Professor Theo van Leeuwen

After working as a film and television producer in the Netherlands and Australia, Theo van Leeuwen studied linguistics at Sydney University, and taught communication theory at Macquarie University and the London College of Printing. He has also taught courses at the Universities of Vancouver, Vienna, Madrid, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. He holds a Dip Film/TV from Amsterdam, and MA and PhD degrees from the University of Sydney. He is currently Professor of Language and Communication at the Centre for Language and Communication research at Cardiff University, Wales.

His research interests include media discourse, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal communication. He is one of the founding editors of the new journal Visual Communication, published by Sage, and he directs the major Language and Global Communication research programme in which the Cardiff Centre for Language & Communication Research is currently engaged, and which is funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

He has published seven books and 49 journal articles and book chapters. His books include The Media Interview - Confession, Contest, Conversation (University of New South Wales Press, 1994, with Philip Bell), Reading Images - The Grammar of Visual Design (Routledge, 1996, with Gunther Kress), Speech, Music, Sound (Macmillan, 1999), Multimodal Discourse - The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication (Arnold, 2001), and the edited volume Handbook of Visual Analysis (Sage, 2000, with Carey Jewitt).

While visiting CCR Professor van Leeuwen spoke on the following topics:

Language & Global Communication
Professor van Leeuwen is Director of the major research project on Language and Global Communication which recently began at the Centre for Language & Communication Research, Cardiff University. It is a five-year project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and has a number of strands including tourism as a global cultural industry; globalisation and identity in Wales; technology, translation and culture; and healthcare in a global community.

This seminar presentation backgrounded the project, its design and its implementation to date.

Speech, Music, Interactivity
The forms and functions of human interactivity are at present a central interest in society. Many activities which used to be solitary are now reconfigured to become interactive – whether in reality (e.g. teamwork) or virtually (interactive computer systems).

In this paper I explored the forms and functions of speech interaction and musical interaction. I argued that the study of speech interaction has often focussed on sequentiality at the expense of simultaneity, and the study of musical interaction on simultaneity at the expense of sequentiality. Putting the two together, projecting music on to speech and speech on to music, will give a more complete picture of human interactivity – and ought to have consequences for the design of interactive activities and systems, even if at this stage only experimentally.
Workshop: Visual Analysis
This workshop was based on the methods of visual analysis developed in Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). These methods differ from many other forms of visual analysis in that they are primarily concerned with the meanings and communicative functions of stylistic and compositional patterns, rather than with the denotations, connotations and symbolic interpretations of the people, places and things depicted in images. Three key aspects were introduced:

Transitivity analysis
Drawing both on the linguistics of M.A.K. Halliday and on the work of Arnheim, Schapiro and others, transitivity analysis concentrates on the representational work done by the vectorial and configurational relations between the elements of visual representations. It brings out how such formal relations realise different kinds of narrative and conceptual connections between the people, places and things (including abstract things) depicted.

Modality analysis
With roots in philosophy and linguistics, as well as in cultural theory, modality analysis concerns the way in which the use of such means of visual representation as colour, representational detail and texture contributes to our judgements of the ‘reality’ value of visual representations, and this in different ways, depending on the reality criteria that operate in the given context.

Composition analysis
Composition analysis centres on three aspects of visual composition, the placement of elements in the visual space (top and bottom, left and right, etc.), the ways in which the elements of a composition can be framed off from each other or connected to each other, and the relative visual salience of the elements of a composition. Again, the communicative value of these aspects and their role in creating ‘textual meaning’ is foregrounded. This final section of the workshop also provided an introduction to the way in which further, more refined methods of visual analysis can be developed.


The Semiotics of Kinetic Design - A Paradigm for Practice-based Research
Everyday objects are increasingly designed kinetically – in terms of which parts of them can be moved, and how. This paper argued that kinetic design should not only be considered from the point of view of ergonomics, but also from the point of view of semiotics. It is used to create representations and subject positions for the users of the kinetically designed objects.

The semiotics of kinetic design involves three types of activity: (1) charting the meaning potential of kinetic design, (2) describing how that meaning potential is taken up in specific contexts, and (3) exploring how that meaning potential and its uses can be expanded. In other words, it encompasses the theory, the analysis as well as the practice of kinetic design.
This was demonstrated in relation to the kinetic design of Barbie dolls, Action Men and baby toys, chairs, light fittings and written texts. The paper will end with a look at the work of the late Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely, which systematically explored the expressive potential of kinetic design.