

## Gunther's gallery

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My friend Gunther Kress passed away on 20 June 2019. He was on his way to present the opening keynote at a conference on multimodality in Rome when he had a heart attack. Later that day he died in hospital. He was 79. I want to remember him here by saying something about his unique use of examples.

In Gunther's work there is a small, selective gallery of images and texts he used over and over in his various articles and books. Others do this too, but their recurrent images are often diagrams, models through which they seek to visualize the essence of their theoretical approaches. Gunther's gallery was different. The examples he used over and over were actual images and texts he had encountered in his everyday life as a father, a traveller, a teacher, a researcher – images and texts that had drawn his attention as he walked through galleries, leafed through magazines, read stories to his children. And they included many mundane, everyday texts, such as no smoking signs, a promotional card in a newly purchased leather purse, a handwritten notice with do's and don'ts for the occupants of a holiday cottage and so on. He called them 'knock-out examples'. As he said in his *Multimodality* book (Kress 2010: 50), they reflected his 'interest': "*interest* directs my *attention* to something that *engages* me, at *this* moment."

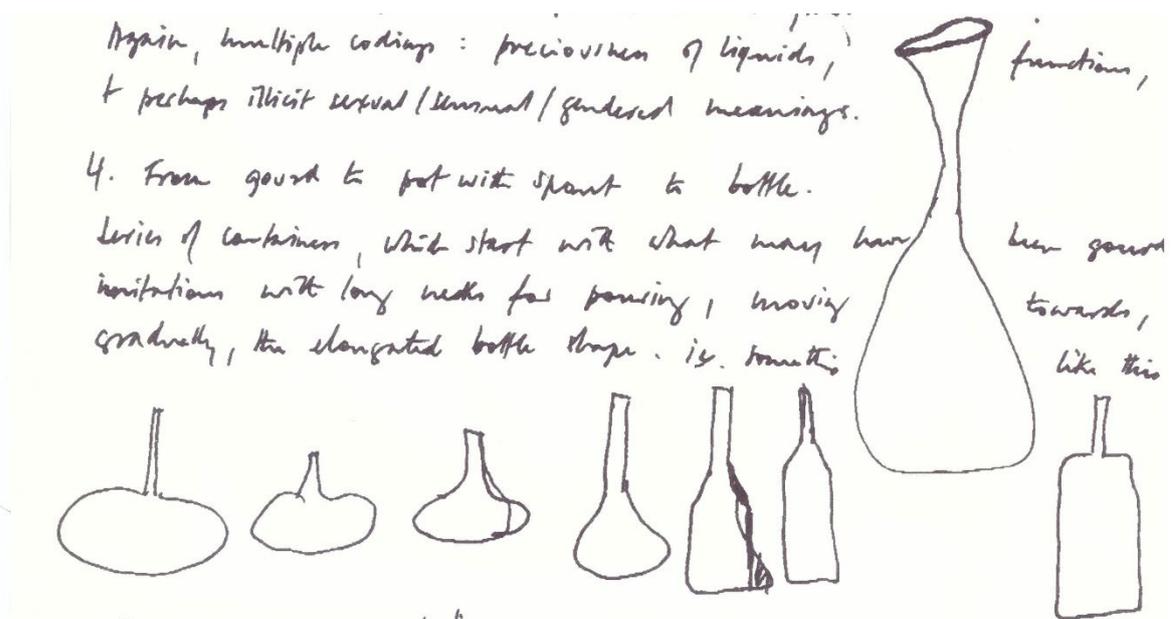
But 'example' is perhaps not the right word here. These images and texts were not examples of ideas he had formed earlier. They were the very *source* of his ideas. They embodied his ideas, and would, over time, continue to express them better, more immediately, and often more visually, than the various paraphrases, or as he liked to say, transductions, he would produce. During the years I worked with him, we could never talk without having such examples in front of us.

I remember walking with him through the Tate Gallery in 1995. We had decided to look at sculptures. Rodin's *The Kiss* was prominently displayed in the centre of one of the gallery's rooms. We walked around it, and suddenly realized that in sculptures of this kind the Given-

and-New structure we had already written about depended on where you stood. From one angle the man was the New, from another the woman. The relation was never inherent. It always depended on the viewer. In two-dimensional images, we realized, Given and New was always an interpretation imposed on the represented phenomenon. And we soon discovered that two-dimensional images of this particular sculpture almost always position the man as the Given and the woman as the New.

We later analysed another sculpture, Epstein's *Jacob and the Angel* along similar lines, and noticed that the way it was placed in the Gallery favoured a particular interpretation and made other points of view less easily accessible.

