

Defusing Controversial Topics: Visual Semiotics in an Atlantic Canadian Textbook

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Drawing upon Gunther Kress' and Theo van Leeuwen's work on the metafunctional grammar of visual design, this paper studies how visual selections in an Atlantic Canadian social studies textbook deflect attention from the political, particularly in sections narrating contentious events. Looking closely at one section from the book, "A Focus On Fine Art," this discussion first examines visual realizations in the interpersonal metafunction (specifically modality choices) and how low-modality, artistic renderings of conflict effectively make it a site of speculation rather than engagement. It then analyses the ideational work of the visuals and suggests that conceptual (and not narrative) representations invite a generic rather than specific understanding of, in this case, forced relocation in Newfoundland. Finally, the paper studies the organizational choices of visuals in the book and, focussing on the before and after picture, proposes a new visual phenomenon—the visual ergative—for understanding how visual selections can sidestep important questions of agency and power. The paper ends by situating visual analysis within a larger project of critical literacy and everyday practice.

S'appuyant sur les travaux de Gunther Kress et de Theo van Leeuwen concernant la grammaire métafonctionnelle de la conception visuelle, cet article montre comme les choix visuels effectués dans un manuel de sciences sociales dans la région de l'Atlantique détournent l'attention du politique, notamment dans les parties exposant des questions controversées. En examinant une partie de l'ouvrage, « A Focus On Fine Art », l'auteur examine les réalisations visuelles dans la métafonction interpersonnelle (précisément les choix de modalités) et montre comment une modalité basse, soit la présentation artistique du conflit, incite à conjecturer plutôt qu'à s'engager. Il poursuit par une analyse de la conception des objets visuels et montre que les représentations conceptuelles (et non narratives) invitent à une compréhension générique, plutôt que spécifique, du déplacement forcé à Terre-Neuve (sujet traité). Enfin, l'auteur étudie

les choix organisationnels des éléments visuels du livre et, mettant l'accent sur l'avant et l'après de l'image, propose un nouveau phénomène, l'« ergatif visuel » pour comprendre comment les choix des présentations visuelles peuvent mettre dans l'ombre les questions importantes de délégation et de pouvoir. L'article se termine en situant l'analyse visuelle dans le cadre d'un projet plus large de la littérature critique et la pratique quotidienne.

Interest in “the visual” has exploded in recent years, particularly in media and cultural studies, where the work of such theorists as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault continues to ignite eclectic interdisciplinary conversations. These foundational thinkers have generated intensely political studies of visual culture, including—but certainly not limited to—visual representations of race (Fanon 1986; Pratt 1992), constructions of disablement (Evans 1999), understandings of photography and its reproduction (Bourdieu 1990; Shapiro 1988; Sontag 1978), and the gendering of the gaze (Mulvey 1975; Rose 1986). Recent studies of film, television, print advertising, newspaper layout, billboards, and other visual texts have demonstrated, in closely considered ways, how images register power relations in our everyday lives; moreover, they have problematized the deeply held assumption that images provide immediate access to the external world, an assumption prevalent in our countless metaphors linking understanding and knowledge with *sight* (an association that runs deep—the etymology of “idea,” sociologist Chris Jenks argues in *Visual Culture*, comes from the Greek verb meaning “to see” (1)).

One voice in these conversations about visual culture—social semiotics—offers the textual critic and practitioner a useful method for understanding how the sensibilities of modern culture are shaped, maintained, and resisted through the visual and its various technologies. While grounded in the basic assumptions of classical semiotics, social semiotics considers meaning beyond the sign systems of a bounded, ahistorical text or group of texts and instead positions them within the social conditions of their production and reception. A social semiotic reading of images gives teachers, practitioners, and researchers a theoretical method not only for examining the meaning making practices at the heart of all cultural representation and consumption, but also for questioning and transforming (in the classroom and in our documents) what critical literacy advocate Ira Shor (1999) calls “a world not yet finished or humane” (1).

Of particular interest to me—a Newfoundlander who studies the semiotic and rhetorical constructions of Newfoundland and Labrador—are those everyday multimodal texts (films, novels, tourist advertisements and heritage sites) that have significant social capital and wide circulation. When I recall some of the formative

texts of my upbringing, one that springs to mind is my grade ten *Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage* textbook—its blue section headings, its various graphs and tables, and its black-and-white photographs. Textbooks constitute an interesting and consequential site of analysis for textual researchers, as considerable effort, money, and resources are drawn upon to create these curriculum materials, some indication of the importance school boards and government bodies place on this kind of text. Despite changes in the curriculum and idiosyncrasies of teachers' approaches, textbooks continue to exert a powerful influence on what subjects are taught and how they are taught. In classroom use, the text is to be treated kindly: students, on strict orders, cover their borrowed books in plastic and paper, underline (in pencil only) the important sections, answer the questions selected for them to explore, and memorize definitions *verbatim* for equally valorized exams.

This focus on the sanitary treatment of books carries over into the textbooks' sanitary treatment of "sticky" subjects. Those doing critical curriculum work in recent years have observed, among other textual trends, that schools, "by minimizing the role of conflict and disagreement in the advance of the physical and social sciences... have presented an overly consensual view of academic knowledge" (Teitelbaum, 1991, p. 136). In an early landmark study of American curriculum material, "Ideology and United States History Textbooks," Jean Anyon (1979) argues that many social studies books favour consensual theories when explaining historical events and fail to clearly delineate cause and effect relationships. Textbook publishers, according to Avon Crismore, assume that "controversial topics and opportunities for critical thinking should be avoided" (1989, p. 145). Within a Canadian context, Harro van Brummelen, in his article, "The World Portrayed in Text," studies elementary textbooks in British Columbia and concludes that the authors downplay conflicts in cultural interactions, that they locate wrongdoings in the past and not the present, and that they "avoid content that deals with most contemporary social problems, as well as issues of social justice and injustice and their implications" (1991, p. 215).

