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Visual Grammar: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Based on a database query and a manual search of Nordic literature about visual grammar, this article provides an overview analysis of six Norwegian contributions. The question in mind during this analysis concerns how the current academic theory of visual grammar is presented, and in particular, its purpose, the way it is systematized, its degree of theoretical discussion and its view of knowledge. In different ways, these contributions have an art- and/or design educational purpose. From this overview analysis, three elected topics were discussed: The degree of systematic and schematic representation, the discussion of the origin and construction of visual grammar, and the context defined norms regarding the use of visual language. This discussion is meant to pave the way for the subsequent development of an academic textbook where visual grammar would be presented in a contextual perspective.

Keywords: Academic textbook analysis, visual grammar, art- and design education, Art and Crafts, visual literacy, visual genre, primary- and secondary school
Introduction

More or less, visual grammar is part of any design process, regardless of the designer’s awareness of this knowledge. There are many theories about visual grammar, where authors have discussed the various ways how one can form abstract and concrete meanings through the compilation of dot, line-, light-, colour- and volume characteristics. In the Norwegian Knowledge Promotion Reform, *Kunnskapsløftet* (2006), within the compulsory Art and Crafts subject, the study of visual communication obtained status as one of five main topics. The knowledge of visual grammar constitutes a substantial part of this content. At the same time, *Kunnskapsløftet* has challenging wording regarding the clarification of competence targets connected to visual grammar: “(...) the student should be able to use contrasts between diagonal, horizontal and vertical directions in simple compositions (...)” (*Kunnskapsdeparmentet* 2006, English translation).

The content of visual grammar is demanding because of its abstract character. The tacit design principles that underlie much of the practical activities require a systematic and verbal form to reach the unskilled pupil. A theoretical and systematic representation is required. But it is uncertain what the established extent of this theoretical platform was when the Norwegian curriculum was implemented in 2006. The question about this clarification has also led to an increased need for new professional literature within the Nordic art and design educational-field. Correspondingly, this is also the challenge within higher education in Norway. Through educational programs, the student meets strong requirements having language disclosure for practical subjects. The student should be able to make clear evaluation criterion where knowledge of visual “language rules” constitute a substantial part of the subject content (*Lutnes* 2011; *Utdanningsdirektoratet* 2011). Based on the teacher’s work in the Norwegian primary and secondary school, a development of Nordic terminology is essential for professional practice (*Schwach and Brandt* 2005; *Schwach, Brandt and Dalseng* 2012).

Through a small pilot study, I have analysed “active” literature on visual grammar for higher education within the field of art and design education. The purpose of this article is to analyse the content of existing literature, which addresses the subject of Art and Crafts within teaching university colleges in Norway. The intention of such an analysis is to make room for subsequent development of an academic book where visual grammar is presented in context. This analysis gathers information about how academic theory of visual grammar is presented in Art and Crafts educational literature. The systematic verbalization of this subject matter has both an art and design academic content and, at the same time, a distinct educational objective.

Research Method and Sources of Knowledge

In order to map the existing academic literature on visual grammar within Nordic student literature, a database search comprised part of this article’s research sources. The available databases and the design of relevant search terms have helped refine the scope. Given the fairly broad search terms, I have attempted to identify books with an educational approach.

It is challenging to define good keywords for the theme, as there are many terms used for visual grammar. These theories have different names, even though much of the content is similar. The databases used were Idunn, Google Scholar, Bibsys and Norart. The restricted access to the large database is the weak point in this pilot study.
With various combinations of words translated into Norwegian, Danish and Swedish, the search words for this database query were: form/shape, or visual grammar, or design, or composition theory/learning, or visual tool, or visual design, or imagery, or design element, or design principles or formal aesthetics. The search was limited to a time frame of 20 years. For literature dated later than 1992 I defined as “inactive”. The time limit was relatively random and thus excluded older literature that, despite having a long life, could still be “active” literature in the relevant scientific community. In total, the search in the various databases showed that only a small number of publications addressed the topic of visual grammar in an educational perspective. Each search resulted in low detection rate and it was not until the time limitation was increased to 30 years that the detection rate also increased. The low detection rate led to a second manual search, where all educational institutions specializing in the Art and Crafts in Norway were questioned about their curriculum on the topic visual grammar/composition theory or design elements and principles. 8 of 14 institutions responded to the question.

