BOOK REVIEW

Title: **Reading the Visual:
An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy**

Author: **Frank Serafini**

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Reviewed by: **Christina Quintiliani, Ph.D. Student, Brock University**

Current shifts in literacy instruction from traditional methods to multimodal approaches have resulted in an increased need for educational resources that provide teachers with the tools and strategies required to address the diversity of millennial learners. In one of his most recent scholarly contributions to literacy education entitled *Reading the Visual: An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy*, Frank Serafini seamlessly merges theory and practice to create a valuable instructional guide for teaching multimodality. Over the past decade, Serafini has consistently stressed the importance of integrating multimodal literacies into the classroom. In particular, he has placed emphasis on the benefits of using visual materials to complement the unique learning styles of a generation that has been, perhaps now more than ever before, subjected to a vast array of images since birth via technological communications and visual media (Avgerinou, 2009). In *Reading the Visual*, Serafini draws upon his extensive experiences as a researcher, educator, and author of children's literature to construct a teacher-friendly resource. Inspired by a multitude of conversations with educators throughout the years, many of whom voiced an intense uncertainty about how to approach instruction using visual and other multimodal forms of literacy, Serafini compiled *Reading the Visual* to address the current gap in available resources and provide "a framework that incorporates visual images and multimodal ensembles in a way that does not pose an additional burden to teachers dealing with an already burgeoning curriculum" (p. 5).

As an educator and emerging scholar studying in the field of visual literacy, I have become well acquainted with Serafini's work which includes his well-received instructional resource *Interactive Comprehension Strategies: Fostering Meaningful Talk about Texts* (2009) and *The Reading Workshop* (2001, 2015) series. His scholarly journal contributions have consisted of numerous articles devoted to perceptual, structural, and ideological perspectives on picturebooks as well as children's comprehension of visual images in multimodal texts. *Reading the Visual* works to expand on the main theoretical and pedagogical perspectives introduced in the aforementioned publications, while also offering new instructional strategies that have not yet been presented in Serafini's past contributions.

Reading the Visual is structured into three main sections: Theoretical and Instructional Foundations, Curricular Frameworks and Pedagogical Approaches, and Units of Study. Each section is divided into chapters containing detailed discussions of relevant theoretical concepts, specific multimodal ensembles such as picturebooks and digital media, and strategies for developing lessons around the ensembles. All chapters conclude with an informative, concise review of the main ideas and concepts presented while simultaneously examining the educational significance of the points under discussion and their implications for practice. To remain consistent with the vocabulary used by Serafini in *Reading the Visual*, the term "picturebook" will be applied

throughout this review in place of the commonly recognized expression “picture book,” representing the interdependent relationship between text and image.

The book commences with a brief introduction which provides a synopsis of multimodal ensembles in a modern visual and digital era. In the preliminary chapters, Serafini effectively argues the relevance of the book and its potential to enhance and extend the practice of educators at the elementary level and beyond. Specifically, he stresses the need for additional resources which can help address existing gaps in literacy programming where instruction of visual and other types of multimodal approaches is underemployed. Serafini’s contentions buttress those of Burke, Butland, Roberts, and Snow (2013) who also acknowledge the need for additional information that aids teachers in widening their “definitions of literacy and pedagogical practices” (p. 42) while also enriching their understanding of “what it means to teach through a lens where classroom communication practices actually become representative of the contemporary literacies of the children we teach” (p. 42). These perspectives, which advocate for transformative practice, are rooted in the contributions of the New London Group (1996) who after assembly in 1994, worked in collaboration to construct *Pedagogy of the Multiliteracies*, an influential document proposing significant changes in existing curricular approaches towards the further integration of multiliteracies as an integral part of classroom instruction.

Part One, which incorporates five individual chapters devoted to discussion on theoretical and instructional foundations, opens by defining the main terminology that is frequently integrated throughout the book. Rather than opting for the use of the more commonly applied term of *multimodal text*, Serafini instead chooses the phrase *multimodal ensemble* to refer to the type of “complex multimodal entity that occurs in both print and digital environments utilizing a variety of cultural and semiotic resources to articulate, render, represent, and communicate an array of concepts and information” (p. 13). To assist readers in becoming further acquainted with the diversity of multimodal forms, Serafini offers a multimodal continuum in his opening chapter which clearly distinguishes between textually dominant and visually dominant mediums. This continuum serves as a bridge to the ensuing chapters which collectively offer detailed pedagogical explorations of visually dominant mediums such as wordless picturebooks, and blended structures such as graphic novels and digital media that incorporate both textual and visual content.