The argument that textbooks temper conflict and controversial subjects is well documented in pedagogical scholarship;¹ however, many of these studies focus primarily on the *written* mode of discourse. Or, when the occasional study does examine visuals, it draws upon "picture analysis" where researchers use quantitative methods to tally such elements as the occurrence of groups by race, class, gender, and ability (see, for example, Sleeter and Grant, 1991). Unlike quantitative content analysis, this paper performs a close, critical reading of visuals in an Atlantic Canadian textbook, *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community*, to understand how they encourage particular regional identifications. To enact this reading, I focus on three strategies of visual apoliticization: (1) the choice of distancing modality cues in provocative sec-

tions; (2) the patterned use of what social semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) call *symbolic processes*; and (3) the prevalence of before and after pictures, which enact what I call the *visual ergative*. In short, this paper explores how patterned, habitual images in this textbook encourage a distanced, indifferent, and disengaged stance towards negative cultural change and the representation of socially marginalized groups.

Visuals often go unexamined, a critical gap that leads to tacit assumptions about relations, people, and places. How do we — teachers of technical and professional writing, document designers, educational researchers, and readers of visuals in our world — remedy the situation? One way is by equipping ourselves and our students to theorize about the political work of pictures in various kinds of documents. Our classrooms can provide a space for students to ponder the effects of document visuals (selections and combinations in layout, colour, modality, framing, etc.) and to ask important questions concerning politically heated topics. Moments of meta-awareness offer insights into the practices of representation and address, especially those that depoliticize issues of difference, of power, and of injustice. With explicit visual reading strategies, we can detect when a document — textbook or otherwise — shuffles its feet, clears its throat, and signals discomfort with the subject at hand.

Atlantic Canada in the Global Community

Atlantic Canada in the Global Community, published in 1998 by Prentice-Hall (now Pearson Education Canada) and the smaller Newfoundland company Breakwater Books, is currently used by all grade nine students in Atlantic Canada. The student will not find yaffles of fish or pictures of anchored dories in *Atlantic Canada*. The glossy, expensive-looking production jettisons the student into the twenty-first century with sections about oil rigs, computer technology, women's hockey teams, and companies that make world-famous cymbals. The book, written by seven authors (many of whom are Atlantic-Canadians), treats students to a multimedia extravaganza: colourful and multitudinous boxes of information overlap on the page as if the student were engaged with hypertext. Poems, pieces of artwork, advertisements for McCain Superfries™, pictures of local celebrities, and archival material make for an eclectic and engaging compilation. Within the Newfoundland education system, the textbook differs markedly from an earlier book, *Our Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage*. For instance, the newer version does not devote as much space to such historical matters as the migratory fishery or patterns of settlement. Instead, it celebrates—in full colour—the future of the region, particularly in terms of communication, business, and technology.

This discussion centres on one section entitled “A Focus on Fine Art,” which introduces students to Newfoundland artist Gerald Squires and draws upon the theme of one of his paintings, *Resettlement*. Resettlement, a government initiative of 1950s and 60s Newfoundland that forced whole communities to move to more economically feasible locations on the Island, continues to provoke controversy amongst Newfoundlanders. But, as Jim Candow argues (“A Stunning Island”), it has received little attention from social scientists and needs to be examined within the context of other forced demographic upheaval “including centralizing the Nova Scotian Mi’kmaq and relocating the African-Nova Scotian residents of Africville (in Halifax)” (2001, p. 4). To support my claims about visual modality, process types, and sequence, I mention in passing other sections (like “Africville,” “The Labrador Inuit,” and “Technology and Resources”). I argue that, as a group, these passages reveal not inconsequential redundancies in grammar and visual strategies, a consistency that supports my contention that certain symbolic resources pattern in this book, especially in sections concerning social upheaval.

To perform a critical reading of the visual selections and combinations in these sections, I turn to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s work, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, which outlines a descriptive framework for understanding how visual structures realize meanings. Drawing upon the metafunctional model of linguist Michael Halliday, Kress and van Leeuwen understand visuals as serving three communicative requirements. First, images function *ideationally*; that is to say, they represent objects and relations in the world. Second, they realize meanings *interpersonally*; they “project a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented” (1996, p. 41). And finally, pictures function *textually* (or organizationally); their arrangement and layout are meaningful as images cohere with each other and with the context in which they occur. Referring to “A Focus on Fine Art” and other units, I trace the metafunctional chorus of meaning in the visual mode.

Before moving to my analysis, I should explain my potentially ambiguous use of phrases like “visual strategies of stabilization and containment” or “patterned, habitual images” which I do *not* equate with intentionality. A critic of textbooks cannot be naive about textbook production—in actual textbook practice, the process of finding and choosing visuals, as art historian Belinda Loftus observes, is often not neat, carefully considered, or intentional. She claims that many textbook pictures are chosen by picture researchers, who are frequently

underpaid, work to tight deadlines, under pressure to find cheap, easily obtainable images, and move speedily from one project to another... Often these conditions of work result in their producing im-

ages which are only loosely appropriate to the text, and lack even the most basic information about their relationship with the historical point they supposedly illustrate. Even educational publications use picture researchers for their illustrations... (Loftus, 1988, p. 117)

No matter how harried the researcher or how seemingly random the choice, however, the selection of a photograph or cartoon or graph still comes out of one's inculcated sense of what is appropriate—even loosely—in a given context. Indeed, if editors and researchers are scrambling for an image, they are likely to take what is most accessible; if landscape shots are most abundant or if a cartoon is the “natural” choice for depiction, then these are the habitual practices and readily available resources in a society and these speak of the shared social texts for understanding a place or people. And more important than intention are the *consequences* of a word, note, gesture, or visual for how we understand, in this case, the status quo—the hierarchies, traditions, and market systems—of regionality. As theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin have argued, the meaning of a text or utterance is not an act of individual will or determination. Instead, an utterance “inevitably orients itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both those by the same author and those by other authors” (1986, p. 95). The intentions of picture researchers, book designers, educators, or publishers are not essential, therefore, for discussing the rhetorical effect of visuals, as students understand images and layout in textbooks against a background of other visual texts. With inculcated repetition, unpeopled shots, low-modality pictures, and nonthreatening landscape photographs become commonsensical ways of understanding conflict and making it safe.

