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Integrating Image and Text: Where one story ends, another begins

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Abstract

Stories may be read independently through images or text but their power to convey the experiences of others can be much greater when one provides a context for interpreting the other. Photographs and written responses provided by children and young people through their participation in an international project, Voices of Children, attest to the many layers of meaning that can be gained through the intersections of images and text. Playful images that present pictures of an idealised childhood are often at odds with the fear and distress that is conveyed through the written word. On the other hand, the aspirations and ambitions of young people as they write about their hopes for the future stand in contrast to the images that reflect the context in which their lives are lived. Reading across images and text is necessary if we are to gain an understanding of the lives of others.

Integrating Image and Text: Where one story ends, another begins

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Introduction

Tim Edensor (2005) argues that a photograph can capture the texture of a place by conveying the ‘feel’ of the location through the visual information it carries. This information may be difficult to express in writing, particularly if it evokes emotions that defy written expression. Edensor (2005 in Rose 2007: 248) refers to the ‘experiential qualities’ of images and, in relation to his documentation of industrial ruins, he writes:

Photographs are never merely visual but in fact conjure up synaesthetic and kinaesthetic effects, for the visual provokes other sensory responses”. The textures and tactilities, smells, atmospheres and sounds of ruined spaces, together with the signs and objects they accommodate, can be empathetically conjured up by visual material (p.16).

Commenting on Sekula’s work, Burgin (1982) suggests that:

the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the possibility of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear ‘semantic outcome’ (p. 91).

Some researchers (for example, Doug Harper, John Berger and Marcus Banks) suggest that images alone, presented as photo-essays, have the potential to convey information and understandings that require no written or spoken word as accompaniment. For example, Sam Taylor-Wood makes photographs and films that ‘examine, through highly charged scenarios, our shared social and psychological conditions’ (White Cube 2007). Tracey Moffat, a noted

Australian photographer, captures moments and tells stories of the suburban and mundane through strong and provocative photo-essays. Moffat assembles her photos to construct the effect of implied narrative, often sequential or self-contained.

While photographers such as Moffat plan execute and reflect on their work, many other photographers capture their world as a moment in time. As Masur (2007) maintains, 'ours is as much a visual culture as a written or oral one' (p.1) and images in the form of 'snapshots' (shooting quickly and with little or no aim) have an important role to play. 'Snapshots exert an undeniable power' (Masur 2007: 1) in capturing particular moments, transcending time, reflecting trends and highlighting recurrent themes in our lives.

Images, then, may be read on their own and will perhaps convey information that is not available through other means. As Riessman (2007) suggests 'investigators are moving beyond realism and illustration as images become 'texts' to be read interpretively (as written transcripts are)' (p.142).

There is continuing debate about this issue (Rose 2007) but it is reasonable to argue that where images and text act to supplement one another, the broader context that this provides will encourage the development of more informed understandings by an audience than one or the other on its own would do. According to Riessman (2007), rather than just speaking for themselves, images need commentary. The camera alone cannot record what is evident in the world, rather 'we have to make arguments in words about images, [and] contextualise and interpret them in light of theoretical questions in our respective fields' (Riessman 2007: 143).

As White (1981: 20 cited in Rimmon-Kenan 2006: 14) suggests, images and texts both contain narrative properties and our fascination with the stories they tell occurs because, in them, 'reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience'. A narrative approach to interpreting the images and words produced by others provides a means of developing insight into their perspectives, allowing us to gain a 'feel' for their experiences, at least in our imaginations.

It has been suggested that all photographs can be innately viewed as narratives. In other words, images have the ability to capture one moment in time that would, under other circumstances, require a story of a thousand words. The viewer unravels a particular meaning and places himself or herself within that frozen world, just as a reader does when escaping into a great novel. Renowned photographers such as Tracey Moffat, Cindy Sherman, Sam Taylor-Wood and Bill Henson pride themselves on exploring the narrative through imagery. Complex and unique environments are presented by these photographers, compelling the viewer to unpack, read or understand the content presented.

If, as Reismann (2008) suggests, visual representations of experience enable others to see as a participant sees or feels, why is it that children's responses may differ in what is presented visually to what is presented in text? *Voices of Children* represents a unique social research study that provides children with the opportunity to not only express their world in a visual way but also to provide an audience with a glimpse of their world through the written word. It

is through a combination of their images and their writing that a deeper insight into the circumstances of the children involved becomes possible.

