Theme 1: Word Pictures

Lesson 1: Learning to See

Part 1
Most of us believe it requires little or no effort to perceive the world around us with our eyes. Yet we must be aware of certain facts, mysteries, and problems of human vision if we are to understand and analyze works of art. As reported in a study by Brown University in November 2003:

We perceive the world with apparent ease—we somehow find our car keys on the kitchen table, we drive on congested roadways, we recognize familiar faces in a crowd, and as children we learn to recognize the differences between lions and tigers and bears. We have an unshakeable belief that we "see" the world—that the "images" in our mind are the accurate reflection of an external reality. The problem is thornier than one might at first imagine. For example, there is no color in the world around us; there are simply surfaces that reflect various wavelengths of light. Nonetheless, the perception of color is immediate and vivid. An enormous portion of the human brain is devoted to solving such problems, yet we have only a limited understanding of the mechanisms underlying vision.¹

We spend the first years of our lives learning to understand the visual information that comes to us. The eye and brain work together to translate light into color and the resulting color pattern into usable images, which in this case are pictures of, or at least pictures associated with, things in the physical world.

Processing visual information is a complicated task. For example, we all know that vision depends on light, which bounces off the surface of an object and enters the eyeball. As it enters, however, the light casts an image upside-down on the back wall of the eyeball, called the retina. The result is very much like the reflection in the bowl of a shiny spoon. It takes a moment to recognize the figure in the spoon on the left. The curvature of the spoon, like the curvature of the eyeball, also bends the “straight” lines in an image. (Is the young woman posing in front of a parking garage?) We must learn to adjust the image in our minds, reversing and correcting it, before we can use the visual information around us. Bear in mind that we must process a new image each time we blink, shift focus, or move our eyes.

Part 2
The question of perspective will arise again and again in our discussions. As in the case of image correction, we must also learn in the first years of life to interpret the distortions of distance. Apparent size is an obvious example. Things that look small to us may actually be large things that are far away from

us. Other things that look small to us may really be small. How to tell the difference? On the right is a still photo from the classic Spanish film *Calle Mayor*, featuring the American actress Betsy Blair. Is she really a tiny doll-like woman, as the image clearly shows, or is the director staging this shot to make her look small and vulnerable beside her co-star José Suárez? Chances are that you, as an experienced and educated viewer of the physical world and of films, would not be baffled by the visual distortion in this scene, having learned to filter such optical illusions. And yet undeniably, the director Antonio Bardem is banking that the dramatic size difference between these two characters would register on an emotional level, increasing your sense of unease even as you “correct” the distortion. After all, the man is only toying with the woman’s affections to win a bet with his friends...

Look again at the photo of the two actors from *Calle Mayor*. Have you noticed two other distortions, just as important as the illusion of size?

These people seem to inhabit a world without color, where light exists in a visual spectrum from white to black with only gradations of gray in between. To almost all human eyes, that world is an impossibility. We see in color. And yet we accept black and white photographs, films, drawings, and etchings as convincingly realistic images. We translate this colorless information into recognizable things that do in fact have color.

The viewer’s interpretation of the image has automatically “corrected” the apparent smallness of Betsy Blair by substituting depth for size. José Suárez happens to be closer to the camera, which operates here as our movie eye, and so appears to loom over the shrunken actress. And yet they are really flat images inhabiting an absolutely two-dimensional world. There is no depth between them at all. Why do we see them, then, in the round?

**Part 3**
This course is not primarily concerned with the biology, physiology, or psychology of vision. It is concerned instead with seeing. We have just examined ways in which each of us has learned to interpret the raw visual information of eye and brain in meaningful ways. Though we may have been born with sight, with that miraculous gift of vision, we were not born seeing.

Everyone here online, reading the text on this page, had to learn to read English. Consider for a moment what that entailed. The eye and brain had to be carefully trained to locate and identify a number of symbols—visible shapes we call letters. Like all linguistic systems, English began as a purely spoken language and only gradually evolved a written form as well. That form is still evolving. Currently, in addition to all manner of unvoiced punctuation marks, modern English requires a 52-letter alphabet (26 lower case and 26 upper case), each letter associated with a particular sound pattern. It may be that our alphabet is more phonetic in theory
than in practice. I speak of phonetic in the sense that words are supposedly spelled the way they sound and sound the way they are spelled.