From the database query and the manual search, six Norwegian contributions could be defined as active literature on the topic visual grammar (four books, a compendium and an article). Based on Søren Kjørup’s pragmatic and situational understanding of knowledge the forthcoming text focuses primarily on the contribution’s purpose, the systematics and the degree of theoretical discussion.

Norwegian Contributions on Visual Grammar

The low detection rate in the database query may indicate that the topic of visual grammar in a Nordic art and crafts educational context has a limited scope, but it probably also shows that the field lacks the established concepts of the subject, and that the concept formation is unstable.

The database search that provided the highest results dealt with the theory of image analysis, both from semiotic and iconographic perspectives. This literature “makes use” of visual grammar, but without being questioned or discussed as an independent theory. Several of the teacher training institutions expressed that within the limited available literature on the topic visual grammar, they refer to theory of iconographic image analysis, mainly the book *Når bilder formidler* (When pictures convey) by Gunnar Danbolt and Siri Meyer (1988). Visual grammar works here as a tool to analyse other people’s (the artists) expressions and it is not presented as knowledge acquisition needed in the performer’s role. In these books the content of an artist’s work constitutes the basic structure, and the visual grammar involved depends on the artwork presented. Meyer and Danbolt’s book on image analysis makes use of visual grammar, but does not explain it explicitly. The visual grammar that is presented through image analysis perspective fell outside the field specific literature that this pilot study examines.

Other sources that also deal with visual grammar are different books about photography. These book titles both show photo-technical issues and knowledge of different compositional principles. Also, the literature on graphic design, layout and media design examines visual grammar, where sales motives and market needs characterize text and image illustrations. Image creation under both these categories relate to specific professions and the audiences for whom the professionals work.

From the manual search on teacher training literature, one textbook written for upper secondary school was also in use (Elvestad, Løvstad and Strømme 2006). Since
this pilot study refers to an academic teacher-training context, this textbook is not included, even though it has interesting aspects concerning the topic of visual grammar.

As mentioned, this pilot study revealed six contributions corresponding to the delimitations of the study. The first is an article Mennesket og tingen (The man and the thing) written by Gisbert Dunker (2011), which refers to a second contribution, the compendium Form og bilde (Shape and image) by Axel Mørch (1994). The third book is written by Christian Leborg (2004), and finally the books Om stygt og pent (About ugly and pretty) (1994) by Odd Brochmann, Grunnbok i bildeskaping (Basic book on image creation) (2003), by Aggi A. Folgerø Johannessen and Blikk for bilder: En liten billed grammatikk (A look at pictures: A small picture grammar), by Gunnar Danbolt.

Dunker’s article discusses the three-dimensional shape, while my literature search was meant to include theories about the two-dimensional format. Dunker refers to Axel Mørch’s theory, “(...) a system that characterizes and classifies the main constituents of the image” (English translation). Dunker describes Mørch’s concept “form element” and “aesthetic functions”, and the contribution serves as a revitalization of a theory that has left traces in the Norwegian Art and Crafts educational context. The manual search reveals that Mørch still is a part of the curriculum in five of the teacher training institutions. Thus, Mørch’s compendium, Shape and image, could be defined as “active” literature on visual grammar.