The presentation of image and text together, whether in the symbols left by previous civilisations or in books, magazines and exhibitions, has a long history. This history attests to the power that both sources have in combination for providing detailed information and understandings about the lives and experiences of others. At times, when no direct reference between the two exists, we may read images and text independently of one another or 'on their own terms' (Berger 1972). Each source may then provide different dimensions of a particular situation or experience and the qualities of each will stand alone to convey a story. At other times, images and text can work together to provide details that would not be possible where one alone was available.

It is through exhibitions in particular, that the complementary aspects of image and text become critical in terms of the ways in which they are read. This paper will explore the concept of integrating photographs and written responses which have been provided by children and young people through their participation in an international project, *Voices of Children* (Brown, Lysaght, Westbrook and Robinson 2007; Lysaght, Westbrook, Brown and Robinson 2006). An integral part of the project is a series of public exhibitions which aim to provide a vehicle for children to share a glimpse of their worlds. Their experiences are conveyed through images that visually represent locations that are important and text that represents their thoughts about family, friends and the future. These exhibitions highlight the intersection of image and text and its role as narrative in image production.

Voices through Image and Text

Voices of Children is an international research project that has drawn on images and text that are constructed independently of one another. The written word does not comment on or caption the images in any way and the images have not been designed to represent what has been written. The project involves children and young people between 6 and 18 years of age from many different countries across the world. Armed with disposable cameras and simple requests to take photographs of their everyday lives, as well as small booklets containing six simple questions or prompts requiring written responses, images and text supplied by the participants are combined in exhibitions that provide audiences with insights into the lives of children and young people. The images and text each provide a context in which the other can be read and, at times, there is congruence between words and photographs. In other instances, however, the qualities of each medium convey information that is less compatible or that provides a contrast.

This is most obvious when the words and images are presented together in exhibitions. Rather than using the words to caption images, they are integrated amongst the photographs as images themselves. Alongside images of friends or family sharing a happy moment are phrases that reveal the depth of feeling the photographers have for people who play an important part in their lives. At the same time, other words express the fear that participants have for those who are important in their lives as well as others whose fate they know of through local and worldwide news. Written responses about the implications of war, crime, poverty and pollution indicate a sense of compassion for other people as well as feelings of

fearfulness for themselves. These feelings are not evident in the images produced by participants in this project.

For the viewer, *Voices of Children* is not unlike the work of Berger and Mohr, originally published in 1975. In their work, *A Seventh Man*, a collection of images related to migrant labour in Europe was exhibited. The images were loosely sequenced but there was no text or particular order to the images. In a similar manner, in the *Voices of Children* exhibitions audiences are free to view the images as they stand, without direction, and to reflect on them at will. This freedom emphasises the active role the viewer has in reading and interpreting the photographs. As with the Berger and Mohr exhibition, the viewer is able to construct 'the meanings that form the *experience* of the work' (Becker 2002: 5).

It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable. The information they contain permeated by feeling. Appearances become the language of the lived life. (Berger and Mohr 1982, 1975: 289, cited in Becker 2002: 5).

Family Harmony and Care for Others

Playful images predominate across the majority of photographs submitted by participants in this project. In many ways, these images suggest an idealised childhood with peers, friends and family smiling at one another and the camera, as they are posed together in close proximity with arms around shoulders and waists.



The body gesturing in these images signals a sense of playfulness, relaxation and care for one another. Many of these images present information about the ways in which leisure time is spent in the home or in the local community. Photos of pets, sporting equipment and private spaces such as bedrooms provide evidence of the different sites and activities in which children and young people typically engage. Scenes of domestic harmony are also presented through images of family members engaged together cooking a meal or members of extended families grouped together for the purpose of the photo.



Support for experiences related to happy childhoods in caring families and communities can be found in many of the written responses, particularly those addressing questions about where the participant lives, family life, what they enjoy doing and their perception of what is good in the world. Regardless of cultural background and economic circumstance, children and young people write about the importance of family and the love that family members feel for one another. Even references to siblings who at times can be ‘annoying’ are countered by statements that reflect a sense of caring, as in the case of this girl from the U.S.A.:

There are 4 people in my family. My mom, my dad, my sister, and me. I am the younger sister. I am 10 years old. My family can be weird sometimes, and I sometimes get mad at them. My family can embarrass (sic) me and my sister. We can always wish that we were somewhere else. My sister sings non-stop. Our family does hang out some, and when we do we have so much fun together. My sister is so annoying she usually isn’t my friend, but is sometimes. I have the best family in the world in my opinion. I love them a lot.

