Multimodal Approach in Advacing the Visual Literacy

Adya Arsita, Kusrini, and Terra Bajraghosa

Institute Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta, Jl. Parangtritis Km 6.5 Sewon Bantul, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract: This research aims to introduce multimodality as an analytic tool to analyze visual texts which are rich in semiotic modes, especially those that juxtapose more than one pictorial forms elaborated with verbal text, such as in a graphic novel. Graphic novel is chosen as the object of the study because it elaborates drawings, photographs, other forms of pictures, and verbal texts. This research chose several graphic novels to highlight that such form of literature is not 'cheap' or childish, yet it could promote visual literacy which might have not been considered as 'academic' all along. Literary studies were conducted in compiling some samples and collecting qualitative data. Samples were purposively selected and narrowed down to five samples to help finding out the significance of learning multimodality. The semiotic modes discussed include the visual, verbal, written text, gesture, and even color. While the meta-functions posited to help analyzing a whole text cover three domains, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The findings will bring the audience to recognize that using multimodal approach is suitable to understand a visual text thoroughly and hopefully it will also escalate the use of various visuals as a way of effective communication in enhancing the visual literacy.

1 INTRODUCTION

Multimodality has been an intriguing topic nowadays because it has been receiving more attention. People communicate one to another with several different modes at the same time. In this context, communication is considered as an action of exchanging information from the sender to the receiver and at the same time also constructing meaning.

Communication is a way to exchange information (Danesi, 2004). In everyday life, communication can expand further when making and delivering the message, that the message must be spread and finally it will reach the receiver. Danesi stated, human's communication is unique in the way they use more than one mode (modality) and medium, being multimodal and multimedia. All human's senses have the ability to be the modes of communication. Our five senses are the modality to experience our surroundings, to encode, to store, and to construct meaning from each information received.

In communication, the construction of codes and signs is critical. The choice and the implementation of signs will influence how a communication is conducted and they will create effects that might appear during the process. That will also include whether the message is being effectively and accurately delivered. Kress and van (Leeuwen,2006) use the term multimodality to explain how the value of truthfulness and the credibility of a statement are constructed through a message. Commonly, this will be deducted from the representation of a particular social group as communication agents. Therefore, it is obvious that the role of a message in a communication process to construct meanings of reality is essential. So does what happens with visual communication. The presented visual medium is able to form an understanding of the world represented in it.

Visual medium used in communication may vary from written text, hand drawing picture to photograph, and even sculptures. One interesting phenomenon to be observed in visual communication is the use of various media at once, which could be referred to as visual multimodality. An example of media juxtaposing some different visuals is graphic novel. It is easy to find and it has been passed down from generations to generations, known as comic. The ubiquity of visuals encounter in comic or graphic novel could be considered massive. Graphic novels are rich in semiotic modes and all is visualized.

Comprehending the whole text (verbal and pictorial) as an intact message may not be as easy as it seems because of its complexity. Due to the name 'comic' it bears, its popularity seems to remain as 'childish'. Hence, the term graphic novel would be more attractive and suitable for a larger scope of audience. No wonder more publishers and bookstores distribute more graphic novels for they have been gaining fame even when they contain science and history. To generally sum up, there is no huge difference between comic and graphic novel. Advertisements both on television and printed actually carry the same complexity as in graphic novels, but it is only for a very short time viewing.

Therefore, this paper aims to introduce multimodality as an analytic tool to analyze visual texts which are rich in semiotic modes, especially those that juxtapose more than one pictorial forms elaborated with verbal text, such as in a graphic novel. The diverse visuals presented a graphic novel make it interesting to analyze.

The research is conducted by doing literary research and desk studies by compiling some samples and collecting qualitative data. Samples are purposively selected and narrowed down to five samples, solely to introduce the application in using multimodal approach to promote visual literacy and its importance in making meaning in graphic novels.

2 ADOPTING MULTIMODAL AS AN APPROACH

Multimodality is comprehended as a part from communication study and social semiotics. The term multimodality refers to a communication practice which involves several different modes at the same time (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). When communicating, people tend to use more than one mode, for as we speak to someone, not only the speech is uttered, but it is also followed by certain gesture, gaze, and even written text. How people engage themselves in a communication indicates a practice of multimodality.

Each mode in multimodal has its own power and capacity in constructing meaning. As an example, a communication occurs during a seminar may include speaking and listening (auditory), eye contact and body language (gesture), printed papers, slide show with graphics and pictures, and written text in slide show (visual). To sum up, such communication is multimodal (Danesi, 2004). Those modes may show a great disparity, however none could be regarded as

stronger than or more dominant than the others. Each mode has its own characteristic to create meaning partially, yet together they will build a distinct meaning and somehow people will understand those chains of modes as 'a good presentation in a seminar'.

