that is awash in visual storytelling. The recent technological revolutions in video recording, editing, and distribution are more akin to the development of movable type than any other such revolution in the last five hundred years. And yet we are not popularly cognizant of or conversant with visual storytelling's grammar, the coded messages of its style, and the practical components of its production. We are largely, in a word, illiterate.
But this is not a gloomy diagnosis of the collapse of civilization; rather, it is a celebration of the progress we've made and an exhortation and a plan to seize the potential we're poised to enjoy. The rules that define effective visual storytelling—much like the rules that define written language—do in fact exist, and Stephen Apkon has long experience in deploying them, teaching them, and witnessing their power in the classroom and beyond. In *The Age of the Image*, drawing on the history of literacy—from scroll to codex, scribes to printing presses, SMS to social media—on the science of how various forms of storytelling work on the human brain, and on the practical value of literacy in real-world situations, Apkon convincingly argues that now is the time to transform the way we teach, create, and communicate so that we can all step forward together into a rich and stimulating future.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This sumptuously detailed and profound new book should be required reading for anyone who thinks about how to effectively communicate in our new world of screens." ?*Jonathan Demme*

"[A] timely, acutely perceptive, and often impassioned book, which sets the rise of visual language in the context of the long history of communication." ?*Simon Schama*

About the Author

Stephen Apkon is the Founder and Executive Director of The Jacob Burns Film Center, a non-profit film and education organization located in Pleasantville, N.Y. The JBFC presents a wide array of documentary, independent and foreign film programs in a three-theater state-of-the-art film complex, and has developed educational programs focused on 21st century literacy. Under Steve's leadership, the JBFC opened a 27,000 square foot Media Arts Lab in 2009. Since its doors opened in 2001, JBFC education programs have reached over 100,000 children.

Steve serves on the boards of The World Cinema Foundation and Advancing Human Rights. He is President of Big 20 Productions; the director and producer of *The Patron,* a collaboration with Ido Haar; a producer of *Enlistment Days,* directed by Ido Haar; and a producer *of I'm Carolyn Parker: The Good, the Mad, and the Beautiful* directed by Jonathan Demme.

Martin Scorsese was born in New York City and graduated from New York University with a degree in film. Widely considered one the best filmmakers in American history, his movies include *Mean Streets, Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, After Hours, Cape Fear,* and *Gangs of New York.*

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ALL THE WORLD'S A SCREEN

We often look for signs of systemic change in the highest of places, yet it is often in the most profane of places that we find the fuel for this change.
So it seems appropriate that a look at the shape of literacy in the twenty-first century can be gleaned in a visit to a set of ratty industrial warehouses at the edge of downtown Los Angeles, in a neighborhood favored by filmmakers for its moody alleys and car-chase venues.
Inside a drafty space that bears the most charitable appellation of "office," a stout young man in a T-shirt and flip-flops named Freddie Wong, along with several of his friends from the University of Southern California,

thinks of new ideas for simple Internet videos that millions will watch.

Wong's first breakout success played off the video game Guitar Hero, in which the player makes exaggerated riffs on a plastic guitar in order to score points and keep an electronic "crowd" cheering. Some of the nation's more exuberant players were in the habit of videotaping themselves jamming on the fake guitars and uploading this footage to YouTube, the massive file-sharing site that had been launched only a year earlier.

Those who were paying attention noticed a commonality in the really popular clips: they emphasized ridiculous quasi–rock star poses, and the cameras zoomed in on the player's face while ignoring the game unfolding on the screen.

This emerging trope seemed ripe for parody. Wong enlisted a few friends; borrowed a motorcycle, donned a black leather jacket, a red sequined shirt, and medieval chains; and preened like a vain thug. "What's up, Internet?" he said. "My name's Freddie and I've come from a long hard day of rocking faces and doing jumps with my sweet bike here to come and *rock you*." A flunky removes the jacket from Wong's shoulders like an obedient valet. Wong sneers that the chains on his chest are there to keep his soul tied down; otherwise, it would fly off and "impregnate women."

Then comes an utterly ridiculous set piece in which Wong's exaggerated licks on the fake guitar are kept in time with the scoring of the game, run as a split screen. Wong does a relatively average job on the scoring, but he acts throughout as though he were supremely pleased with himself. And then, in an unexpected coup de grâce, he smashes the plastic guitar, punk-style, with a triumphant "Yes!"

The performance was designed to be ludicrous—which it was—but the larger purpose was to engage the Internet's boisterous hive of largely anonymous users who watch, criticize, and share amateur videos. It didn't matter that the strap of the guitar was accidentally hanging on Freddie the wrong way, or that the lighting was crude. The video was smart and it was literate and it shared a set of in-gestures with the audience. Within a few weeks, it received more than a million hits on YouTube, as friends e-mailed it through the exponential matrix of social connections. Wong has since duplicated this success many times over.

