A new grammar of visual design – Entrevista com Gunther Kress

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Esta entrevista ocorreu no quadro da visita do Prof. Gunther Kress à Universidade do Minho, entre 28 de Fevereiro e 2 de Março de 2005, a convite do Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade – CECS – Departamento de Ciências da Comunicação, para efeitos de realização de um Seminário para Estudantes de Doutoramento, intitulado *Sócio-semiótica da comunicação visual e multi-semiótica.*

Alguns dados curriculares

O Professor Gunther Kress é Presidente da Escola de Cultura, Linguagem e Comunicação do Instituto de Educação da Universidade de Londres.

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Os seus interesses na investigação incluem questões da sociedade, da cultura e da semiótica: todos os aspectos da comunicação numa perspectiva sócio-semiótica; comunicação visual; linguagem; literacia; análise do discurso; questões do *curriculum* e da pedagogia para o futuro; e, globalmente, a educação e os futuros sociais.

Algumas publicações

Kress, Gunther (2003) *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.

Kress, Gunther & van Leeuwen, Theo (2001) *Multimodal Discourse the Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Edward Arnold.

Kress, Gunther & Leeuwen, Theo (1996) *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.

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Entrevista

Helena Pires (HP) – *I remember you saying that, in your words, "In the social semiotic approach which I adopt signs are motivated combinations of form and meaning in which the form is already the best, the most apt, representation of meaning which the maker of the sign wishes to represent. That means that form and meaning do not stand in an arbitrary relation to each other, but that the relation is motivated: 'this is the form best expresses the meaning that I wish to represent'".*

Is this your starting point, a critical position to the linguistic tradition, in Saussure's terms? How do you define your approach?

Gunther Kress (GK) – In fact, I didn't start from a critical position to Saussure's theory of sign. In the 70's I started to make linguistics relevant to the social critics. I wanted to have a linguistic theory which would be socially useful and also a linguistic theory which would be a possible theory of the social. Me and some colleagues started to called it language's ideology, and tried to connect different forms of language, of ever kind, to social organisation. It was a marxist notion of super-structure and the organisation of the social and economic bases. How the bases were reflected in the super-structure. As Marx said, how the legal system reflected the basic social and economic forms of organisation. And I think that language itself is a super-structure category. And you could say related to grammatical forms, practical forms... and also to social and economic basic forms. I think that in that time I wasn't really aware of that as a semiotic approach... I was more aware of thinking that the linguistic form was a reflection of the economical and social organisation. This was really the starting point. The other starting point was Halliday's linguistics. And Halliday's linguistics is based on the fact that we have meanings and the meanings we have are larger then the meanings that are produced in our cultures. And we have ways of realising this meanings, in a linguistic form, and the meanings system is organised in a system of choices, which is the saussure's notion of paradigm which is multiple... so as an agent I choose, I have my meanings that come from the social and how my meanings become realised in a linguistic form. In the marxist notion of the linguistic form, it is more then a reflection but a shape of the social organisation. That is a kind of the linguistics that in the 90's took me to produce a book called «Language as Ideology». Not Language and Ideology. Language as ideologically shaped. And it is a marxist semiotics because it relates de bases with super-structure and also because the work of the individual human being is regarded significant. It is not the XIX's notion of the socialist individualism...

HP – *You talked about a marxist approach and I was thinking, isn't there in your theory an attempt of giving a kind of freedom to the individual...*

GK – Yes, as a maker of the sign...

HP – *... because you talk about agency, a kind of freedom of choice you give to the individual. In that way isn't there a paradox with the marxist notion of the individual as part of the structure?*

GK – I kept on repeating that I am socially formed. And I use resources that are socially made. I use these resources in a social position and in a social environment... but nevertheless I would like to give significance to the work of the individual. And I think it is a little bit like marxist notion of the men, and women to, making history. So it is not a paradox saying that human labour is significant and also conditioned by the social system.

HP – *Even so, it is not clear for me how do you articulate the individual performance, his freedom of choice with these social conditions...*

GK – Yes. We are not completely free. But in a certain situation there are things we do that have a certain effect. So it is an attempt to combine an interpretation of a certain marxist theory of the individuals, that have not freedom, with the significance of the work of the individual.

HP – *Even so, I would like to explore this idea a little more. In your books there is a kind of view of «the world that there is to be told» and of the individual that make its choices in order to represent he's special way of seeing it, throw his special motivations... Isn't there an assumption of «the reality that precedes representation»? I am comparing this with André Joly and Francis Jacques points of view, for instance, because they present two completely different ways of thinking. One that thinks that language is a form of representation and the individuals made their own representation of the world, and then communicate it to the others, and the other who says that meaning is always produced in relation, in interaction, and representation precedes reality... What would you say about this?*

GK – I am not familiar with those authors. But I think we live in a cultural shaped world and the cultural shaping has a semiotic form. The chair in which we are sitting speaks of a certain way of sitting, speaks about how to compose yourself in the space... and I think this is inescapable. And this is representation about how humans ought to dispose themselves in a public space. Nevertheless we have some possibilities of projecting our own sense of *who and how* in relation to the others in the environment. And in that representation that I make of sitting relatively informally in a formal chair I am remaking, I am actually making new not only myself but also how I perceived, how I project this space is about. I think I am constantly remaking the world with the resources that are given to me. So, yes, I think that representation precedes us but we remake those representations and in doing so we change the world.

HP – *That is an interesting question because if we think, for example, about identity construction we could say that we are always reshaping ourselves perception. Representation gives us, in a certain way, resources of thinking about our own shape...*

GK – Yes. It is a kind of constraint and freedom. We do have some freedom of choice.

HP – *You are also concerned with ideational, syntax and grammar, and also with the interpersonal, but you think it is necessary a kind of epistemological frame of what it is a matter of semiotics or not?*

GK – Yes...