The Interpersonal Metafunction: Modality and Address

Modality refers, in part, to the truth value of statements about the world. An expression that marks one's limited perspective “from a certain location; the writer's position in the world” (Giltrow, 1995, p. 302), modality can be realized grammatically in various ways. For instance, as Kress and van Leeuwen argue, markers like auxiliary verbs (*may*, *will* and *must*) and related adjectives (*possible*, *probable*, *certain*) accord specific degrees of reliability to utterances or pictures (1996, p. 160). Additionally, writers can reduce the modality or credibility of a claim by attributing it to someone else, by formulating it as a subjective claim, or by articulating it in the past tense (ex. “It was thought by early explorers that...”). Modality, they suggest, does not express absolute truths or falsehoods about the world but rather encourages agreement amongst readers, “aligning [them] with some statements and distancing them from

others" (1996, p. 160). It is, therefore, a rhetorical or interpersonal resource. The discursive rendering of regionality, constructed and maintained in part through modality markers, can be very persuasive, especially if these markers pattern repeatedly in a textbook.

One can apply the linguistic instantiation of modality to the visual mode, as well. According to Kress and van Leeuwen,

Visuals can represent people, places and things as though they are real, as though they actually exist in this way, or as though they do not — as though they are imaginings, fantasies, caricatures, etc. And here, too, modality judgements are social, dependent on what is considered real (or true, or sacred) in the social group from which the representation is primarily intended. (1996, p. 161)

For instance, readers of an advanced anatomy textbook, in the tradition of scientific orientation, accord more truth value to black and white, decontextualized, and diagrammatic depictions than they do 35 mm photographic naturalism. Colour and realistic detail in a scientific context signal lower modality. On the other end of the spectrum, the supersaturated hamburger is more "real" for television viewers because they use a different coding orientation to understand it—they apply sensory rather than scientific criteria. In this context, the more a picture can create an illusion of taste and touch and smell, synaesthetic experience, the higher its modality. One cannot make blanket statements, therefore, about what constitutes the real in visuals; what is regarded as real depends on how reality is defined by a particular social group.

Although different coding orientations apply in different contexts, the dominant standard by which we judge visual realism and hence visual modality remains, at present, and for the purposes of understanding modality in a textbook, photorealism. Again, according to Kress and van Leeuwen,

we judge an image as real when, for instance, its colours are approximately as saturated as those in 35 mm photographs... as detail, sharpness, colour, etc. are reduced or amplified, as the perspective flattens or deepens, so modality decreases. (pp. 163-64)

For the most part, *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community* sets the modal and ideological stage for students by offering a series of photorealistic pictures of successful people and landscape shots. The landscape pictures, all photographs, carry high modality. One typical example, a photograph of Woody Point, Newfoundland, with the long range mountains in the background, illustrates this photorealistic trend. (See

LANDFORMS IN ATLANTIC CANADA

Much of Atlantic Canada is known for its rugged terrain, dotted with thousands of lakes and ponds, and its coastline, broken with bays and inlets. Nevertheless, the region has a wide variety of physical features, as you can see in Figure 2.2.

In northern New Brunswick, much of the land, with its mountains and hills, is high. A **mountain** can be defined as a mass of land that is significantly higher than the surrounding area. Although it is difficult to use one height to distinguish all mountains from hills, a mountain is often considered to be a mass of land with an elevation of 600 m or more. The highest land in Nova Scotia is found on Cape Breton Island, but other parts, such as the Springhill to Stellarton and Annapolis Royal to Windsor areas, are also hilly. In Prince Edward Island, the highest land is found in the hills of the central region, while gently rolling hills are found in the east and west. The most striking physical feature on the island of Newfoundland is the Long Range Mountains which run along its western side. East of these mountains, much of the island is formed by an upland area with rolling hills and valleys, lakes, ponds, and bogs. An upland area generally has an elevation of 100 m to 400 m.

The mountain and upland systems of Newfoundland are part of the Appalachian Mountains, which extend across the rest of the

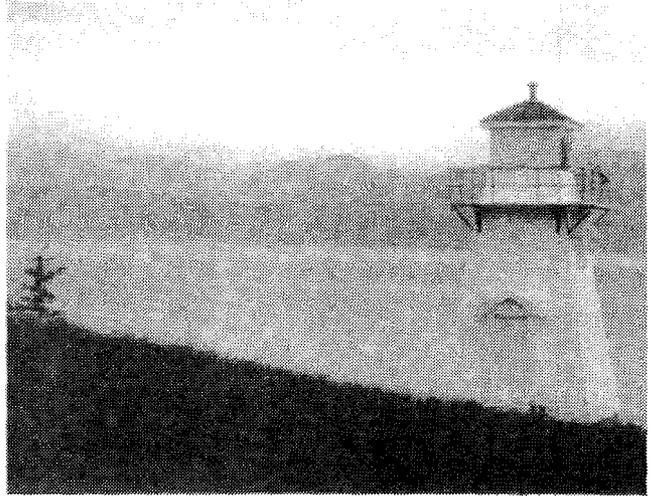


Figure 2.7 A view of Woody Point, Newfoundland, with the Long Range Mountains in the background

Atlantic region and into the United States as far south as the state of Georgia. These mountains were formed by **folding** — a bending of the earth's crust. They were once high and jagged, but erosion over their 300-million-year history has reduced them to low mountains and rolling hills separated by wide valleys.

In Labrador, however, the land is an extension of the Canadian Shield, a vast area of rock that stretches across central Canada. Although the mountains in Labrador have been heavily eroded by glaciers, some are rugged and high.

Table 2.1 Atlantic Canada: Principal elevations by province

Province	Mountain/Hill	Elevation	Absolute Location
Newfoundland and Labrador	Lewis Hills	806 m	48°50'N 58°29'W
	Mount Caubvick	1652 m	58°43'N 63°43'W
Nova Scotia	Cape Breton Highlands	532 m	46°62'N 60°36'W
New Brunswick	Mount Carleton	817 m	47°23'N 66°53'W
Prince Edward Island	Queen's County	142 m	46°20'N 63°25'W



PHYSICAL SETTING

Figure 1.

figure 1.) In terms of colour saturation, this visual has medium saturation; in other words, if one constructed a continuum between supersaturation and black and white photography, the colour would fall somewhere in the middle. As for colour differentiation, the photograph draws upon a diverse range of colour and shades (it is not monochromatic). Looking at colour modulation, one notices that the picture does not have the solid, unmodulated colour of, for instance, a child's painting, but different shades, like the hues of white/grey in the lighthouse itself. As for background, objects are contextualized (that is to say, the lighthouse is set against a setting and background, rather than in a "void"). However, the background (the mountain and the horizon) is not fully articulated but is a little hazy. Interestingly, the most fully articulated, or detailed, background does not carry the highest naturalistic modality in visuals. Given the resolution of standard 35MM photography, we accord more reality to a slightly out-of-focus background (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 159-80). This accordance with photographic naturalism carries across all of the textbook, as pictures of fjords, fields, harbours, and marshes define the landscape for the Atlantic Canadian student. This landscape realism is a trend in other east coast books, as well. A grade five social studies text in Newfoundland, *The Atlantic Edge*, also begins with page after page of photographs of land and sea.