But what I want to stress here is that we were right *there, in* the Gallery, looking at the sculpture, walking around it and making notes of what we observed and speculated. The notes, with the writing of which we took turns, would slowly build up from week to week until the point we felt we had enough to start writing.



Here is a small extract from four pages of notes by Gunther, in his own handwriting. They were written after we visited the Victoria and Albert museum in 1996, where we had somehow decided to linger in a room with bottles – perfume bottles, snuff bottles and so on. What is characteristic about these notes, and hence about Gunther's way of working?

Gunther always began by describing what he saw, the signifier, in all its physicality, without any pre-constructed set of parameters or analytical frameworks: "...a slightly irregularly formed flat rectangular dish with a rim about 1.5 cms high, French Sevres porcelain,

1760, pink and bone-coloured, (with, I think, gold etchings)".

When, much later, he describes the Annapelle card, in *Literacy in the New Media Age* (Kress, 2003: 103) he started in the same way:

It is a small card, about 5x 10 cm on quite firm 'cardboard', olive-eucalypt green. ...  
The text is laid out in what I take to be an aesthetically pleasing fashion – it is  
'sculpted' ... Then there is the logo (is it Renaissance Italy or Australian art deco?).

But note that there were also always cultural and historical references – French Sevres porcelain, Renaissance Italy, Australian art deco ... These we would later check, just as art historians do when they try to work out the function and meaning of objects shown in Renaissance art.

But next, the object became a source of *ideas*, and of *questions* which might, for the moment, have remained open, to be returned to later: "In how many domains is language excluded, or inappropriate? Where practices, and objects, speak for themselves?" As it happens, we never used these particular notes. They ended up on the cutting room floor, like other gems I found in my archive when I tried to put this little gallery of Gunther's examples together.

Two of his 'knock-out examples' have special significance for me, because they played a central role in our very first work session together.

I had met Gunther, I think it was 1987, one summer evening in Armidale, a country town in New South Wales. We had been to a small 'Language in education' conference. One of the organizers had invited us to his large country house and we were sitting in his garden, discussing the critical analysis of media speech and writing. After a while, Gunther suggested we do some work together. Two weeks later I sat in the courtyard of his small terrace house in the inner-city suburb of Newtown in Sydney, a few streets away from where I then lived. "What shall we do?" he asked. I said I had always wanted to study 'the language of the image'. He said he had long realized it was no longer viable to analyse media texts without paying attention to the visual – at the time he worked in a Media & Communication School.

So the visual it was to be.

Then he stood up, went inside, and returned a moment later with two little books from the bedroom of his son Michael – Ladybird's *Baby's first book* and Dick Bruna's *On my walk*, the one explaining images with words, the other entirely visual. For almost two hours we talked

about these books. So first of all, we could not even *begin* talking without having an example on the table, and, secondly, the examples he selected were part of his life, books that had *interested* him, as a father reading stories to his young son.

But there is another thing. In picking up *these* two books from Michael's room, without any prior planning, he selected, intuitively, and unfailingly, one in which images were closely tied to language, a clear example of what Roland Barthes had called the 'anchorage' of visual meaning by language, and another which included no language at all. The double page from *Baby's first book* we looked at was titled 'My bath'. The left page contained text ("Every night I have my bath before I go to bed"), and the right page a fairly realistic, detailed drawing of a bath. The page from *On my walk* which we looked at used highly stylized drawings in bold colours – a drawing of a bird in a tree in the centre of the page, and four smaller drawings, one in each of the corners of the page – an aeroplane, another bird in a tree, a cat and a pear.

So how did that second image make meaning? And also, why was it no longer a naturalistic image, but, a composition of rather diverse, and by comparison to 'My bath', rather abstract elements? Did the Bruna example foreshadow new forms of textuality, suited to pluriform, multicultural societies?

As we discussed the two examples, we began to realize, back in 1987, that *On my walk* was a non-linear text which could be read in different ways in different contexts, yet always on the basis of what was there, on the page. Parents, we surmised, could for instance tell a story about a bird and a cat, and that story could be, as we would write in *Reading images*,

“...a political story, a story of powerful predators coming from another continent and native birds killed and threatened with extinction”, a story perhaps appropriate in Australia, or “a story that legitimized the survival of the fittest”. (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 27)

In short, we began to see in 'Bird in tree' the beginnings of a new form of control over meaning, no longer located only in the text itself, but also and importantly in the embedding of the text in its environment, here in the practice of 'reading a bedtime story' where it becomes, as we would write later in *Reading images* “less a text than an organized resource for *making* texts” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 28).



