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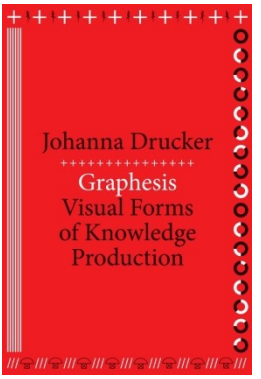
Manuel Portela e
António Rito Silva (orgs.)

Visual Interpretations and Humanistic Interfaces

JOSHUA ALMA ENSLEN
West Point | CLP | University of Coimbra
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Materialities of Literature



Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014. 215 pp. ISBN 978-0-674-72493-8

In her recent book *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, Johanna Drucker insists that now is the time for humanists to consider how to visually represent their work. Why? The answer is staring us in the face. Drucker's theoretical treatise and rapid-fire historical survey is intended to contextualize and encourage humanists to confront the challenges and consider the opportunities that visual representations of knowledge in the context of new media and the digital revolution pose for us. For those more accustomed to rendering research in textual form and not as graphs, maps or networks, the book begins with an unequivocal and spirited call to action: "Now is the moment to lift that ban of suspicion," and one might add intimidation, "and engage the full potential of visuality to produce and encode knowledge as interpretation." (11) The insistence of the narrative as it barrels through centuries of visual history with provocative and relevant analysis suggests that humanities scholars who ignore Drucker's call do so at their own risk.

Defining *Graphesis* as "the study of the visual production of knowledge, a topic that has compelling urgency in our current environment" (4), Drucker couches her call in the context of the book's three-fold mission. "First, to study information graphics and begin to understand how they operate; to denaturalize the increasingly familiar interface. . . and finally to consider how to serve a humanistic agenda by thinking about ways to visualize interpretation" (9).

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Filled with dozens of illustrations displaying the evolution of the graphic representation of knowledge, the main chapters of the book roughly follow a path outlined by these three main objectives.

The chapter "Image, Interpretation, and Interface" discusses what Drucker describes as a long held scholastic skepticism against the "truth" of visual images. Citing an article published in 1982 which "deliberately excluded graphical means as unreliable," Drucker explains that scholars have historically favored numerical and textual forms of knowledge representation (23). While upholding the value of this skepticism, she then goes on to remind us that all representations of knowledge, whether visual, numerical, or textual, are interpretations, a decidedly humanist perspective on knowledge production. In this way, she contextualizes her argument that this "unreliable" quality oft attributed to visualizations is inherent in all research and counters the skeptics with numerous examples. Citing Darwin's nineteenth-century sketches and other sixteenth-century studies in architecture among others, Drucker asserts "graphic methods are crucial to scientific work" and have afforded "precision. . . in circumstances where language failed" (27). With this constructivist perspective of visualization, she then traces graphic design as it emerged as an independent discipline in the 1970s and established methods for "visual communication" and a "graphical language" (38).

The chapter "Interpreting Visualization: Visualizing Interpretation" takes a closer look at the "intellectual lineages" of the many specific graphic forms, such as bar charts, tables, scatter plots, network diagrams, and trees of knowledge. Here Drucker explains how these graphics standards have come to be associated (by the public and not necessarily by scholars) with a perceived objective representation of data and information. Citing examples such as Descartes and the conceptualization of his Cartesian plane, Drucker discusses the roots of these many graphic forms while deliberately drawing into question the "literalism of representational strategies" (67). Suggesting the "performative" qualities of visuality (an adjective reminiscent of Judith Butler's propositions on gender), she makes her point with the example of calendars and clocks that, although correspondent to some degree with the movements of the heavens, are still abstract constructs that "make the world by structuring our experience of it" (74).

With these examples and others, Drucker carefully develops two important interconnected themes throughout the book. The first theme is about form and bears on the relevance of visualization to the humanities. The second theme is about content and contemplates the relevance of critical theory and the humanities to visualization. As demonstrated, the main point of the first theme is that visualizations are interpretations. This idea is expressed in a number of different ways throughout the course of the book. In one instance, Drucker cites a potential drawback to network diagrams. These diagrams can, as they adapt to the limits of the screen, introduce "interpretative warp or skew, so that what we see and read is actually a reification of misin-

formation" (105). In this way, Drucker strongly argues that images "act as if they are just showing us *what is*, but in actuality they are *arguments made in graphical form*" (10). Still, even with these shortcomings, she insists that humanists must grapple with how to represent our work visually due to the force of the digital revolution upon us.

With a convincing justification for experimenting with the visual form, Drucker then questions in a humanist light the coin of the digital realm: data. For Drucker, this seemingly ubiquitous and impenetrable stalwart of the sciences is actually only a convenient construct. She states her position on data in the following manner: "The graphical force conceals what the statistician knows very well—that no 'data' pre-exist their parameterization. *Data are capta*, taken not given, constructed as an interpretation of the phenomenal world, not inherent in it" (128). Importantly, this "refrain" (as she terms it) of "data are capta" demystifies and deconstructs data as she considers its potential role in visualizing humanities topics (129). For humanists, the perceived concretenesss of data may seem anathema to our research when, in regards to questions such as race, gender and identity, goals are often to problematize and subvert fixed positions and parameters. But, with data conceived as capta, Drucker proposes a path to overcome this incongruency.

With these two arguments in mind, Drucker takes to the book's final substantive chapter, "Interface and Interpretation" where she asks the important question, "Who is the subject of an interface?" (147). Defining it as "a mediating structure" between humans and machines "that supports behaviors and tasks" (138), the main premise here is to contextualize the computer interface while questioning the role of its "user." In the place of the "user," a term employing a capitalistic metaphor of consumption, Drucker prefers the more humanistic term: "subject." "We need a theory of the ways interface produces subjects of enunciation, not users as consumers," she declares (146). At this point, Drucker makes a number of other propositions about what a "subject-oriented" interface might be and provides "a few striking instances" (159). Among the examples provided, she cites The Van Gogh Correspondence project for it being "rooted in the appreciation and engagement of cultural materials" (158) and then the Austrian Academy's *Die Fackel* for the transparent qualities of navigation through its extensive archive of the writings of Karl Kraus (158-9). She also discusses in some detail the interactive artistic project *We Feel Fine* in which the "subject" can influence and transform the site's content through participation (160-1). If, at this point in the book, it feels as though Drucker is struggling to define the exact characteristics of a humanistic interface, this struggle becomes emblematic of the complexities of subjectivity that the best interfaces must reflect. For Drucker, the primary objective of a successful humanistic interface is to create a virtual experience which will allow for the exploration of a site's given subject matter while also accounting for the dynamics and complexities of the individual

doing the exploration. Undoubtedly, this is no small challenge and will require more humanists to accept the call to action proposed by *Graphesis*.

In a world increasingly dominated by information mediated through the screen, humanists of all fields would do well to read *Graphesis* carefully and to consider how their work may convincingly be rendered in visual form. Not content to have the humanities remain on the sidelines while the world changes literally before our eyes, Drucker has added her voice to a growing number of influential scholars, such as Moretti and Manovich, who are influencing the role that the humanities will play as the world experiences a "shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication" (Manovich, 2001: 19).

Reference

MANOVICH, Lev (2001). *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.