DESIGNS FOR LEARNING

Interview with Theo van Leeuwen

By FREDRIK LINDSTRAND

This issue features an interview with professor Theo van Leeuwen, who is known to most of our readers as one of the main contributors to the field of multimodality and social semiotics. As always, our intention with the interview is to give some further insights regarding interests and influences that form a background to his theoretical work.

Theo van Leeuwen is professor and dean of the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at University of Technology Sydney. He has written extensively on discourse analysis, visual communication and multimodality. Among his recent books are *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2005), *Global Media Discourse* (2006, with Machin), *The Language of New Media Design: Theory and Practice* (2008, with Martinec) and *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (2008). He is also editor of the journal *Visual Communication.*

FL: Since most of readers are familiar with, and inspired by, your work on multimodality, social semiotics and issues relating to the study of media and communication, it would be interesting to hear a little about your background. What led you to where you are today, academically?

TvL: In my younger years I was interested in three things: film, jazz and semiotics. I couldn't choose between them. I was impressed with French school semiotics and reading Roland Barthes and Christian Metz and so on. At the Amsterdam film school we started a magazine where we wrote about semiotics. I liked the idea of film as 'language', of the 'camera stylo', film as a medium to write, not only to tell stories, but also essays, intellectual work. All this excited me, in the way you get excited by ideas when you are young – without quite knowing why. I came from a protestant background in which the image was not very strongly valued. There were hardly any images in the house and those that were on the wall were texts with at best austere black and white drawings. I also wrote poetry at the time. My father liked my poetry but he wasn't impressed by my first film, even though it won two prizes. Maybe I felt that seeing film as language would make it more acceptable in that logocentric world. Years later, in Australia, I taught film production in a media, linguistics and literature school at Macquarie University and started studying linguistics in the evenings. I thought that I might do better than the French if I learned more about linguistics, more than just second-hand Saussure. It was all generative grammar at first, absolutely useless for my purposes. I found myself

drawn to the least tangible aspects of language, intonation, rhythm and so on. So I wrote my masters thesis on the intonation of radio speakers. I have always found it fascinating to try and talk about things that are hard to talk about, that are not easily caught in words. And intonation is like that. So my idea of using linguistics to talk about the visual got delayed and delayed even though it was my original motivation for studying linguistics. Then I encountered systemic linguistics and decided to do my PhD at Sydney University, but I still wasn't doing it on the visual. It was a thesis on language.

But then, I met Gunther [Kress] for the first time at a conference. He had marked my intonation thesis and suggested that we do some work together. So we met and wondered what we might do. And Gunther said "Well, for years I've been saying that, nowadays, if you work on media texts you need to look at the visual but I have only been saying it and never done anything about it." And I said "Well, I studied linguistics to do something about the visual in the first place, but I still haven't gotten around to it." So we began generating ideas by talking, talking through examples, that's how it started.

FL: When was this in time?

TvL: It was in 1986, I think. We had the Newtown Semiotics Circle in Sydney which was a very exciting intellectual milieu for a time, until many of the core members went to different parts of the world. We were daring, putting forward new ideas. Initially Gunther and I didn't have any publication plans. We just did it, talked, made notes. Then Frances Christie rang me. She had a series of short books with Geelong University Press and asked me if I wanted to do one. I said "Can it be about images, and can I do it with Gunther?" So that was the first version of *Reading Images.* Then I moved to London and that did my career a lot of good. I think many people in Australia thought of my work as mildly eccentric, outside of the mainstream. In Europe there was more of an audience for it. So Gunther and I did a much enlarged version of *Reading Images* (1996) and I also wrote a book on music and speech where I could go back to my earlier research on intonation and rhythm (*Speech, Music, Sound*, 1999).

FL: So you left the visual for a while?

TvL: No, I worked on both, and had done so for quite a while. In the mid 80s I was teaching in a media department in Sydney and realized that students were studying media for three years without ever learning anything about music. That seemed bizarre. The media is so full of music. I had a study leave for half a year and spent the whole time reading about music. I could play, but I didn't know much about the musicological literature. So then I began to teach music to media students, starting with simple things like advertising songs and news

signature tunes and stuff like that and working up a way of talking about music that would work for non-musicians.

FL: As I see it that was pioneering as well, in the same way as your work on the visual.