HP – *Well, but I am thinking that when we look at semiotics history there is so much transdisciplinary, from economics, from linguistics, sociology... do you think it is possible to define a semiotics field, a clear frame?*

GK – I think disciplines are constructed and produced for different kinds of jobs. Disciplines are tools. And a discipline which is produced for this kind of job does this job well, and so on. And sociology is produced in order to account for the social. As semiotics is produced to account for representation. For the production of meaning. Of course you could say the social is always a field of meaning and nevertheless when you look at the society from a sociological perspective, the production of meaning is not in the full part. So disciplines produce a field and a focus of attention. In this case, how is meaning made, how it changes... I am also concerned with learning. And with learning there are lots of semiotics tasks that are a key to learning discussions. I am very concerned with how concepts like, the mind, the concepts itself, the mental construction of signs... and there is a different orientation. Sociology says, «I am interested in concepts», and semiotics «I am interested in signs», of its material and ideational presence. A kind of internal thinking of the concepts and not an external one.

HP – *But it is true that some other disciplines can give resources to understand better what meanings and representations are about...*

GK – No question about it. For example the economic metaphor of consuming messages as consuming a soap is very useful...

HP – *I am asking this because you talked about learning and the importance of motivation...*

GK – Which is a psychological concept, yes.

HP – *... and I was thinking, precisely, of psychological approach for understanding, for example, children's motivation, and also about the unconscious...*

GK – I agree. There is a kind of blurring, motivation is a psychological concept and I am using it in semiotics because I want to have an account of the production of signs... and the importance of the social as «the mind being the social»... but I am blurring those boundaries.

HP – *The perception we have of the reality, and the way we produce representations, it is not always a conscious process... sometimes we don't know what does it means...*

GK – I am completely agree with that.

HP – *So I wouldn't talk about motivation as similar as interest.*

GK – I do not talk about interest in a common sense of it. It is «the interest at this moment». Very contextualised. Intentionality it is a very difficult concept...

HP – *You are thinking of a cultural context?*

GK – I am thinking of a social occasion, now. Maybe an historic moment. Different notions of agency...

HP – *What about emotional aspects?*

GK – Very much so. I wouldn't like to separate affects and cognition. Ever. But I have no knowledge of psychoanalysis thinking. I am reluctant to enter in the domain of desire. I think that is a domain to be explored but not in semiotics. But that kind of energy is always present in our actions. And actions make signs.

HP – *Now I would like to hear from you something about visual grammar, the visual analysis that you are exploring. It is a new field, not so developed as linguistics, and you talk about the dominance not of speech and writing but of image.*

GK – It is above all a contrast of writing and image. Not speech and image.

HP – *But what are the main causes of this transformation?*

GK – I have no idea.

HP – I*s it just a question of technology?*

GK – I don't think so. Of course the screen has been with us from more then a hundred years and it is something very important. Why the screen has become important is another question. I think that is a cultural question. A social question rather then a psychological question. Of course knowledge produces new forms of screen and this screen produces new kinds of potentials and facilities which are used in relation to social tensions. The individuation or the fragmentation of the social. Instead of sitting in the cinema, people sit at home with its own television. And all the members of the family have its own television. It is this kind of fragmentation. So, social individuation. And I would be unhappy do think that technology is causal. What is producing social changes, I think it is still a question. But not a question for semiotics, I think.

HP – *So why is it important to study new ways of thinking with images?*

GK – Because it is happening.

HP – *But don't you think that, in a certain way, you are contributing to a kind of institutionalisation of the visual grammar, against the individual freedom...?*

GK – Yes, no question about it. The moment you provide a grammar, somebody can put it as a kind of convention. Invent laws about it. Reinforce the ways of constructing images. But at the same time we need understanding. And the question of who has power to make rules is a political question... and at this moment nobody in Portugal as much as in England works on the need of an education system which emphasises the production of creative individuals, with practices in the conditions of change... the system is still conservative and there is a contradiction here. And I think understanding is also a form of liberating.

HP – *I was also thinking of the visual literacy and about the people that are excluded from that... and if there is a kind of freedom in the visual text because the reader can have the freedom of ordering the elements there isn't a true freedom in terms of representation of the «real» world... Isn't it only a formal freedom?*

GK – I see...

HP – *Well, and when we compare different modes of representation, images with writing and speech, each one with different forms of representation and putting knowledge in a certain way, and think about the visual dominance of nowadays, aren't we loosing some aspects... ?*

GK – I agree with that. And I am keeping now some talks about «gains and loses». What is gained by this development of image and what are we in danger of loosing. So, as an educator I would say that we should not to pay less attention to writing, but more attention to writing. Equity in a social perspective of the group needs that we pay attention to the potentials of writing. There are changes in the forms of writing. Complex sentences are conceptually complex. There is a cognitive complexity. And we must convince young people of writing importance. Not because it was important in the past but rather like «what these things do that are useful for you». Even in a world of image. And also the importance of different forms of imagination that go with the development of writing and what forms of imagination go with image. These are the questions that are really important.

HP – *I was wondering that nowadays people say that the young have difficulties to deal with maths because it is an abstract language and they are more used to deal with concrete forms...*

GK – I think there are different forms of abstraction. Image representation also provides abstraction. There is another kind of problem which is the speed. We live in a society which have a completely different experience of speed. And we know that some forms of peace contribute to reflection. So, maybe it is not a question of abstraction but of reflection. In our society, which is a consuming society, all is instantly available. «You wanted, you have it». «If you can't have it, you robe somebody». And children live in that society, and school says something quite different. It says: «you wanted, so let's time to slowly develop it». And I think the school has a new task of convincing the children of the good reasons that regard significant.