Atlantic Canada, I argue, establishes a naturalistic code for supposedly incontestable realities. But what happens when the book addresses contentious issues? How is the student then located relative to the real? One means through which the textbook distances the student from politically contentious topics is through low modality artistic selections. "A Focus on Fine Art," the subject of this discussion, is by no means the only section in the book to use paintings or art pieces to explain conflict or difficult subjects. The Acadian Expulsion, the extermination of the Beothuk Indians, and the traditional lifestyle of the Inuit people—tricky subjects, all—are just a few examples of this textual choice. How do these interpersonal choices invite a given position relative to these representations? How might the concept of modality help explain how the textbooks construct interactive participants and in this case distance students from uncomfortable topics?

In the two-page unit, "A Focus on Fine Art," (see figures 2a, 2b), images and language together create a multimodal text, although the images (including the layout of the pages) constitute a dominant semiotic mode. The left-hand page is divided evenly between linguistic and visual text. On top, the text provides a brief written biography of Squires and a description of the resettlement program in Exploits, Squires' home. On bottom, a large (and predominantly dark) black-and-white picture depicts Gerald Squires (with his brushes and rags), his daughter, Esther, and an early version of his painting, *Resettlement*. The photograph, which highlights the painting in the

A FOCUS ON FINE ART

Artists of the Atlantic provinces have often painted the dramatic landscapes of the region. One such artist is Gerald Squires. Squires was born in Change Islands on Newfoundland's northeast coast in 1937, and spent much of his childhood on the island of Exploits. In 1950, his family moved to Toronto, where Squires finished school and planned a career in commercial art. He worked for a Toronto newspaper, but in 1969, he decided to return to Newfoundland to be an artist.

When Squires returned to Exploits, he found a community on the brink of death. While he had been away, the fishery — on which the economy and culture of the area were built — had been changing. As you will see in Unit 4, off-shore trawlers had replaced small-boat operators. Instead of being salted or sun-cured, fish were now fresh frozen in modern plants. As a result, the economy of the outports suffered. The government decided to resettle many people from such communities, offering them \$2000 to settle in more urban centres.

Gail Squires, Gerry's wife, describes their reaction to the resettlement program that was underway in Exploits in 1970:

There was a lot of anger towards the government. Word was that the school teacher and mailboat were to be taken away, forcing people to leave the island for these services.... [People were being forced] out of their centuries-long homes and livelihoods.... It was heart-wrenching to watch those proud people...being loaded aboard boats, pathetic and fearful, heading for an uncertain future amongst strangers. When we returned for a brief visit three years later, only three people remained as permanent residents....

Source: D. Walsh and S. Jamieson, *Gerald Squires: Newfoundland Artist (St. John's: Breakwater, 1995) p. 14.*

Figure 7.8 Gerald Squires working on his painting *Resettlement*. His daughter Esther is behind him. How did the painting change between this earlier version and the finished piece, shown on the next page? Which version do you think has more impact? Why?



CALDERA

Figure 2a.

In response to what they saw, Squires began a series of paintings called *The Boatman*. Since then, he has painted a number of series presenting Newfoundland images. Many draw on his cultural and spiritual roots on the island. Squires is now recognized as one of Newfoundland's finest artists. In 1992, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Memorial University.

Figure 7.9 *Resettlement* was painted by Gerald Squires in 1975. What is the historical background to this painting? In what ways is the painting symbolic? In what ways does the painting reflect Squires' cultural roots?



EXPLORATIONS

REVIEWING THE IDEAS

1. Compare *Resettlement* with the painting by Maud Lewis on page 97. How would you describe the difference between folk painting and fine art?

APPLYING YOUR SKILLS

2. There are several paintings by Atlantic Canadian artists in this book. With a partner, analyze one of them, or any other painting by an Atlantic artist, by following these steps:
 - a) Describe what you see in the foreground, middle ground, and background of the picture.
 - b) What forms the focal point of the picture?
 - c) What can you learn from the picture? Record three things.

d) How does the picture make you feel? Explain.

e) What is your opinion of the picture? Explain.

ANALYZING AND REFLECTING

3. Some artists are very successful, but most receive little financial benefit from their work. What do you think motivates them to paint? In pairs or small groups, role play an interview with any one of the artists whose work is included in this text. The interviewer should ask about the motivation and inspiration for the artist's work, and the artist should provide carefully considered answers. If possible, make a tape or video recording of your interview.



Figure 2b.

foreground, becomes progressively darker as one moves into the background of the shot, where Esther's head seems to float, in sharp contrast to the black doorway. This lighting gives the photograph an ethereal quality that marks this picture as meaningful or symbolic of some general statement that a personal family portrait, for instance, might not be.

The right-hand page is dominated by the finished version of *Resettlement*, which can be interpreted as a low modality choice when considered within naturalistic conventions. This striking landscape painting features a cemetery on the edge of a rocky cliff, where a government official (whose back is to the viewer) watches a boat cross against the tides. Looking closely, one can make out the words, "Dept. of Community and Social Development" on the government official's briefcase and community names like "St. Annes" and "St. Kyrans" on the tombstones in the foreground. The painting's limited colour differentiation (it is restricted to shades of brown and grey) and its brightness (there is little contrast between light and dark in the painting) speak of an aesthetic reality, one distinct from the "real" Newfoundland set out in the photorealism of the book's first chapter.