Jewit confirmed that all modes have an important part in contributing the construction of meaning in different ways (Jewitt, 2008). As stated by Kress, a mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource in constructing meaning (Kress, 2010). Therefore, it is considered substantial to appreciate and understand each resource used in that process (Jewitt & Kress, 2003).

Aforementioned, a multimodal analysis is derived from a social semiotics and communication theories, and it considers that every resource is important in meaning potential within a distinct and specific context. To apply multimodality as an approach, a shift of theorising shall be implied.

2.1 Metafunction

Grammar, which initially was only for anything related to language and linguistics, it has been enabled to analyze all visual matters in this visual era. Visual grammar treats all visual images as if they are languages. Among all of those different semiotic modes applied at the same time in a text (graphic novel as a whole), the text has a broader context. It is not only in the form of written or verbal form, but signifies far more than that. The text is all practices that signifies, being meaningful in the form of images and even sounds (Barker, 2000).

In relation to social semiotics, the social function of a text and its operation of the semiotic resources to make meaning are regarded as carrying three metafunctions namely ideational / logical, interpersonal, and textual (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The exploration of those three metafunction described by Kress and van Leeuwen is derived from Halliday's theory of seeing grammar not as a fixed rule, but more as a resource to deliver meaningful message (Halliday, 2004). The first is ideational / logical which is exposing pictures or images as a representation of empirical aspects experienced by human being. The second is interpersonal which observes the interrelation of someone with the others and amongst all of present semiotic modes. The amalgamation of each sign or mode to build an intact meaning is the third metafunction, the textual, which breathes coherence and relevance with the other two.

Altogether, this process will lead to a finding that each mode is subjectively motivated and shaped by certain culturally given resources. In the context of

visual multimodal, the power of visual resources is very important in a communication process. Kress and van Leeuwen revealed that there are two important things to be considered in a communication practice, interaction and representation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). By interaction, it means that the communication will always need participants who shall understand each other, showing that communication is effective. While choosing the proper and adequate expression in communication implies the representation.

2.2 Graphic Novel as a Visual Communication Media

Graphic novel, a 'new term' for comic as a medium for storytelling, can be regarded as a communication medium. The message in the form of story is based on an idea or concept to be delivered to the readers. Comic is a channel to deliver story in a (pictorial) visual form.

Seen from the point of view of visual communication design, graphic novel is applying some graphic design elements such as images (drawing) and typography, into a particular composition, to send message to the readers.

The cycle of communication process used as the communication model in graphic novel is expected to help understanding its visual communication process that will enhance the appreciation towards comic or graphic novel as a media that is able to communicate various ideas.

In this context, the source as the message's sender is the comic artist, merely from one component- they are the drawing artist and the author, and can be from many other components. The initial idea and the objective of the story are originated from the source, with the story maker (author) as the main component, to define plot, scenes, actions, as well as to provide narration and dialogue. The other components are the comic artists (draftsmen), from the pencillers, inkers, colorists, letterer, or depending on the work flow, that will interpret a story into images. Started with pencillers who will define the layout and composition, then followed by the inkers to emphasize the style, and followed by written text attachment as paralanguage inspired by the author and at last being colored (if needed) for color will bring out different meaning in the extension of the message (Duncan & Smith, 2009). The receivers are the comic readers, who will send their feedback through open forums such as discussion group, articles in newspapers, and even in a more private way which is by personal letter or emails. Those feedbacks could easily be found indirectly in social media or in a discussion session related to comic publication. On web-based comics (webtoon), the feedback is directly expressed in the comments provided by platform of the online comic providers.

The message implied in a comic is presented in the form of storytelling, with the comic itself as the channel. There are two types of messages in the communication of comic, the encoded message (sent by the source) and the decoded message (received by the readers (audience). Comic has many codes and they operate as particular system of general meaning for the groups of certain culture or culture-derivative in the form of signs' organization, consists of signs and their convention in how codes are combined to form a far more complex message (Fiske, 2011).

The format of the message in a graphic novel is the harmonization of comic-style drawing and photograph or other visual text. A precise example for that is a graphic novel entitiled 'The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders', published in 2011, was made by Didier Lefèvre and Emmanuele Guibert. It presents the readers with the comic-style drawing and black and white photograph. The juxtaposition of different images forms a message that could complete one another. The comic drawings are arranged in series of panels and the photographs are in frames-like-panels. Verbal texts and word balloons accompany the comic, while captions and narrations set to the photographs, sometimes slightly apart just to make the photographs remain intact as they are supposed to.