Christian Leborg’s book Visual Grammar mainly problematises the two-dimensional shape, but through a descriptive and neutral approach, the theoretical exposition also becomes relevant to the study of the three-dimensional shape. The distinction between a two- and a three-dimensional shape is overlapping and, therefore, only works partially as a demarcation. In Danbolt’s book there is one chapter named A small picture grammar, where a “picture” is defined as two-dimensional shape. Brochmann’s book primarily represents the visual grammar associated with three-dimensional objects, but also shares terminology used about two-dimensional shapes. Dividing between two- and three-dimensional expressions is thus less significant for the delimitation.

**Christian Leborg: Visuell grammatikk (Visual grammar)**

The book Visual Grammar (2004) is both addressed to performers and teachers within the field of visual communication. The book classifies visual language grammar systematically, and acts as an aid to the verbalization of what the visual object is, or can make (Leborg 2004, p. 4). With a very limited amount of text and a rich number of schematic illustrations, Leborg manages to define the fundamentals of form-elements as well as the relationships between them. The basic elements are roughly divided into two main categories: 1) Abstract objects and structures and 2) Concrete objects and structures. To depict the relationship between the basic elements names such as 3) Activities and 4) Relationships were given. Categories number one and two can be explained as visual language’s building blocks, while categories three and four act as the building principle.
The book’s very general character and the neutral descriptive approach to visual grammar invite a broad audience. The book describes visual grammatical issues without touching on normative aesthetics. Leborg describes various shapes: “geometric”, “organic” and “random”; and different activities: “mirroring”, “rotation” and “repetition”. Leborg yields no image examples in which he discusses how, for instance, repetition functions in one image composition as a positive or negative reinforcement. Leborg communicates a neutral, almost relativistic sight of knowledge.

**Gisbert Dunker: Mennesket og tingen (The man and the thing)**

Dunker’s article *The man and the thing* (part 2, About things as a man’s document, English translation) (2011) systematises grammar into two systems, one through Axel Mørch’s schematic representation, and the other references an unpublished oral note about“(…) the form’s organization and context” with Paul Gowland. Through a phenomenological approach, Dunker discusses various aspects of the issues of shapes. The article problematises form concepts, and is tangential to Leborg’s main categories 1) and 2). But parts of the text also thematise the design principles, through the terms of “power” and “communication”. The article does not try to systematise or categorize visual grammar, but with the help of good photo illustrations, the writer contemplates flat and spatial shapes, composed shape, the power of shape, shape signal, the recognition, communication, play, seriousness and about clear and ambiguous shapes. Even though the article is not characterized by classification and overview from an
educational point of view, it is interesting how the author vaguely takes position and
discusses the use of visual grammar, where certain aesthetic standards apply to “the
good” shape. As a distinction from Leborg, Dunker claims that it is important to discuss
whether a shape is clear or ambiguous, if it is “finished” or not, and if the shape
communicates clearly or ambiguously. Dunker’s article can be characterised as
representative for a vague objective knowledge understanding.

Odd Brochmann: Om stygt og pent (About ugly and beauty)

Even though the book About ugly and beauty (1994) was first printed in 1953, it was
still included in this analysis. The 4th edition of the book was published in 1994, and
was also translated into several languages. The high issue number of the book
communicates its position in the field of art, design and architecture. Brochmann
discusses visual grammar in an unpretentious manner. The book, About ugly and
beauty, is a compelling portrayal of Brochmann’s normative aesthetics conveyed
through everyday “form problems”, relating to material culture and visual
environment. In contrast to the somewhat normative language tone in the beginning of
the book, Brochmann conveys, in Chapter 5, that the norms of order and disorder,
pleasure and pain, ugly and pretty in a man’s encounter with visual culture are first and
foremost dependent on cultural conditions. From this he defines the concept “style”,
where he explains how people from different times value varying qualities, from the
abstract, the organic or the functional expression of form (Brochmann 1994, p. 79).
Different styles characterize different eras. In addition to practicing visual grammar in
different ways, depending upon the style choice and time flow, Brochmann argues that
certain grammatical laws are “eternal” and can be explained through nature’s eternal
voice and influence. Brochmann’s book contains a variety of hand-drawn illustrations,
which systematize visual grammar. At the same time, Brochmann manages to comment
on the good and bad practices of these design elements and design principles, through
a contextual perspective. He shows, for example, various interior problems. The
illustrations of the interior cases convey how visual disorder obtains a noisy function,
while grouping as an organizing principle creates a feeling of pleasure. Of the six
Norwegian contributions, Brochmann is the only one that also visualizes examples in
“bad” visual language usage, something that strengthens and makes the message
clearer. Brochmann’s book conveys a contextual concept of knowledge, where some
aesthetic “laws” delimitate situations, and the style-phenomenon is used to define them.