Not only the colour choices but also the spatial organization of the landscape suggest that this representation operates within aesthetic discourse. The historical development of aesthetic discourses in photography is explored by Rosalind Krauss (1999), in her article, "Photography's Discursive Spaces." She argues that different visual modes (in her study, photography and lithography) occupy different discursive spaces, respond to different viewer expectations, and communicate different kinds of knowledge (1999, p. 195). Gerald Squires' mode in *Resettlement*—landscape painting—operates within what Krauss calls "the space of exhibition" (p. 287), an understanding of art-in-space that came out of museum and gallery practices of the nineteenth century. Krauss suggests that the presence of an exhibition wall was in the 1860s internalized in paintings and changed the perspective and lateral organization of landscape paintings themselves:

The transformation of landscape after 1860 into a flattened and compressed experience of space spreading laterally across the surface was extremely rapid. It began with the insistent voiding of perspective, as landscape painting counteracted perspectival recession with a variety of devices, among them sharp value contrast, which had the effect of converting the orthogonal penetration of depth—effected, for example, by a lane of trees—into a diagonal ordering of the surface. (1999, p. 195)

Squires' painting, similarly, demonstrates the strong diagonal ordering, sharp contrasts, and wide expanse mentioned above. A viewer might feel unsettled looking at the painting, as its vectors seem to lead the eye in different directions: the rocks, the leaning official, and the largest grave marker all form a strong diagonal line upwards to the right, whereas the dory at the top of the painting directs the eye straight to the left, and many of the grave markers point straight upwards. The various angles speak of a world not quite right, one not in alignment. But a strong diagonal exists, nonetheless, and makes this painting dramatic, captivating, and very easily imagined on the wall of a gallery—an object of speculation rather than interaction.

The painting, an object of contemplation, invites a position of aesthetic distance relative to the piece because it performs no direct demand (no address like a smiling face, a pointing finger, or eye contact); instead, the government official in the painting has his back to the viewer. The man's posture constitutes what Kress and van Leeuwen call an offer: "it offers the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (1996, p. 124). The reader's response to the politically heated issue of resettlement would be considerably different if the piece included a photograph of displaced residents looking, at close distance, at the viewer.

A reader who glances through the textbook might notice that often, when controversial topics are the theme, the textbook shows still shots of communities, an offer that asks to be viewed as impersonal information. For example, in one ironically called "Focus" section, "Africville," (the picture of the town is actually *out of focus!*), the student reads about a small community of predominantly African-Canadians north of Halifax that became a site for sewage and garbage disposal and was never provided with amenities like postal service, schools, street lights, water or sewers. In the 1960s the entire community was demolished because politicians decided that this alternative was cheaper than providing the necessary services. This response to relocation, like that in "A Focus on Fine Art," is communicated through the aestheticizing mechanism of art (this time in a poem called "Africville My Home"). The picture accompanying the text is of the community, and in the accompanying caption, the student is asked to locate the church (p. 62). Similarly, in "The Labrador Inuit" case study, the reader finds an unpeopled photograph of wooden houses in Hopedale, Labrador (p. 113). In a section that narrates the collapse of the cod fishery, the text includes a picture of Trinity, Newfoundland. This repeated pattern is important because it habituates a distanced response to change, one that objectifies place, stabilizes conflicts, and keeps viewers at arm's length (or farther) from its consequences. It offers students comfortable, familiar images of place, instead of making them angered by, or at least engaged with, these events and their effects on human beings in the region.

The Ideational Metafunction: Conceptual Processes

Of course, in this age of mechanical reproduction, a piece of art like *Resettlement* is easily removed from its original spatio-temporal conditions (whether in a private collection or hanging in a public space) and re-framed in a new context. In “A Focus on Fine Art,” the page layout, the exercises, and the surrounding narrative and captions frame the images in relation to a particular historical event—resettlement. Textbook sections like “A Focus on Fine Art” are multimodal systems (with visuals, linguistic text, materiality of the paper, etc.) that organize perceptions and structure readers’ interpretations. More than that, these frames provide reading cues—directives—for viewers, encouraging some interpretations and deflecting others.

The frame for Squires’ painting (captions, exercises, other photos) as well as its own visual selections invites viewers to interpret it according to—and here I draw upon Kress and van Leeuwen’s ideational work—*conceptual* rather than narrative terms. To define these terms briefly, a narrative representation is one in which vectors or lines between represented elements in the picture “serve to present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements” (1996, p. 56). A picture of a child running down a road, a chef offering someone a dish, even a geometric shape like a triangle tilting into a square can represent narrative processes of dynamic action. By contrast, conceptual representations depict participants “in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure, or meaning” (p. 79). Tree diagrams, networks, and decontextualized symbols are just a few examples of conceptual processes, as all these speak of a permanent meaning or relation among represented participants.

The painting *Resettlement*, which exemplifies a conceptual meaning as opposed to a narrative one, offers descriptive information; it tells the viewer what, essentially, resettlement *means* (to this artist at least). Specifically, it illustrates what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) call a *symbolic attributive process*. The written caption accompanying the picture invites readers to break the painting into its various attributes when it asks them “in what ways is the painting symbolic?” It encourages them to explore what symbolic value each object in the picture carries (and how these attributes give meaning to some central participant, in this case the government official who stands on shore). The grave markers, the briefcase, the boat, the rocks, the beating waters, and the sombre colours establish this man’s meaningfulness, his personification of power, of death, and perhaps, regret.

The question is, what effects might this conceptual selection within the ideational realization of visual meaning have in this context? How does this visual choice defuse a provocative subject? First, I return to the heart of conceptual representation:

to communicate a “generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence.” Squires’ painting certainly speaks of the essence of Newfoundland resettlement and not simply an instance of it; it prompts students to convert the details—the specifics—of the piece into a *generic* understanding of a political event. Quite easily read as emblematic of an era in Newfoundland history, the painting evokes a timeless quality, a statement about power, abandonment, and death. In doing so, it distances the viewer from the subject and calls for detached, impersonal scrutiny. The painting, by virtue of its status as art, is also considered to be more distant from the subject represented. According to Vito Signorile, who ponders the “riddle” of generic versus particular readings of visuals, “[d]rawings and paintings are considered more generic than photographs and, therefore, more ‘distant’ from the subjects they depict” (1994, p. 223). The painting *Resettlement*, by representing the generic through art, encourages an aesthetic distance from the scene portrayed and subdues any response one might have if given a specific instance of displacement.