Responses to questions about what is good in the world also support the sense of caring implied by the images, but this compassion for others is evident beyond the boundaries of family. One young boy from Malaysia, for example, made the following observation:

I remembered when tsunami hit those part of the world where Bandar Aceh is badly hit. Thousands of people were injured and died. During this time a lot of helping hand came to help. Peoples from all over the world donated money, food and used clothing. From this incident we can see that many people in this world are willing to help others in time at when help is most wanted.

For children and young people in South-East Asian countries, the tsunami was frequently mentioned as an instance of a tragic event that brought out the ‘goodness’ in people through their responses to calls for help. In the U.S.A., Hurricane Katrina was identified in the same manner. Caring for others, then, extended beyond those who were known to participants.

Other ideas about what was considered good in the world presented views that echoed prevailing political discourses such as this extract from the response of a young girl in the U.S.A.:

... Basically, people are helping others to make the world a better place. Helping others might not always be the best way to help. That specifically

means war. U.S. citizens are fighting in Iraq to protect America and also to help the good Iraqi (sic) citizens. Yes, they're killing others and destroying (sic) nature, but all in all, they're helping us. Helping. That is what's good in the world today!

The sense of care for others perceived as 'good' is evident but it is countered by other consequences that are regarded as unintended.

It is perhaps significant that although compassionate responses to the situations of those who are less privileged were widespread across locations, they were less evident in areas of disadvantage such as Zambia and Mexico. In response to the question about what is good in the world, the focus was more often on opportunities for personal advancement through education or work experience. Perhaps where subsistence in terms of the individual and the family is more challenging, the emphasis on a practical solution to problems of survival is not surprising.

A Sense of Fear

Another element that could not be seen in the images was the sense of fear that many children and young people expressed, usually in response to the question about what they would like to change in the world. Many wrote about the dangers they perceived, whether from terrorism, drug dealing or war, as well as their desire for peace. A common thread in these responses was the fearfulness these topics invoked, reflecting perhaps the sense of powerlessness a child experiences in a world of adults. A young boy from Thailand stated quite simply:

There are bad people in the world. So, we live in fear.

One young girl living in Malaysia provided a first-hand account of the personal effects of war. In response to the first question, she describes her 'new' home after leaving her country of origin, Iraq, to live in a safer environment:

I have two homes. My first home is in Iraq which I left it because it wasn't safe there and still isn't. My second home is in Malaysia . . . It is a really safe and beautiful place. It has a playground and a nearby lake . . . It is wonderful here. I love my second home just like my first home.

She continued her story in response to the final question about changes she would like to make to the world:

There are three things that I would like to change in this world. First, to stop any war especially (sic) in my country (Iraq) and stop the killing of children. Second, no more poor people. Third, to build a big building and put orphans in it and take good care of them.

The simplicity of her statements belies the depth of her very personal experiences of war and its consequences. Another personal experience of the war in Iraq was mentioned by a girl in the U.S.A. who was worried about a member of her family there:

If I could change anything in the world it would be for peace on Earth. Not just that but that the war in Iraq could end because my cousin is there and I am very scared for him and I miss him a whole lot. If we had peace on Earth there would be no racism and everyone could get along. I wish that the world were really like that. If it was the world would be such a great place.

From two different countries and through quite different experiences, these girls, both aged between 9 and 12 years, held similar views.

The words of one young girl from De Kalb, Illinois take on special significance in light of a shooting incident that occurred at Northern Illinois University (NIU) not long after the images and responses had been gathered. She wrote:

My Mom is a nurse. My Dad is a poilce (sic) officer. My little brother loves sports. I am a dancer!
I would change the law state so you can not use guns.

Reading between the lines in this case, a sense of fearfulness existed in relation to the use and misuse of guns and the implications for a parent who works in a capacity in which the consequences may be dangerous. Predictably perhaps, this sentiment was not reflected in the images captured in De Kalb, most of which highlighted children at play and families involved in celebrating Halloween.

Aspirations and Opportunities

Educational opportunities were valued by children and young people in all countries involved in the project, but the levels of aspiration varied. In the majority of instances, aspirations appeared to be commensurate with the circumstances in which participants lived. In other words, those living in more affluent situations held higher aspirations than those in settings that were relatively poor such as Zambia and Mexico. Images of the circumstances in which lives were lived, in the home, at school and in the local area, provided a telling context in which to interpret the written responses.