"Gamer Commute," for example, which received more than nine million views within two months, begins with a shot of Wong waking up in an ordinary bedroom and making a choice of clothes from an electronic menu—glasses, gray T-shirt, flip-flops, cargo shorts. Three guns fly toward him and embed themselves in his body with a metallic click. He then gets into his Toyota, and after taking it up to the speed limit on an ordinary Los Angeles street, he climbs on top of the roof of the moving car and fires a pistol in the air. All of this was achieved with green screens and special effects. The video ends with Wong coming into his ordinary-looking office cubicle and sitting down with a bored expression, resigned to the mundane workday. The video builds upon a foundation of cultural knowledge, and then leaves an unstated moral conclusion: that the gaming world contains far too many thrills and blood spatters to be sustainable in the dreary existence of working life.

One wonders how many of the nine million clicks "Gamer Commute" received were made from cubicles such as the one Wong occupies at the video's end.

Freddie Wong's success on YouTube was anything but a random accident. He did not make a video and just throw it against the wall of the Internet to see if it would stick. In fact, his career has been built not so much on creative randomness as on deliberate calculation, in much the same way Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* not as a freewheeling, spontaneous howl of beatnik joy, but rather as a shrewd attempt to write a bestseller that would embody the rambling spirit of the late 1950s. Like Kerouac, Wong found cultural receptivity, and he has done more to uncrack the nebulous market "science" behind effective amateur filmmaking than just about anybody working today.

This inquiry into the base code of successful videos started when Wong was still an undergraduate at USC. He wrote a thesis called the "10^6 Project," its name implying a force with exponential power. "Why do videos go viral?" he asked. "What kind of content goes viral? And what are the strategies and techniques utilized to promote them?" Wong and his classmate and partner Brandon Laatsch started looking closer at

the videos that had gone viral, and at the core factors in their doing so.

“They repeat a formula,” Wong said. “The success of videos was seen as this random force, but when you have an enormous body of people doing the same thing, that element of randomness disappears.”

Herein lies a paradox: watching videos on the Web is usually a solitary experience, but Wong tapped into a social gold mine. People who watch homemade videos love to pass them on to their friends. It is a way to have a connection with others and even to claim a little credit for the creativity of the filmmaker, because it is you who first noticed and laughed at his brilliance; the humor accrues to the sharer. People take a social risk when they e-mail a link to a Web video to friends, or call them over to the laptop. “You’re putting yourself out there,” says Wong. So it had better be amusing.

The factor he is aiming for, then, is what, for newspapers, used to be called the “Hey, Martha” factor: the quirky, indescribable story that would persuade a reader to toss the Metro section over to his wife and say, “Hey, Martha, you have to read this.” Enjoying the story together and then talking about it, even arguing about it, become as much a part of the experience as the viewing. So in Wong’s case, the maker’s imperative is to provoke a specific response in the viewer, namely, “What will make me want to show this to other people?”

This medium of exchange is critical in an era when our choices of what to watch are so easily driven by the recommendations of our friends, which usually come in the form not of spoken plaudits but of a forwarded e-mail. This is the way we share literacy in this century.

Henry Jenkins, a professor of communication at the University of Southern California, writes about this in a book called *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture*, written with Sam Ford and Joshua Green. Jenkins says the act of forwarding a video link both gives an inherent sense of added value to the product and instantaneously creates a mini-community.

“Rather than seeing circulation as the empty exchange of information stripped of context and meaning, we see these acts of circulation as constituting bids for meaning and value,” Jenkins writes with his coauthors. “We feel that it very much matters who sends the message, who receives it, and most importantly, what messages get sent.”

In short, context matters in these mini-communities. Freddie Wong, too, noticed a contextual factor at work in videos that were truly successful in eliciting page clicks. The sound and the dialogue needed to be only basically intelligible, as they were likely to be competing with other sounds. And for that reason, sound element didn’t matter nearly as much as the visual components. The filmmaker’s credo that “plot matters” holds true more than ever, but plot must be expressed in a way that can be seen. It lends itself to a more physical type of acting—almost a mimetic method that dates to the silent era of movies at the turn of the twentieth century.

“You have to assume that these videos are being played on laptops, tablets and cell phones with tiny speakers” says Wong. “And that there’s going to be noise and other distractions in the room. And so you have to make it visually interesting in order to cut through the static noise and draw the proper attention to the central message of the video.”

The new era of the digital peep show has something else in common with the brief films of the silent era. Like those early films, today’s videos are meant to be international in their appeal. The early film studios in Patterson, New Jersey, were cranking out three-minute reels that could be understood in Paris and Buenos Aires as well as in New York. Short films with limited dialogue are more easily appreciated, and therefore more likely to be watched and shared in nations where English is not widely spoken. Visuals are not hampered by the constraints of tongue; they work in most any culture—which is why Freddie Wong has a following in Croatia.

Thus stripped of most traditional linguistic elements, the short film has to move fast, but it must strive not to confuse the viewer with too many moving objects or jarring cuts. The format of a short online video is subject to a concept called “dropoff,” in which the viewer simply gets bored and stops watching. Conventional Hollywood movies longer than ninety minutes and shown to a...

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