TvL: The main new thing was that I tried to make a single unified discipline of speech, music and other sounds. For a filmmaker there is nothing strange about this. It is what you do when you put together a soundtrack. In the academic world most books about film music don't talk about all the other sounds you can hear at the same time as the music. Meanwhile Gunther and I had started to talk, as we always did, about multimodality. We drank cups of coffee in the cafés of London parks and museums discussing the difference between modes, media, channels and so on and eventually wrote a short book called *Multimodal Discourse* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). We weren't allowed to call it 'Multimodality'. The publisher thought nobody would know what that meant or it would end up in the wrong part of the book shop. So the word 'discourse' had to be added to the title. This was annoying because 'discourse' in the book is just one of the four key elements of sign production and interpretation (discourse, design, production and distribution). But the publishers won, as usual. Ron Scollon told me he had the same problem in the late 70s. He couldn't call a book just 'Discourse' because the publishers thought that would be too obscure.
My book on social semiotics had to be called *Introducing Social Semiotics*, because they had an "Introducing..." series. I didn't want that title, because I didn't introduce social semiotics. Gunther [Kress] and Bob [Hodge] did that in Social Semiotics (1988), which was published 17 years earlier. On the other hand, I do like writing textbooks, writing for students, as clearly as I can, and hoping I have something to offer that they can use for their own purposes.

FL: You wrote about typography in *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2005).

TvL: It is always exciting exploring new things. You constantly hit upon new areas of ignorance in this field, and that is because the semiotic landscape changes so quickly. I was teaching a course on visual communication in Cardiff, and the students were asking about typography, which had become a very fashionable area of graphic design. I had nothing to say about it I probably could not have sustained more than two minutes of discourse about it. So I began to read about it and tried some ideas out. It still needs a lot of development. The same thing happened with colour. Gunther and I wrote an outline in 2002, and I am now writing a book about it (*The Language of Colour*), finally teaching myself a little more about it. As a semiotician you can't be a specialist. You have to look at the whole semiotic landscape. That is what I admired so much in Roland Barthes, that breadth. You can't think of anything

that he hasn't said something interesting about, all those years ago. One of the things that went wrong with Paris School semiotics was that Barthes' students all started specializing, claiming a little bit of territory for themselves, film, theatre, music, comics, graphic design and so on, and then lapsing back, sometimes, into the traditional disciplines associated with these fields.

The other thing that happened at the time was that our ideas were taken up by educationalists, and Gunther had of course started at the Institute of Education at that time, starting all that interesting work they have done there over the years. That is also the context in which I got to meet Staffan [Selander] and work with him on various exciting projects, first text books, and then toys.

FL: Can you say something more about the toy project, looking back at it today?

TvL: I learned an enormous amount from that project. From the early 80s on there had been a move against text analysis in media studies. Either the text or the reader. It's a dead end. You need both. And in media studies they did this audience research through interviews, which I am not so keen on. What people say in interviews is coloured by the context. They will say one thing in one context, another in another. But with toys you don't have to ask any questions. You can see how the 'text' (the toy) is 'read' (taken up in play). You could see how children played differently with the same toys in a playschool and at home, for instance. It was a real eye opener.

FL: If you look at the social semiotic framework and multimodality...

TvL: The social semiotic approach started with Halliday and this made it possible to use linguistics differently from the way it had been used before in semiotics. Instead of asking "Is there a visual equivalent for modal adverbs?", we asked "What expresses the modality function, the function of signifying degrees of truth, in the visual?" Language and the visual could have common communicative functions but very different ways of realizing them. And then there was the emphasis on context, on situational context and on cultural context. But even though Halliday said that it is ultimately the cultural context that explains why things are the way they are, most Hallidayans don't really engage with cultural context. In my own work I try, more and more, to pay attention to it, both in relation to the semiotic resources themselves, and their history, and in relation to their uses. In this way I also began to realize that 'systems' are the product of practices. So 'practice' has to be the central notion. In *Multimodal Discourse* we derive the 'system' of stratification from practice, and in my *Discourse and Practice book* (2008), I see discourses as recontextualizations of social practices. In fact, when you have 'practice', you don't need 'context' anymore. A text becomes an element of a social practice,