Aggi A. Folgerø Johannessen: Grunnbok i bildekaping
(Elementary book of image creation)

The book, Elementary book of image creation (2003), consists of assignment texts
for children, where the purpose is, “(…) to teach the students to free the line, and to
explore and acknowledge the room” (English translation). Johannessen addresses the
book for teaching students, and others teaching art. The book does not provide an
introduction to visual grammar as a systematic theory, but presents many of the design
principles sporadically. One of the chapters has the title Composition with subtitles
about the golden ratio, diagonals and horizon lines. Another chapter is about
proportions, two chapters thematise colour theory, and one presents the
representation of room and volume. Otherwise, the book provides an introduction to
various image-techniques. An image analysis of famous works of art can be found
throughout the book in order to emphasize the overall theme. The book has an unclear
structure, and this is partly due to the fact that the subject matter is difficult to grasp. The book communicates a clear expectation that the student is the receiver of the content, that the language is personal, that the content is practical and that all together this communicates a strong engagement. The author’s voice comes close to the reader. Regarding the audience of the book, the students in higher education, the content is somewhat arbitrary and lacks a critical discussion of the theoretical knowledge. The writer does not problematise the existence of the design principles, whether this knowledge can be explained as a social construction, a natural science phenomenon or a total relativistic construction. Nevertheless, the text communicates, underlying, a normative aesthetic perspective, and that these norms have a natural anchoring (Johannessen 2003, s. 36-41).

**Axel Mørch: Form og bilde (Shape and image)**

Through a number of years the compendium *Shape and image* (1994) has been compulsory reading in several studies, offered at Telemark University College (HiT). Mørch himself has been an academic employee at HiT. Together with Oslo and Akershus University College (HiOA), HiT is one of the largest institutions in Norway, with higher education in the field of art and crafts education. Even though Mørch’s contribution is from a relatively older date, his work remains vital since specialists still refer to his literature (Dunker 2011, and various master theses at HiT). Mørch systematised visual grammar in a schematic model (Figure 2). He visualized the concepts “aesthetical element” and “aesthetical functions”, and also related to the logical structure and division between design elements and design principles. At the same time, Mørch discusses the origin of design elements and principles ("formalestetikk", Norwegian translation), as a theoretical concept. Mørch illustrations made comments on concepts such as harmony, contrast and proportionality. Through these illustrations, Mørch values the different form compositions and he expressed a value-laden opinion about beauty. As opposed to Leborg, Mørch emphasized exemplary use of visual grammar, and explained how design elements and principles are rooted in universal “laws” of nature. It is especially interesting how Mørch depicts the origin of design elements and design principles, in the first part of the compendium, he argues that the educational context must strive for “(...) an objectivity in the assessment and analysis of the form-relations.” (English translation)With references to futurism, expressionism and surrealism, the thought of holistic aesthetics (“helhetlig estetikk”, Norwegian translation), Gestalt psychology and perceptual organization, Mørch shows how different academic environments have confirmed an objective (universal “law”) understanding of visual grammar (Mørch 1994, p. 2-6).
Gunnar Danbolt: Blikk for bilder (A look at Pictures)