The second consequence of a conceptual representation—one strengthened by the framing text—is the defusion of any immediate indignation a viewer might feel after reading the language in this unit (with stories about “proud people... being loaded aboard boats, pathetic and fearful, heading for an uncertain future amongst strangers”). The selection of visual and linguistic symbols absorbs the reader in the activity of understanding the relations between parts: How does the grave marker relate to the man? How does the dory relate to the waves? How does the briefcase relate to the grave markers? This process deflects student attention from questioning the motives and consequences of this government initiative: why did Newfoundlanders have to move? Whose interests did the program serve? Who implemented this program in the first place? Why did some areas attract residents and others lose them? How did people react? Could this demographic upheaval happen again and what agency would present-day students have to resist such a move?

While the painting is a powerful and masterful depiction of Newfoundland landscape and history, it is also aesthetic and ultimately harmonizing rather than upsetting, particularly for a twenty-first century student who knows little about resettlement. The symbolic weight and juxtapositioning of individual objects in this painting construct a timeless, unreal place (given its modality cues), one that does not affect the student’s life directly. In his work on visual opposition and how it plays out in a Saturn™ car company brochure, David Goodwin outlines the means by which visuals can construct a fantasy space for consumers, often through the juxtaposition of decontextualized and oppositionally organized objects. He argues that the “happily compatible” world of Saturn is developed, among other ways, through reduction and substitution in their advertising material:

First, the image is a site of metonymic reduction and substitution: reduction wherever wholes are reduced to parts...; and substitution, wherever objects replace their agents.... As in a dream, the image reduces intricate social relationships to simple, aesthetic contiguities; it substitutes, as well, simple, physical objects for vastly complex agents.... Everything represented visually “works together” perfectly in a world out of time... and out of space. (1999, p. 104)

While Squires’ painting is motivated by and suggestive of political inequities and demographic devastation, its aesthetic choices within the context of this textbook nonetheless remove the viewer from the antagonisms of real people and their immediate and varied reactions. The various objects in *Resettlement*, like the images Goodwin examines in the Saturn™ brochure, effectively convert whole programs and whole groups of people to parts: the entire government initiative to a human figure whose face is turned away from us; a provincial department to a briefcase; hundreds of evacuated people to two distant figures in a boat. In a substitution move, the image of the grave markers stands in for the communities that were left. The painting, then, transforms complex relationships—the relationships between fishermen and government officials, between incoming families and the new communities they faced, even the divisions *amongst* politicians at this time—into aesthetic objects. By reifying events, the picture can then spatialize these relations on the canvas and stabilize them. And through similar colours and angles, it can make the grave markers (which represent the communities) harmonize with the briefcase and man (which represent the government department responsible) even though these two entities would actually have been in conflict over resettlement. While the various objects are not depicted entirely out of time and space (there is a definite scene and contextualization for objects in the painting), the metonymic impulse still makes this representation less conflictual than other visual choices might have been.

Again, I must stress that paintings *can* be political and in other environments with other textual frames *Resettlement* could rouse the viewer to sharp sadness, anger, regret—and action. But the “Explorations” section below the painting, which provides questions for the student, deals with the techniques and lifestyle of artists and—apart from the vague question “What can you learn from this picture?”—not the topic of resettlement. The text does not give the painting’s size (Gerald Squires’ paintings tend to be big, hence much of their impact); its current location (a public forum like the Confederation Building, the seat of the provincial government, would make the painting mean differently than if it hung in Memorial University’s art gallery or in

someone's private collection); or its medium (oil carries an intensity that watercolour, say, does not). An interested reader cannot even find this information in the credits at the back of the book. Instead, the textbook frames the painting as an illustration of historical content, as the caption urges students to discuss "the historical background to this painting." (See Loftus [1988], for a similar discussion pertaining to the Northern Ireland troubles and historical illustrations.) This approach does not display much interest in the function of the painting, politically (besides pondering history as inspirational) and focuses too exclusively on the image and not the conflict attached to Newfoundland resettlement.

The Organizational Metafunction: Before and After Pictures

Visual texts, as I have shown, function ideationally and interpersonally; however, they also function as a whole, their parts fitting together on a page, computer screen, billboard, or other medium. The compositional choices of a text instantiate the textual or organizational metafunction, the third of these visual realizations. Organizationally, *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community* relies upon one prevalent sequence: the before and after dyad. Before and after pictures invite the viewer to make comparisons rather than to interrogate the politics of the scenes they depict. For instance, in "A Focus on Fine Art," the picture of Squires standing next to his painting-in-progress can be considered a "before" frame and the final coloured portrait on the next page the "after" frame. Before and after sequences, whether they illustrate improvement or deterioration, represent frozen moments of transformation over time. And they invite a "safe" reading of change because, ultimately, they encourage students to view social change (especially negative change) in terms of stages which, as Kress and van Leeuwen describe above, possess "fixed and stable characteristics, stages which can then be treated as though they were things" (1996, p. 95).

Consider the two pictures in "A Focus on Fine Art." A student views *Resettlement*, figure 2b], along with the black-and-white picture of Gerald Squires, figure 2a]. Together, these images perform a visual sequence, one that invites a narrative reading (this stage of the painting happened, *and then* this stage occurred), and an analytical one (this stage of the painting *included* these attributes, while the later stage *included* these other ones). The text encourages students to view the painting, not as a political statement, but rather as an object that they will study, part by part, to detect changes as the painting progressed. In fact, the script accompanying the black and white photograph instructs students to perform just this kind of comparative exercise. It reads, "How did the painting change between this earlier version and the finished piece, shown on the next page? Which version do you think has more impact? Why?"

CHAPTER 15

Technology and Resources

From this...