This is the Annapelle card I already mentioned. It, too, has figured in many of Gunther's writings, and it, too, was encountered in the course of his everyday life. "It came", as he wrote in *Literacy in the new media age*, "together with two other cards exactly the same, in a leather purse, sent from Australia in 1996, on the occasion of a birthday, sent as a gift and as a memento from 'home' to us, living now in England" (Kress 2003: 103).

He then described the card, characteristically not allowing himself to be restricted to analytical frameworks that might limit what should and what should not be looked at. Today's handbooks of language and literacy include the aesthetic dimension of texts and the materiality of texts as objects, as artefacts. In 1996 that was uncommon, to say the least. "The text," he wrote,

is laid out in what I take to be an aesthetically pleasing fashion. It is 'sculpted' (it reminds me of the shapes of poems by the seventeenth century poet George Herbert). The makers of the card address me as someone who is interested in something beautiful, as someone who has taste. (Kress 2003: 103)

And he stressed the materiality of the card (Kress 2003: 104):

In the text we need to focus on the discourse of nationalism, of (weakly articulated)

racism, of taste and of contemporary economies ('quality inspection'). But beyond the written text in that narrow sense, we need to focus on quite physical material features of the card. Generically, as card, it relates to business cards and to the social relations of that type of card. In its colour it invokes both a certain idea of Italy, and the colour of the Australian bush. (Kress 2003: 104)

From there he moved to a critique of the concept of genre as uniquely tied to temporal sequence:

Generic meanings are carried as much in the prepositional usage as in the thickness of the card and its glossiness, as much as in the type of card as in the written text. *All these* point to the social meanings that are realized in genre. (Kress 2003: 105)

This drawing by Gunther's son Michael has featured in many of his publications, including *Reading images*, and it has become emblematic of a key aspect of Gunther's developing theoretical outlook. It is, again, an example he encountered in everyday life:

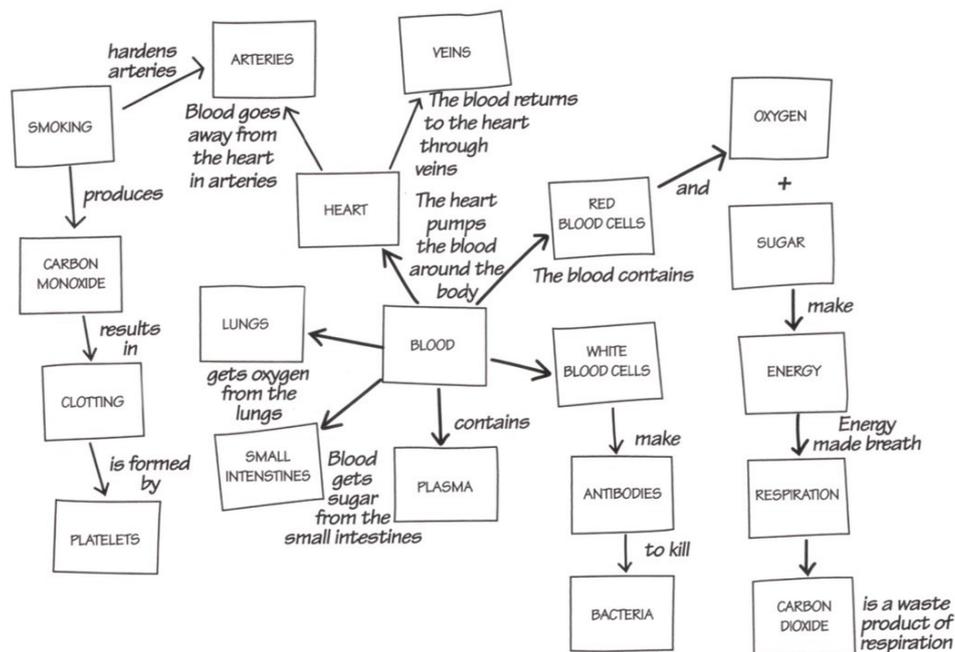
The drawing was made by a three-year-old boy. Sitting on his father's lap, he talked about the drawing as he was doing it: "Do you want to watch me? I'll make a car...got two wheels...and two wheels at the back ...and two wheels here..."...  
"When he had finished he said "[t]his is a car". (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006: 6)

Gunther explained the making of the drawing as an instance of 'sign-making' in which the sign-maker, here Michael, wants to express something, and chooses from the resources available to him what he considers the most apt signifier for doing so. Having just learned to draw circles, the circle is now a resource to him with a range of affordances, including its ability to represent a wheel, which, in turn, can be used to represent a car. Thus Gunther saw sign-

making as, each time, a creative act, and conventions as merely “placing the pressure of constant limitations of conformity on sign-making” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006: 12).