The chapter, A small picture grammar, within Danbolt’s book A look at pictures (2002), visualizes 10 relations found through the systematic analyses of the fine arts, limited to two dimensional pictures. The visual angle, lightning, modelling, texture, room/space, the character of a surface, movement, balance, colour and composition constitutes the content. The author discusses how visual tools are systematically repeated during the creation of art-works throughout history. These visual tools are thoroughly explained with support from art history examples. This presentation reveals different art history styles, and Danbolt shows how these styles are constructed by different visual rules. Even though these visual references and genres are narrowly limited to fine arts history, the combination of systematized visual grammar and the use of it make an exquisite explanation. Like March, Danbolt also emphasized exemplary use of visual grammar, but explained how visual elements and principles are rooted in socially constructed “laws” of art.

Deliberation on Visual Grammar as an Academic Textbook

From the analysis above, the following text will discuss different relevant themes for the development of an academic book in this area. The forthcoming chapter is organized into three parts: Systematic and schematic representation, the origin and construction of visual grammar, and context defined norms regarding visual language use.

Both Leborg and March systematized the theory of visual grammar in categories supported by schematic illustrations. These models represent a systematic overview, and involve the development of a visual grammar terminology. Leborg’s systematising is characterized by a far greater scope and nuance than the “rough categorization”, developed by March. However, Leborg’s terminologies sometimes complicate the content of visual grammar. He uses, for example, visual reproductions instead of visual
signs or two-dimensional expressions. He does not apply the term composition, but instead activities and relationships. Leborg’s terms are precise, but at the same time, it is sometimes difficult to grasp them because of their unfamiliarity. Also, Leborg’s first attempt at systematizing the theory in a visual manner is too wide and, as a result, extensive and diffuse (see Figure 1). This model could be strengthened by reducing the amount of main-categories and terms through a schematic rough division of the content. In such a way, the model could communicate the logic structure of Leborg’s theorises. As a difference from Mørch, Leborg divided between “abstract” and “concrete” objects and structures. The differentiation describes how the abstract object, like the point, is an ideal form and that a representation cannot be done physically. If one draws a point, he creates not a point but a surface or a volume (Leborg 2004, p. 9). The latter exemplifies the precision and accuracy of Leborg’s definitions. But explaining the complicated division between abstract and concrete objects and structures in a visual model has its weaknesses. The abstract/concrete division could be replaced by an explanatory verbal text, which provides more accuracy and nuances concerning its demanding content. To summarize: Leborg explores figures and terms in depth, and it is precisely this in-depth approach that gives credibility and accuracy to the theory. By the development of more accessible terms and a more logic, simplified schematic model overview, one could constitute the basic structure of a new visual grammar academic book. A first draft of an alternative visual model is presented in Figure 3.
Figure 3. Alternative model, developing Nordic terminology on visual grammar, inspired by March and Leborg.
Another aspect where most of the six contributions are insufficient is an introductory discussion of visual grammar in a social and historical perspective. Mørch is partially doing it, and introduces the theory of Shape and Image by unravelling the phenomenon “Visual order”. He discusses how different studies of art history and Gestalt’s psychology could explain visual order as a result of the objective “nature law” understanding of aesthetics (“det estetisk visuelle plan”, Norwegian translation) (Mørch 1994, p. 1). But Mørch does not deliberate on how the “nature law” understanding could be one of several discourses explaining the construction of a visual grammar.

To analyse the concept of visual grammar as a social construction that is based on a pragmatic and situational understanding of knowledge (Kjørup 1996, p. 26), the approach emphasizes how visual grammar, formally and informally, has become established as truth within a limited social context. Despite a narrow exemplifying of visual culture, only related to fine arts history, Danbolt’s contribution communicates a somewhat situational understanding of visual grammar. The knowledge construction is not a part of Danbolt’s discussion, but the art historic style perspective is situational in itself.