As a centre of phenomenon, comic is able to collide and to blur the boundaries between verbal text and pictorial texts (Eisner, 2004). Reading a comic is a perceptual experience that does not only involve the decoding of pictorial symbols, but also the linguistics as well as the inter-animation between images and words (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

3 ADVANCING VISUAL LITERACY USING MULTIMODAL XPLORATION

Defining visual literacy is quite strenuous since it has not got a specific and fixed term. Ausburn and Ausburn define visual literacy as a group of skills that make each person understands and intentionally use visuals to communicate with the others (Ausburn and Ausburn, 1978). Considered as the pioneer who coined the term 'visual literacy', Debes, defined visual language as the intentional use of culturally

given sign to establish patterns in acquiring communication (Debes, 1969).

Visual literacy in general is something that already dwells within our daily life. The term visual literacy will always remind us that we are all visual creatures. Visual literacy is basically all about understanding what you see.

Below is the sample of a graphic novel entitled 'Maus' that received a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. That time was the benchmark of embracing comic book, also known as graphic novel, as a part of literary world.

Figure 1: "Maus" by Art Spiegelman http://www. goodreads.com/book/show/15195.The_Complete_Maus (accessed on 20th May 2019).

'Maus' is special in a way it gives a touch of a different visual, comic hand-drawings and a portrait. The presence of the portrait seems to emphasize the importance of the memory of a mother and a best friend of the graphic novel artist. He seems to want telling his readers how those two important persons mean a lot to him. The juxtaposition of black and white hand-drawing and the black and white portrait seem to indicate the sorrow happening in the story. The irony and metaphor are presented in the characters, the mice. The story narrated through word balloons and narration show the representation of the political and social situation happening at that moment.

Figure 2: Fumetti entitled 'Doomlord" (1980s), http:// www.cisforcomics.gr/doomlord/ (accessed on 5th May 2019).

The above fumetti or photonovel was actually considered to be one of the first photonovels back then. The collaboration of photographs with the iconic word balloons as in comic would not be directly understood as a pure comic form even though all elements of comic present in that photonovel. The images look so realistic, however to make them less realistic, the panels are all in black and white, leaving the cover alone stays in full color. The convention format of a comic somehow will lead the readers to comprehend it as a comic book, in a new way.
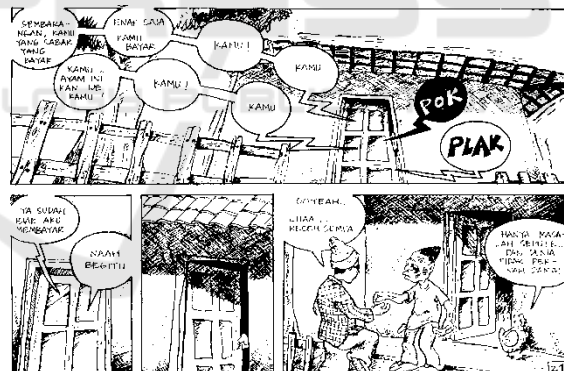

Figure 3: Interdependence of verbal text and picture, supporting a scene. Losing one of it, the meaning of the story might not be understood. Source: "Ayam Majapahit" (Ismail:1997).

The collaboration of pictorial and linguistics in a graphic novel is the combination of images and written text that enable a graphic novel to be an effective communication media. The combination is unnecessarily in balanced, however, the interaction and the proper stress amongst the elements would build a good communication (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Words are spread all over the big upper panel in picture 5, with one image of a seemingly traditional

house. The simplicity shown in that panel actually does not offer the same simplicity, as the readers need to discern the sequence of the word balloons. Failing to follow the sequence will make that panel losing its meaning.

Figure 4: Situation in Afghanistan in "The Photographer". Source: The Photographer (Guibert, et.al., 2009).

Figure 5: One of the main characters in "The Photographer" (left:comic version and right: photograph version). Source: The Photographer (Guibert, et.al., 2009).

The above images, picture 6 and picture 7 show how the graphic novel drawings are elaborated with photographs. Picture 7 almost seems redundant by showing the same image of a man. Yet, those two visuals with their own characteristic and mode, show their own strength in making meaning. They complement each other in visuality. The left panel with typical comic drawing emphasizes its presence as a comic, while the right panel with typical black and white photograph (even without a single word balloon) define its ubiquity as a photograph carrying a message that what is drawn on the left panel is inspired by the real life, a real man. Without appreciating all visuals, lacking information about the reality of the story might happen to the readers.