I initially had difficulties with this new development in his ideas. I did not, of course, disagree with his analysis of the child’s thought process, but I questioned whether it could be a model for semiosis generally. I felt that the concept of affordance does not distinguish between socially ratified semiotic resources, meaning potentials with a history, and the latent other semiotic possibilities of resources. But Gunther did not budge.

In time I came to see that he was, once again, ahead of me. Many contemporary forms of communication are not based on conventions, but on vaguely understood provenances (Renaissance Italy or the Australian bush?) and experiential metaphors, such as that the thickness of a card might signify ‘solidity’ and its gloss ‘classiness’. This, I realized, is how meaning is made in the world of identity design and branding, starting with something that needs to be expressed (a ‘brief’), and then choosing apt colour palettes, fonts, materialities, to express it, in a way that must always seem creative and innovative. Hence interpretation of such signs is also creative, also an act of sign-making, just as telling a story on the basis of the Dick Bruna images is also a creative act.



1 second

Dear Diary, I have just left the heart. I had to come from the top right chamber of the heart (right atrium) and squeeze my way through to the right ventricle where the heartbeat got stronger and I left the heart.

- 2 seconds      Dear Diary, I am currently in the lungs. It is terribly cramped in here as the capillaries are tiny and there are millions of us. We have just dropped off oxygen and picked up some carbon dioxide.
- 5 seconds      Dear Diary, we have entered the liver where we had a thorough wash.
- ....

These are two of the key examples emerging from Gunther's work with his colleagues at the Institute of Education in London. I will introduce them in Gunther's words:

The teacher had, in the one instance, asked the children to write a 'story' of the journey of a red blood cell around the body. In the other case the teacher had asked groups of children, two or three in each case, to construct 'concept maps', also of blood circulation. (Kress 2010: 94)

Earlier, in *Reading images*, Gunther and I had set out from the idea that the underlying semantic systems of language and the image overlap, that image and text could make the same meanings, albeit with different means. Transitivity, we argued for instance, is realized in language by the relations between certain kinds of nominal groups or nouns and certain kinds of verbal groups, in images, following Arnheim, by vectors and volumes, but these different signifiers realize the same kinds of meaning.

But later Gunther's began to stress the differences, the *semantic* differences between linguistic and visual representations. Let me give just two examples of how he explained this:

To describe cells linguistically it is necessary to name the relation between cell and nucleus in terms of possession, 'have'. In a visual representation this is not necessary but it is necessary to decide exactly where in the cell that nucleus is located. (Kress 2003: 57)

Different modes have different '*epistemological commitments*' (ibid.). Again, language can express causality: "If, in the diary, we read "I...squeezed my way through" we know that the agent that did the squeezing is the agent who caused this action" (Kress 2003: 57). However, the visual works differently:

In the case of the concept map, movement suggested by the arrows means ‘point of origin’ and ‘point of destination’ or it may mean origin and succession. Causality is not or only very weakly implied, if at all. (ibid.)

Such differences have large implications. When we read a linguistic text, we imagine things differently from others. When we see a film that is adapted from a book we have read, we may be disappointed that the characters are not as we imagined them. As Gunther wrote,

”Imagination, in the sense that it was produced by engagement with the written text, was a move towards an inner world; imagination in the sense that is required by the demands of design – the imposition of order on the representational world – is a move towards action in the outer world. One was the move towards contemplation; the other is a move towards outward action. (Kress 2003: 59)

Throughout his career, Gunther’s ideas always evolved, not least as a result of his unrivalled antenna for sensing changes in the semiotic landscape, and his unfailing ability to find the ‘knockout examples’ that can reveal these changes. It is this that is one of his greatest legacies, that ability to think unfettered by all too rigid preconceptions.

But there is another aspect of his legacy I want to mention here. For Gunther, semiotics was always about dialogue, ideas evolving in conversations about and around those ‘knockout examples’. And those conversations had to be embedded in conviviality.

As we worked on what would become *Reading images*, we would first go for a swim in Sydney’s Nielsen Park, then buy pastries and have breakfast together and begin to talk and make those notes. And later, when we both lived in London, we would walk through London’s parks and galleries and have coffee and pastries in the cafés of those parks and galleries, all well away from university seminar rooms, formal research proposals and funding applications. It is this spirit I hope to keep alive for as long as I can, in memory of, and as a tribute to, Gunther, from whom I have learned more than I will ever be able to express.

## References

Kress, Gunther. 2003. *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge.

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