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Cook: Understanding Pictures in Papua New Guinea

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Note

1 Kunzie does not place himself in this context and cites neither Angela Carter’s nor Michel Foucault’s work in his extensive bibliography.

References


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Students of the visual media have often found it necessary to point out that “Western” systems of “realistic” pictorial representation are no less conventional than the systems developed in other picture-making traditions. In other words, in the former case no less than in the latter, the development of representational rules has been a matter of social validation and transmission. However, many writers have also taken the further step of equating “conventional” with “arbitrary” and, consequently, insisting that even the most “realistic” product of “Western” picture-making (e.g., an ordinary photograph) must be incomprehensible to a viewer who is unfamiliar with pictures of this sort.

Despite the existence of numerous anthropological anecdotes and some systematic studies that have been taken to be supportive of this position, there are compelling theoretical reasons for accepting the contrary claim, namely, that certain aspects of the interpretation of “Western”-style pictures should not be influenced appreciably by the viewer’s degree of familiarity with such pictures. In particular, J. J. Gibson has demonstrated that “Western”-style pictures typically reproduce many of the kinds of information which “non-pictorial” visual perception makes use of (e.g., see Gibson 1971), while Hochberg (1972) has shown that the inevitable absence of some of these kinds of information from pictures is no impediment to the analogical use of “real-life” perceptual mechanisms in pictorial interpretation. Strong support for this position has come not only from cross-cultural research but also from several other kinds of studies (e.g., with animals; see Kennedy 1974 for an excellent summary of this material). Nevertheless, the issue is still controversial, and many of its details remain completely unexplored. Bruce Cook’s work on pictorial interpretation in Papua New Guinea is a useful contribution toward untangling the controversy and probing some of these details.

Cook’s book describes the results of a series of interviews with 423 villagers from several locations in Papua New Guinea. Most of the informants had “traditional” occupations (e.g., farming), and half of them were literate. Their previous experience (if any) with pictures is not described in as much detail as one would wish, but it can be inferred that this experience was limited. The interviews were based primarily on several sets of picture-stories produced specifically for this study and dealing with local subjects (e.g., a
woman growing and fetching corn, a man building a grass hut). Each story consisted of four drawings, and each set of four drawings was produced in five different styles: stick-figure drawings, faceless outline drawings, detailed black-and-white drawings, detailed drawings with color, and black-and-white photographs. The informants were asked to perform such tasks as telling a story based on the pictures, identifying specific components of the pictures, and choosing among alternative orderings of the four pictures in each story.

In certain respects, the results of this study can be summarized quite simply. Even in the case of the least detailed representations tested here, some of the objects represented appeared to cause interpretational difficulties for almost none of the informants, regardless of degree of previous experience with pictures. In particular, the overall rate for correct identification was 97 percent for human figures and 96 percent for tools and weapons. This finding is clearly supportive of the argument that at least some aspects of "Western" pictorial conventions are not arbitrary. If establishing this point were one's sole concern, it would not be necessary to probe any further into the results of the study. For a more precise understanding of pictorial interpretation, however, one must look more closely at those aspects of the task which did cause difficulties for Cook's informants.

An interesting example of a picture that was not interpreted as intended occurred in the picture-story of a woman growing and fetching corn. The second picture in this story depicts the corn in the process of growing and is bracketed by a picture of the woman planting and a picture of the woman harvesting the fully grown corn. Although identification of the corn does not seem to have been a problem, few of Cook's informants were able to infer that passage of time was being implied in the second picture. On the basis of this and other related findings, Cook concludes that the use of single pictures to portray passage of time is likely to be problematic for preliterate viewers, but a pair of more precise observations may be added to this: First, the implication of time passing would undoubtedly have been incomprehensible to any viewer who did not see this picture as part of the series mentioned above. Second, many of Cook's informants—especially the preliterate—were apparently unfamiliar with the "Western" comic-book convention of "reading" frames from left to right and from top to bottom. Consequently, it is quite likely that the reason for their "misinterpretation" in this instance was lack of awareness of the appropriate contextual boundaries within which to search for meaning.

With reference to pictures in a series, the point just made should be insightfully obvious. But it can be extended somewhat less obviously to some of the aspects of single pictures that appear to have posed interpretational obstacles to Cook's informants and, indeed, to inexperienced viewers in other studies. Typically, what these viewers seem to have trouble interpreting is features of pictures which, in and of themselves, lack sufficient structural integrity to permit identification, regardless of the viewer's degree of pictorial "sophistication," and which, therefore, can only be interpreted as elements in a broader structure—that is, in the context of the picture as a whole. Examples: fire or the horizon line in Cook's study, a road or the outline of a hill in other research (e.g., Kilbride and Robbins 1969). It might well be, then, that viewers' "problems" with such pictorial elements stem from insufficient familiarity with the conventions by which the various parts of a design on a page are treated as belonging to the representation of a single "scene." Since many of those conventions (e.g., a frame line surrounding the picture) surely are arbitrary, this hypothesis is a plausible way of tying together several of the findings of interpretational difficulty in Cook's study and in related research.

Cook himself does not offer either this or any other integrative theoretical scheme to account for his findings, since the focus of his book is mainly on methodology and the practical implications of his study. In both of these areas the book is an admirable achievement. The methodological discussion is especially impressive. It is consistently sensitive to the point of view and social circumstances of the informants, and in this respect the study should be a positive example for other investigators. Of particular importance is Cook's demonstration that several previous findings of "naive" viewers' inability to interpret pictorial depth cues (e.g., Hudson 1960) could be due to the investigators' misinterpretation of their informants' use of terms for distance (pp. 62–64). The book concludes with useful advice for people engaged in development campaigns. Although these people are in fact Cook's primary intended audience, his findings should clearly be of more general interest to anyone concerned with pictures as communication.

References

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- Kennedy, John M.
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