Figure 6: Onomatopoeia representing some sound effects in a graphic novel. Source: Ophir (Studio Bajing Loncat, 1999) and Kecoa (Yudi, 1998).

Onomatopeia is often regarded as the sound effect of a comic, in this context it could also be referred as sound lettering. This iconic presentation is almost as famous as the word balloons, that once people see it, will identify the media as a comic or graphic novel. This onomatopoeia has a strength in narrating the sequential story or to indicate an event not presented in the panels (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

Understanding the types of word balloons in comic is regarded as important, for the shapes and the thickness of the lines are quite distinctive. Various types of word balloons defines thoughts, direct utterance, and even calm talking (Saraceni, 2013).
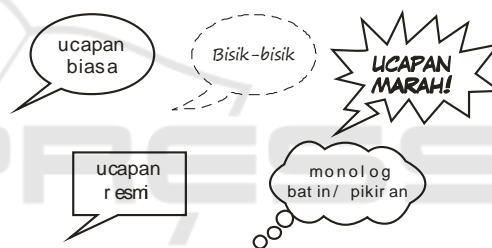

Figure 7: Variations of word balloons. (Bajraghosa, 2012).

4 CONCLUSIONS

In visual communication, multimodality can become an alternative in the format of a message. However, it is mandatory to have a good comprehension on verbal text, images, and other things that cannot be replaced by thousands of words. It is resulted from the complexity of the images themselves. The graphic novel seems unique in its own way, the information is solid and compact yet there is a hint of 'freshness' in it. For those who are not familiar with comic reading, to understand the combination of text and visual, could be assisted by the presence of the photographs. The nature of a photo as the recorder of reality can be implied as the element of continuity, which will result in the understanding of the whole comic story with the messages meant to be delivered. Another advantage of visual multimodality in communication is how the message enters the mind and the perception of the readers. The impression of

the related images from an event can be more striking when visual as in picture is present. Hence, readers unnecessarily imagine for themselves how an event happens. The stimuli of the images or the visual sensory dashes because written texts and photographs or other visuals are attached. Even so, further research on it will still have to be done.

REFERENCES

Ausburn, Lynna and Floyd B. Ausburn., 1978. "Visual literacy: background, theory and practice" (Accessed from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/ 234650756_Visual_Literacy_Background_Theory_an d_Practice, on 4th June 2019)

Bajraghosa, Terra., 2012, Visualisasi bahasa dalam komik indonesia, Program Pascasarjana Pengkajian Seni ISI (thesis), Yogyakarta.

Barker, Chris., 2000. Cultural studies: theory and practice. London: SAGE Publication.

Danesi, Marcel. 2004. Messages, signs, and meaning: a basic textbook in semiotics and communications theory (3rd Edition). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Debes, John L. 1969. Some Hows and Whys of Visual Literacy Educational Screen and Audiovisual Guide, Vol.48, No.1

Duncan, Randy and Matthew J. Smith., 2009, The power of comics: history, form, and culture, New York: Bloomsburry Academy.

Eisner, Will., 2004, Comics and sequential arts, Florida: Poorhouse Press

Fiske, John. (2011), Introduction to cultural and communication studies or cultural and communication studies; Sebuah Pengantar Paling Komprehensif, Jalasutra: Yogyakarta.

Guibert, Emmanuel., Didier Lefevre, Frederic Lemercier, 2009, The Photographer : Into war-torn afghanistan with doctors without borders, New York: First Second

Halliday, M.A.K. dan Matthiessen, Christian, M.I.M. 2004. An introduction to functionnal grammar, 3rd edition. Great Britain: Arnold.

Ismail, Ahmad Faisal & Kirikomik. 1997. Ayam majapahit, Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.

Jewitt, Carey. 2008. Multimodality and literacy in school classrooms (Review for Research in Education), Vol. 32. DOI: 10.3102/0091732X07310586

Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. (Eds.). 2003. Multimodal literacy. New York: Peter Lang.

http://www.cisforcomics.gr/doomlord/ (accessed on 5th May 2019)

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15195.The_Compl ete_Maus (accessed on 20th May 2019)

Kress, Gunter and Theo van Leeuwen. 2006. Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, Routledge: New York.

Kress, Gunther R. and Theo Van Leeuwen. 2001. Multimodal Discourse: The Modes And Media Of Contemporary Communication, London: Cardiff University.

Saraceni, Mario. 2003. The Language of Comics, Routledge: New York.

Studio Bajing Loncat.1999. Ophir, Mizan: Bandung

Sulistia, Yudi and Arief Yaddie. 1998. Kecoa, Balai Pustaka: Jakarta.