sometimes a major element, sometimes a quite small and relatively marginal element. And when you study practices you also need to pay attention to the 'normative discourses' that regulate practices, sometimes very strictly, sometimes very loosely. This also came to the fore in studying toys. We had the mothers introduce two different pram rattles to their babies. One was a classic pram rattle. Everyone knew what to do with it and did more or less the same thing, because it is the kind of toy that is described in all the baby books as good for your baby's motor development. The other was quite different, and the mothers initially didn't know what to do, and did quite different things. So that blows up any categorical ideas about 'remaking' signs we often hear these days. There are areas where this applies and there are areas where it does not. You cannot generalize about it. That would be pure ideology. As I mentioned before, in the mid 80s people began to argue against critical text analysis. What you had to do was talk to audiences, to the consumer, and see the consumer as 'active'. How well does that fit in with the kind of 'lifestyle' consumerism that emerged at the same time in the world of marketing? Not only nuclear scientists have to think about the ethics of their work, we all do. We all have to ask: "How does what I am saying fit into the wider scheme of things? What makes it topical?"

FL: Since quite some time has passed since you developed the notion of multimodality with Gunther Kress and both of you have continued to work on different aspects of it, I would be curious to hear if you see any differences between your and Gunther's approach to it.

TvL: When we first started working together, Gunther had been at it far longer than me. I was the apprentice. And what Gunther taught me was to be very open-minded, even intuitive, and also very daring. I would hold back and say "Shouldn't we look at more data", and he would say, "No, we have to put these ideas out there now". He also has this wonderful ability to ask questions which the average person would probably think "They are professors, shouldn't they know about this?", the ability to go back to square one, and wonder about things that most people think are obvious. Very few people have that ability. Staffan Selander has it too. So I learnt a lot from all that. Yes, during the past years, Gunther has worked in a different environment, in an education context, while I continued to work mostly in a media studies context, so inevitably that influences how you think. In *Multimodal Discourse* you can see that difference a bit, Gunther pulling one way, because of his work on very young children, me pulling another way because of my work on more institutionalized forms of semiosis. But I never found that particularly problematic. Let it be a slightly polyphonic sort of book. What does it matter. It has two authors, why pretend there is only one.

FL: It is interesting to go back to earlier books and see how the framework of

multimodality has developed and how certain concepts have become more central over time and so on.

TvL: Yes. And this is partly due to the fact that the semiotic world is changing. When we wrote *Reading Images* we still saw the visual as images. That is no longer the case, or at least not uniquely so. Written texts are visual now, through layout, colour, typography. So you constantly have to rethink because things move so fast. The other thing I am increasingly interested is something we also started in *Multimodal Discourse*, the importance of semiotic technology. At the moment I have a grant to study PowerPoint and the semiotic thought that has gone into its design. I hope to do a book on this topic with Emilia Djonov, my co-researcher. It is fascinating to see that software designers have had very similar ideas to Gunther and me at roughly the same time. Just as we were positing that quadrant of 'given' and 'new' and 'ideal' and 'real', a kind of merger of the grid and the compositional pattern, PowerPoint designers did the same thing, presenting users with a set of quite similar quadrants to choose from. And just as many of us, including for instance Norman Fairclough, began to talk about style as 'identity', HTML came out with the cascading style sheet. Contemporary technologies like that provide semiotic resources. So we have to study them systematically, explore every option they offer, in the way we explore language, which normal users do not do, just as the speakers of a language do not use all the words in that language. Quite time-consuming, but very interesting.

FL: I guess you would have to look at every interface and so on?

TvL: That's exactly what you have to do. Chart the whole thing so that you have something to benchmark against what people actually do and don't do, what they use and what they don't use, and so on. It is a semiotic resource to make texts or communicative events with. But a peculiar one, because it is deliberately designed, somewhere in a lab, and it doesn't grow organically, it is changed unilaterally and instantaneously every few years. It is also interesting how people learn to use this resource, without any parents, teachers, copy editors or others telling them what to do, usually. Yet there is a great homogeneity of practice. How does it come about?

FL: To conclude this interview; do you have any specific advice in terms of what needs to be done at the moment?

TvL: Maybe the two things I mention in the beginning of *Introducing Social Semiotics*: to continue to study the resources and the practices, the discourses and their take up. Not the one or the other. It is hard but it has to be done because without it we decontextualize too much, we cannot tell the whole story. And then, again, technology. Most discourses about technology are

very broad brush. New technologies either spell the end of all values or the beginning of a wonderful new age. You can get some ideas from such broad brush approaches. But what social semiotics can do is to look at their affordances and constraints in detail, study which practices they facilitate and which they do not, what Gunther now refers to as 'gains and losses'. And then see what people actually do with it – different kinds of people, in different contexts, embracing it, adapting it to their own needs, struggling with it, and so on.

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