...to this

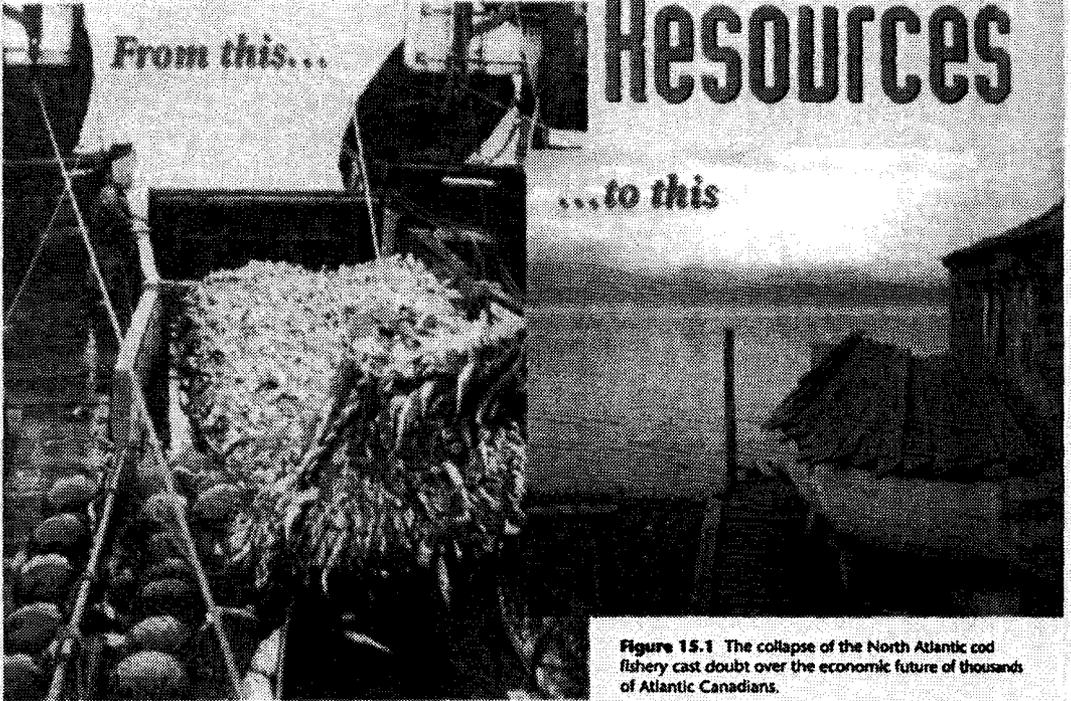


Figure 15.1 The collapse of the North Atlantic cod fishery cast doubt over the economic future of thousands of Atlantic Canadians.

It is July 1992. You are 15 years old. For five generations your family has made its living from the Atlantic fishery. Their "bread and butter" has always been the northern cod. You have fished a fair bit yourself and you think that your future, too, will be in the fishery. On Friday July 3, 1992, you are listening to the radio and hear government officials declare that the cod fishery has been stopped dead, because fish stocks have been drastically reduced. A complete moratorium is in place. Your parents, along with almost 19 000 others who make their living in the fishery, are out of work for at least two years, perhaps more.

- How did you get to this point? Who or what is to blame?
- How has technology affected the fishery and other natural resources in the Atlantic region?

Figure 3.

Not only do these before and after pictures turn activities into spatial representations that can be broken down into pieces, but these pictures also perform what I call the *visual ergative*. By way of linguistic definition, the ergative occurs when an actor is both the doer and the done-to in a clause. For example, in the clause *the sundae toppled*, *the sundae* is the doer of the action (the toppling) and the recipient, as well (it was toppled). In functional grammar, the ergative clause is divided into what is called a medium and a process. The medium is “the key figure in that process; this is the one... without which there would be no process at all” (Halliday, 1994, p. 163). In the clause *the sundae toppled*, *sundae* is that figure, that medium. *Toppled* is the process.

Ergative constructions prove useful for understanding agency in representations of sticky political subjects because they communicate information about the causation of an action. Halliday suggests that when looking for ergative verbs one ask the question: *is the process brought about from within or from outside?* (1994, p. 162). When read through an ergative lens, action can appear to be, as Halliday notes, “self-engendering”:

Either the process is represented as self-engendering, in which case there is no separate Agent; or it is represented as engendered from outside, in which case there is another participant functioning as Agent. Thus the clauses *the glass broke*, *the baby sat up*, *the boy ran* are all structured as Medium + Process. In the real world, there may well have been some external agency involved in the breaking of the glass; but in the semantics of English it is represented as having been self-caused. (1994, p. 164)

Because of its frequent use of the ergative construction in both its linguistic and visual text, *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community* narrates change and crisis as self-caused phenomena. At the same time, however, human agents smile out at the student on almost every page and proclaim their economic, social, and technological efficacy.

An example of this pervasive ergative occurs in the language of “A Focus on Fine Art”: *While he [Squires] had been away, **the fishery** — on which the economy and culture of the area were built — **had been changing**. The fishery (medium) seems to have both brought about its own change and been the recipient of it. By conferring agency onto an abstract inanimate activity, the text produces a world where people do not do anything, and where, instead, events do things themselves. The title of another section dealing with change, entitled, “Cultures Change,” is expressed as an ergative, where *culture* is both the doer of the change and the recipient of it. As if setting precedent,*

this title unleashes a number of ergatives in the section it heralds: *cultures grow and change* and *cultures appear and disappear* (a ludicrous claim). The reader is invited to read the world of technological change as an abstract and self-caused phenomenon.

Before and after pictures, I argue, communicate this ergative construction visually. At the beginning of chapter 15, "Technology and Resources," (see figure 3) a caption that reads "From this... to this" is accompanied by two pictures: one of a net overflowing with fish (the before shot) and the other of a boarded up boat on a deserted wharf (the after shot). These sequences visually communicate the message, "change happens," and they invite a habituated response to and understanding of regional transformations. They do not invite interrogation into the processes of that change, into the intervening increments of change, or into the people and institutions that caused it in the first place. They construct a self-driven world, one that can be understood critically with reference to Kenneth Burke's definition of motion which he opposes to action: "Action," Burke writes, "is a term for the kind of behavior possible to a typically symbol-using animal (such as man) in contrast with the extrasymbolic or nonsymbolic operations of nature" (1968, p. 447). Motion, on the other hand, applies to the blossoming of buds, rotation of the planets, movement of the tides, and the shooting of neurons in the brain. Ergatives, both visual and linguistic, construct a world where "motion" forces cause change (in the case of the textbook, negative or undesirable change). Agents do not.