The images signify differences in social standing in various ways. In more affluent communities, objects such as houses, cars, furniture, clothes and so on attest to the relative wealth of different participants. The written responses of children and young people from these areas also imply a certain acceptance of the consequences of privilege, such as the right to an extended education and to the privileges accorded those who do not live in poverty. Those from less privileged backgrounds such as participants in Zambia and Mexico have expectations that are grounded more in the reality of their day to day lives.

In Zambia, the majority of responses to questions about what's good in the world involved opportunities for advancement through education, often related to training in education or accountancy. One young girl wrote:

I would like to be a teacher or an accountant when I finish school, that's why I like going to school so that I can have a better job in the future.

Images of the village in Zambia lead one to question the extent of the opportunities that will be available for children living in a compound surrounded by barbed wire.

A similar situation is apparent from the responses of children in Mexico. Despite images that project a sense of happiness, the opportunities for children in these particular settings are limited:

The place where I live is basic, my house has a wood fence, its roof is made of cardboard, one part has pillars, all around the house there are maize plantations and trees and moreover the house is lent [rented].

My family is poor because my father died when I was 5 months, my mum works with the association [name of company] in order to have money to buy food, clothes and other things that we need. I have a sister, her name is [name], she is in high school and my grandmother takes care of the house, sometimes she makes clothes like shirts and pants.

What makes my family special is its honesty and that it's hard-working, what makes my mum special is that she works with the association [name of company], sometimes she has to go very far, what makes my grandmother special is that she spends many time cooking and so she doesn't earn a lot with the clothes she sells and as my sister studies, she gives me food when my grandmother is sick.

The sense of family and community is evident in this response but the picture it paints is one that is less carefree than the images present. An understanding of the political and economic context in which people live is important in order to make sense of images and the 'feel' that is evoked by them in terms of living conditions. Personal experiences such as those presented through the written word add another layer of meaning that could not be gleaned through the images alone.

When examining the detailed visual responses and written text from the children involved in this study a certain tension is evident. While the source of this tension is difficult to identify, it is possible that their photographs are an embodiment of their tangible world, or of their world as they would like it to be. Their written words, on the other hand, have the capability of transcending their physical existence and giving expression to what may generally be hidden or withheld from public view. If one examines closely the work of an adult professional photographer, such as Australian Bill Henson who explores narrative themes through image, we find that emotions often raw and bare are purposefully explored and presented. Another example can be found in Cindy Sherman's images, renowned for their narrative or story-telling qualities using the medium of photography by establishing movie-like sets or tableau frozen in time. Children, on the other hand, appear to capture what is seen rather than what it is hoped will be seen. How difficult is it then for children to reflect their fears and aspirations

through photography? It appears that their innermost thoughts may be captured in their writing but the same information is not evident in their visuals. As researchers we question whether it is even appropriate for us to encourage children to explore this mode of expression through the visual.

Henson's images are frequently foreboding, depressive and disturbing. Sherman's images are often provocative and controversial. Both of these photographers seek to explain emotions through the visual and want the audience to be engaged and sometimes shocked. On examination of the photographs from the *Voices of Children* project, the intention of the children participating, regardless of the country involved, appears to be to capture images that portray socially acceptable emotions such as contentment and happiness. It is in the written word only that their concerns for themselves and others are embedded.

The Role of the Curator

An important component of the *Voices of Children* project is a traveling exhibition, which highlights a selection of the children's images and words. As with visual images, the context of the written word and the role of the curator and researcher in the selection and exhibition of the children's artifacts cannot be dismissed. Audiences interpret and understand images and words in relation to what has been presented. Curators and researchers sort through the images and text supplied by participants and select what they believe will engage the interest and motivation of an audience. When one selects, rejects and accepts particular images or words from material that is not one's own then explicit intervention is occurring. To be true to the research undertaken the researcher/curator must acknowledge that this intervention has occurred.

Integrating Image and Text

If we are to understand the experiences of others at more than a superficial level so that recognition is given to them as individuals as well as on a broader level, then we must be prepared to read across images and text wherever possible. In both instances, the individual will be aware of an audience or a 'reader' as the image or the text is constructed. Although we argue for naivety and innocence in the representations that children may present through image and text, this may refer more to a lack of sophistication in the use of the techniques at hand rather than the nature of the information that is presented. As Catherine Riessman (2007) notes, participants have an idea about audiences in mind when they take photographs that means that the images are perhaps not as 'free' as they might appear. In addition, there will never be a single or correct reading of an image or a written response: 'Although visual materials make a compelling appeal to realism, they, like oral and written narratives, are produced by particular people living in particular times and places' (Riessman 2007: 179). Our challenge as researchers is to explore the multiple readings that both images and text provide.

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