Spelling often seems arbitrary to the beginner, more the result of convention than of logic. Leaving aside for now the plethora of silent letters, did you ever wonder about the same sound made by the letter \( C \) and the letter \( S \) in many words (space, society, cease, etc.) or by the letter \( C \) and the letter \( K \) (Calvin Klein)? Check out the Simplified Spelling Society’s [Wy chanje English spelling?](https://example.com) page for further complaints.

Yet the beginner gradually does learn to see each letter and piece those letters together into words. It takes much practice, but after years of frustration, trial and error, and memorization of the many so-called exceptions to the spelling rules, we manage to read complete texts with little or no effort. Of course, now and then—let’s say in university courses—we come across texts that demand all our concentration; and as we master those texts, we become even better readers and thinkers.

**Part 4**

Reading also demands some fairly abstract thinking. Consider the correspondence, if any, between a particular word and the thing which it signifies. The word *egg*, for instance. Say it aloud. The word certainly doesn’t sound like a real egg in the ear or taste like a real egg in the mouth as we speak it. Look at the written word spelled *e-g-g*. It certainly doesn’t look like an egg. True, we could write the word in such a way as to suggest somewhat the color and shape of an ordinary hen’s egg:

But what of other kinds of eggs? Or other meanings of *egg*, as in to egg someone on, to encourage or incite someone to do something? Such an approach—picture writing, pictographs, ideograms, or word art—is at least cumbersome when not impractical. In any event, giving color and shape to every word would only work with those words having to do with the concrete and the visual. And when reading aloud, how would we communicate color and shape?

No, we are stuck with a word that has no sensory relation at all to the thing we call an egg. If that relation does not reside in our senses, it must be mental. Since the Middle Ages, the majority of those who study words and meaning have
believed that words do not in fact signify things. Words signify concepts. In this case the concept might be called **egg-ness**, a far more expansive and slippery meaning than any physical egg. In 1916, in the midst of avant-garde revolutions in painting and literature, a major work by the pioneer structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure was published, in which he emphasized the completely arbitrary relationship between a linguistic sign and what that sign refers to. We will return to this question of signification later, when discussing modern art and literature.

The reading process becomes ever more complex as word follows word, creating constellations of meaning: phrases, sentences, paragraphs, entire texts that, in turn, relate to other texts. Not only must we read the text as written; we must also read something into the text in order to approach its meaning. A shopping list must be read differently than a poem. The instructions on a package of macaroni and cheese, though wholly written, are not Holy Writ. Matters of style and usage invariably affect meaning. As does experience.

In our first years, then, we learn the spoken words and eventually the written words that comprise our English language. From that point on, each word becomes ever richer with the experiences we bring to it. The word becomes inseparable from other words and other experiences. It becomes personal, part of our own lives, which, in addition to enriching us, can also lead to all kinds of miscommunications. Someone may hear exactly what we say, and yet apply to our words a meaning wholly unintended. As we read the texts in this course, we may sometimes find ourselves unsure of the meaning of a verse or sentence or entire work. That is the nature, not of literature, but of language itself.

This glimpse into the complexities of language may be enough to give anyone a headache, but it makes an important point. Would any of us ever claim that he or she had been born able to read words, sentences, paragraphs, texts? We learned to read relatively late in life (at five, six, or seven) and all of us remember something of the years it took us to learn. Given the nature of memory, however, we cannot remember much of the years it took us to learn how to see. We were too young. Unless we later enrolled in a drawing or painting class, unless we bought a sophisticated camera that required us to look at the world in a different way, unless something got us to look at how we look, we may well think that we were born seeing.

Just as we had to learn to read textual or text-based information, we also had to learn to read visual information. We have already touched on a number of aspects of this kind of reading. Now it is time to build up our vocabulary.