There are many historical analysis of art and design education that can nuance Danbolt’s and Mørch’s theorisations, as characterized by a social constructionist interpretation horizon. Jorunn Spord Borgen (1995), Karen Brænne (2005; 2009), Jan Michl (1996), Helene Illeris (2002) and Arthur Efland (1996) explain the origin of the autonomous design principles (formalestetikk, Norwegian translation) as a result of a modern design thinking, formulated through contributions from the German Staatliches Bauhaus (Spiller 1961 a and b; Kandinsky 1979). Brænne moreover discusses how this understanding can be explained both as the result of a modernist idiom, and also as a result of a perception psychology, rooted in natural science, according to Mørch (1994). The perception psychological perspective focuses “aesthetic considerations” as a result of certain organizing tendencies in the brain. It excludes the valuation of certain aesthetic expressions that could be explained by an inexplicable aesthetic autonomy, often linked to a genius-dimension (Brænne 2009, p. 121). The modernist horizon is more subjectively grounded than the “objective nature-scientific” explanation.

Also Efland distinguishes between a romantic and a rational understanding of modernity. To the rational, Efland identifies “Elements of Design”, where the significant form is the objective and systematic experimentation method. Then Efland relates this rational understanding to the ideas of futurism and functionalism. The romantic understanding of modernity Efland defines as “The Creative Self-Expression”, also characterized by visual “language rules”, but which are informal and unexpressed (Efland 1996; Brænne 2009).

Through contextualization of the concept visual grammar, the philosophy of Art and Crafts education is also debated. By such a philosophical framework the intended academic book can generate the student’s ability to critical position an academic content, and to understand how knowledge always has been in flux.

Brochmann’s book, especially chapter 5, “(...) which deals with the perception of beauty and ugly, and what the word style means (...),” contain interesting aspects concerning design principles and visual “genre”. Being able to “practice” visual grammar is an essential part of an art and crafts teacher’s professional competence. With reference to Leborg’ s visual grammar, this theory could work as a verbalizing tool explaining what visual objects mean, and to a certain degree their function. But the
exposition does not discuss how certain design principles can strengthen or weaken a visual expression, depending upon context and visual “genre”. When a student designs a poster for a child circus, with a colourful, lush and savage expression, it is probable that other design principles will be applied then when designing a poster for a classical concert. To verbalize and illustrate how design principles are determined by different contexts, an academic book should contain a normative approach within defined genres. A discussion of quality is underlying, and points to a current and important topic in secondary and primary school, the challenge of evaluation. Both the theory of visual grammar and a discussion of “good” and “bad” visual language use has particular relevance in the teaching situation. Although such normative representations may seem naive and simplified, I find them to be an honest, presupposed style and context specific account. The clarification gives the students the opportunity to understand what criteria their work should accommodate. And from this, developing their own assessment skills, related to pupils’ achievements. To question visual language use is to realize visual grammar.

Closing remarks

In addition to an increased focus on assessment in the Norwegian school system, the art- and design area is in the process of developing an academic discipline, named the Making Discipline (Dunin-Woyseth 2001). A consequence of this development is an increased interest in investigating the character of systematic language or literacy, understood both verbally and visually (Nielsen 2008). The number of completed doctoral degrees, publication-channels and international conferences confirm that the research field of Nordic art- and design education is growing. However, the extent of how the increased research activity and the development of a systematic language will infiltrate and influence the daily life of education and practical activities have been hardly explored. There is always a risk that an academic field moves away from the ground level to deal with theoretical aspects with limited relevance concerning practical tasks. At the same time the participants of a ground level, mainly involved in a practical core activity, could be in danger of ignoring research results. Research publications may seem inaccessible because of their academic form, and most of the art and crafts professionals are deeply employed in practical problem solving. To develop an academic book on the topic of visual grammar and Nordic design terminology, it is possible to increase the frequency of contact between practice and research. The analysis of the six contributions is a modest start to mapping the literature that already addresses the theme. From these six publications, it is obvious that further clarification and deepening of visual grammar can enhance art- and design educational practice.

References

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