This consistent stylistic choice, the ergative, while seemingly inconsequential, in the end serves the interests of the larger nation state. The ergative representation of regional change, with its suggestion of temporal inevitability and static status, prevents students from interrogating such activities as suspect fishery practices or inadequate punishment against foreign fishing. Canadian literary critic Frank Davey, in his article, "Toward the Ends of Regionality," argues that geographic determinism (and one could substitute Burke's term *motion* here) offers government an easy way out of regional inequalities:

a regionalism should be perceived as a production of the nation-state and as partly serving the nation-state's interests. In economics, the myth of geographic determinism (*read: motion*) allows a national government to avoid responsibility for regional downturns, and to use the band-aid of equalization payments instead of investigating ways in which national economic practices create regional economic differentiations. (1998, p. 5, italicized insertion my own)

Ergatives extract responsibility from a text and they allow for thinking in terms of compensation instead of investigation, fish moratoria instead of mobilized efforts to confront politicians, fisheries officials, and others who hold powerful positions. If anything, replacing visual and linguistic ergatives with active process types (foreign fishing vessels fishing in Newfoundland waters, illicit local fishing practices) or pictures of angry fisherman and politicians or pictures of the very technologies that brought about the demise of the fishery would help readers confront in more sophisticated ways the reasons behind change. Thinking through reasons behind change does not mean blaming Ottawa or St. John's or some abstract government body. Instead, critical thinking means that students in the classroom are encouraged to become aware of the very modes that constitute representation and to recognize that symbols and narratives are motivated and ideologically loaded texts.

Conclusion: Meaning Making as a Community

Theorists who study the politics of the textbook argue that the field of textbook analysis "need[s] more nuanced models of textual analysis," models that acknowledge that "texts do not simply represent dominant beliefs in some straightforward way" (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 13). To support this argument, Apple and Christian-Smith quote Allan Luke's position in *Literacy, Textbooks and Ideology*:

A major pitfall of research in the sociology of curriculum has been its willingness to accept text form as a mere adjunct means for the delivery of ideological content: the former described in terms of dominant metaphors, images, or key ideas; the latter described in terms of the sum total of values, beliefs, and ideas which might be seen to constitute a false consciousness.... Even those critics who have recognized that the ideology encoded in curricular texts may reflect the internally contradictory character of a dominant culture have tended to neglect the need for a more complex model of text analysis, one that does not suppose that texts are simply readable, literal representations of "someone else's" version of social reality, objective knowledge and human relations. (as cited in Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 13)

Reading a textbook rhetorically to understand how its symbols invite identification and how its visuals draw upon and reproduce habitual ways of knowing is not to say that texts are "simply readable" or that they "deliver" ideological content. Nor does such an approach imply that meaning inheres in the text and that there is only one way of understanding an image: I am not positing *the* reading of these visuals.

But one does not have to pursue an ethnographic study of textbook use, I would argue, to speculate about the possible meanings a textbook invites and the consequences such readings might have. Features of visual representation have semantic meaning potential; that is to say, we can surmise what a visual *could* mean in a given context, given students' experience of previous visuals (other before and after pictures in textbooks or magazines, experiences with art, the contexts in which animation occurs). One can contemplate, with some reliability, how present day students would read *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community*, how they would interpret this text against the background of other current texts (advertisements, hypertext, animation, etc.) to construct meaning. The before and after picture, for instance, is a pervasive form in advertising, self-improvement genres, and, presumably, other textbooks.

Our challenge now, as teachers and researchers who write, edit, select, and critique textbooks, is to recognize the often unilateral authority in such commercial documents as the standardized textbook and to focus on how visuals mobilize the status quo, which defends tradition, hierarchy, and the current market system. The apathy and distance that visuals promote in viewers (and the apathy other "safe" documents encourage) is one means of maintaining power structures and keeping readers from questioning how we make sense of the world. We might develop what Ira Shor in "What is Critical Literacy?" (1999) calls a "dissident politics in the classroom" (p. 12), in which we foreground the deflections of visual selections, the framing mechanisms that guide our reading of an image, the habitual selections and interpretations of content, and the power of visual sequence. Visual analysis, then, can become part of our critical pedagogy, and theoretical methods like social semiotic readings of images will help us develop as critically thinking citizens. In *Empowering Education* (1992) Shor summarizes the goals of critical literacy that I envision visual analysis helping us achieve, a literacy that promotes:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (1992, p. 129)

Part of this visual critical literacy involves locating patterns in a text and considering their consequences, as I have done with *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community*.

But many questions remain to be explored. Have more progressive textbooks been written—in Canada and abroad—that could counter-balance this discussion? To what extent are authors and researchers co-opted by the publisher's agenda? What kinds of mediation occur between authors and corporate interests? How do teachers using *Atlantic Canada in the Global Community* feel about the text? Do they find it necessary to supplement it with other visuals that have higher modality? Where might sites/sights of resistance occur? These questions, beyond the scope of this analysis, are nonetheless helpful for contextualizing the actual practices surrounding the production and consumption of visual culture in the classroom and outside of it.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Allan Luke, "Making Dick and Jane: Historical Genesis of the Modern Basal Reader," *Teachers College Record*, 89 (1) (Fall, 1987): 91-116; and Dennis L. Carlson, "Legitimation and Delegitimation: American History Textbooks and the Cold War" in *Language, Authority, and Criticism: Readings on the School Textbook*, eds. Suzanne de Castell, Allen Luke, and Carmen Luke (Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press, 1989), pp. 46-55.
- 2 Earlier versions of this paper included a section about the representation of native peoples in cartoon form, with high colour saturation and with no modulation. I argued that these modality choices and the form of diagrams and charts (along with grammatical choices) constructed native people as static in this textbook. A developed, sophisticated discussion of racial depiction was not possible within the parameters of this paper, but an interested reader can look at the work of Howard Adams (1989), J. E. Chamberlin (1975), Daniel Francis (1992), and Terry Goldie (1989)—among others—for discussions of the "ossification" of natives in literary and popular representation and see how low-modality, diagrammatic forms resonate with some of their arguments.

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