Serafini describes the process of “seeing” as “one’s ability to transact with an image to construct meaning” (p. 31) and he argues that continual exposure does not necessarily ensure conscious awareness or active interpretation of that which is initially perceived. In this sense, even though the current generation of students may be accustomed to the ongoing presence of visual stimuli within a predominantly visual culture, or what Avgerinou (2009) identifies as the *Bain d’Images Era* (Image Bath), they ultimately must be taught effective skills and strategies for deconstructing and making sense of what they see. In chapter three, Serafini expands on these notions of mindfulness and offers an overview of perception, representation, interpretation, and ideology as four main foundational and cognitive processes involved in one’s comprehension of multimodal ensembles. Discussion in this section provides educators with the necessary theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for helping students make the transition from passive viewers to active seers and critical interpreters. Panofsky’s (1955) model for deciphering visual content and Rose’s (2001) perspectives on compositional interpretation are among the frameworks introduced to enhance educators’ knowledge of the theoretical foundations behind the instructional strategies that are discussed in later portions of the book.

The concluding chapters in Part One present the basic elements of art and design to assist educators in advancing their understanding of the language of visual arts and how to apply certain terminology and grammar when engaging in discussion of visual compositions with students. Specifically, Serafini draws upon the works of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and their well

renowned book *Reading Images: A Grammar of Visual Design* to present an overview of the main elements of visual grammar, including representational, interpersonal, and compositional structures. The perspectives of Dondis (1973) successfully provide inspiration for Serafini's discussion of how educators can actively introduce students to the primary elements of visual compositions including colour, size and scale, positioning, as well as the presentation of narrative structures and point of view. The very fact that Serafini introduces numerous theoretical perspectives suggests that his mandate is not to encourage a single method of analysis and interpretation, but rather to offer educators an overview of some of the more relevant pedagogic strategies that can help inspire classroom discussions and encourage students to consider multiple and alternative perspectives when closely exploring visual information.

Part Two opens with a thorough exploration of picturebooks as a specific type of multimodal ensemble. Included within this section is a valuable, detailed glossary of picturebook terminology which teachers can model for students when making reference to specific picturebook elements, such as how borders can be used to frame portions of an image or how an illustrator's medium of choice can help portray desired tones or emotions. This segment is accompanied by discussion of the influences of postmodernism on picturebook style and content. Particularly helpful to educators is the chapter devoted to a detailed analysis of the multimodal elements of a single contemporary picturebook entitled *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne. Serafini effectively uses this book as a working example to illustrate how the key terms, theories, and concepts presented throughout *Reading the Visual* can be applied to investigate each minute detail of the illustrations and text. Although *Piggybook* is a well suited choice to serve as the example model due to its diverse application of picturebook elements, regrettably, it is the only sample picturebook selected for analysis in *Reading the Visual*. The inclusion of other types of picturebooks, such as those which are less contemporary or postmodern in nature, may provide teachers with alternative examples that could easily be adapted for instruction with a broader range of age and developmental levels.

The final portion, Part Three, is comprised of a series of ten individual units of study, with each unit devoted to the exploration of a specific multimodal ensemble. In this section, Serafini provides teachers with a springboard for new lesson ideas centered on multimodal ensembles such as postmodern and informational picturebooks, graphic novels, advertisements, film, and digital media. As an emergent scholar and researcher investigating the academic potentials of wordless picturebooks for early readers, I was delighted to discover an entire unit devoted exclusively to wordless literature, particularly when such detailed examples are considered to be rare instructional finds (Arizpe, 2013). Tapping into his experiences as an author and illustrator of children's literature which include the highly acclaimed *Looking Closely* series of non-fiction picturebooks, Serafini offers resourceful tips on how to help contemporary learners develop what Eisner (1998) refers to as the "enlightened eye", or that which is trained to observe beyond the surface by seeing in new and consciously informed ways. Much like the resourceful chapter devoted to wordless picturebooks, Serafini creatively constructs all units to maximize learning potential by including activities that increase students' exposure to, exploration of, and engagement with multimodalities. The unit devoted to digital media serves as an especially valuable resource for educators seeking to acquire new ideas on some of the most current technological resources, such as weblogs and podcasts, and how they can be used to help students engage in collaborative learning with peers. This unit, like all others in Part Three, concludes by offering a series of questions, such as "Who is the intended audience?" or "What is the proposed message?" (p. 166), which teachers can pose to encourage students to think critically about the multimodal ensemble under discussion. Specifically, in the digital media unit, Serafini invites teachers and students to consider not only the processes behind the actual production and

composition of digital media, but also how they serve as interactive sites for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge.

The easy-to-follow format of *Reading the Visual* equips teachers with the theoretical and pedagogical foundations required to integrate an assortment of multimodal ensembles into their existing literacy programming and provide students with the necessary interpretive skills for becoming critically competent analysts of multimodalities. While the book places slightly greater emphasis on the discussion of visually dominant multimodal ensembles, it unquestionably still offers a solid introduction to other multimodalities as well. Educators of a wide range of grade levels will most certainly appreciate the step-by-step instructional suggestions, model templates, and generous collection of sample questions for assessing student progress and engaging learners in meaningful multimodal inquiry. *Reading the Visual* is a must read for all educators seeking to broaden their pedagogical knowledge base and advance their current practices.

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