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Book review

**Computers
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ix visual exercises (CD-ROM). (2004). Cheryl E. Ball and
Kristin L. Arola. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's

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My father often left messages on a notepad for his family that let us know that my tia had called, that he went next door to the neighbor's, or that he was in the backyard working in his shop. He almost always drew pictures and used no letters, neither de English ni de Español. He developed and drew his own pictures: my mom had big hair, the neighbor wore square glasses, and my brother was drawn with big ears. My father, like most of my family members from his generation, saw written words as only one way to communicate. But to really communicate, according to my dad, always included sounds (verbal and actual sounds) and images (photos, drawings) that he saw as the backbone for making meaning. Family members and neighbors rhymed in two languages, often mixing languages to achieve the rhyme. My mom, now in her 80s, is still quick to catch a double meaning, to mispronounce an English word and make it sound Spanish, and to read the English newspaper's images of the American soldiers in Iraq and the destruction wreaked by the Tsunami. When she tells me how she read the image, she is close to what the caption said. Her ability to read emotion, environment, and situation is usually correct.

Like my parents' fondness for and reliance on images, I too enjoy reading and interpreting visuals. When I first saw Cheryl E. Ball and Kristin L. Arola's *ix visual exercises*, I was excited to be presented with a medium that allowed and asked for the mixing of language, sound, and images. The CD is not only pedagogically sound, but also an excellent way of putting language and structure to the study of visuals.

Visual literacy, as presented by Ball and Arola, is much like the literacy I learned at home. To read an image is similar to reading a text. The reader may read between the lines, read too much into it, or simply project personal meaning onto the text. But, like text, the image is rich with meaning, often highly dependent on the textual, social, political, and cultural contexts. A black and white image today, for instance, is either interpreted as old or classic. The same black and white photo back in 1949 was simply a photograph, neither old nor classic. Ball and Arola show us how we interpret images differently depending on the color scheme used and depending on how we understand the background of the image.

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ix visual exercises is especially insightful for learners who, like me, are visual learners. I have always preferred to read images to reading text. When I skim a book, a report, or a magazine, I look at the images. I quickly read the captions and make a split second decision whether I will read the text that accompanies the image. I know and have worked with individuals who would describe such a page exactly the opposite. These individuals are largely text-bound, or rely on the written word before, and in my experience, above the visual. From my perspective, these individuals are visually challenged, or maybe they are visually disabled. Many times, these word-dominated students are in my classroom, and I have difficulties comprehending their lack of visual literacy. They cannot read an image and sometimes cannot imagine what it means to read an image. The challenge often lies in how to teach students who struggle with the concept of reading an image, how to show students the relevance of visual literacy. I have used photo stills, pages from art books, and other images I cannot manipulate. My experience is that students nod knowingly, but I realize that often they cannot imagine how the meaning of an image can change depending on the context in which it is read.

A wonderful possibility for teaching visual literacy to visual novices is Ball and Arola's CD *ix visual exercises*. I find the CD useful especially if the teacher is new to teaching visual literacy, teaches an introduction to multimedia or media and text, or simply has many visual novices in the classroom. Even with my confidence and ease with visual literacy theory, I too have difficulties with practical teaching methods when students simply do not get it.

Ball and Arola's work is cleverly designed. The compact disc is a wonderful model for how teachers could incorporate their own interactive CDs into their pedagogical framework. Earlier CDs were often fancy texts that were easier to haul around, but really, they were digitized text that was often printed out. I cannot imagine this CD as a text-bound book. I cannot imagine wanting to print out the modules because it would lose its appeal as an interactive multimedia tool. In effect, the strength of Ball and Arola's argument is in the CD's ability to behave like a software program. Ball and Arola also recognize this pedagogical difference as they state in the opening introductory screen, "There are things you can't do in a book. You cannot manipulate images. You cannot change colors, drag pictures around to make your own visual argument, or watch a movie. We created this CD because it makes sense to introduce the fundamentals of visual composition in this medium—and we hope it helps you read and write about all kinds of texts." The CD does exactly as they intended. The exercises are among the most accessible I have seen and worked with. The program is designed with a language and framework that ought to be familiar to rhetoric and literacy researchers. The actual program is an example of multimedia literacy, or how some of our future texts and learning materials ought to look. For all the still and moving images, sounds, and interactive capabilities, this program only needs Macromedia FLASH Player (a free download) and it runs just fine on my now old 256 MB, 500 MHZ, G3.

The visual exercises are highly structured, which is another plus because we are currently in a transitional period of technological use (students who grew up with computers, and students who are new to computers). Once a student has gone through an entire exercise, the remaining eight are structured in the same way. Of course, the program also allows students to begin with the ninth exercise, jumping from definition to definition, allowing for self-designed learning. For hypertext fans, this CD ought to work just as well because the lessons work as independent units. For students who need a bit more time to find their comfort zone with a keyboard, the

same structure for exercises is useful and quickly becomes familiar. Ball and Arola call their three steps “fundamentals of visual composition”, being comprised of definitions, analysis, and assignment. Students will quickly learn, for instance that once definition appears, they will read and then work on analysis, followed up with a manageable assignment. Each exercise follows the same pattern if the student chooses to follow the structure provided. In addition to the structure, the program is set up for student writing or note-taking. There are prompts for the students to write down their thoughts. A text box opens up with an email and print option. The student needs to be online for the email to work (a problem if students are working offline), and, of course, the printer function only works if the student is connected to a printer. Perhaps its only downfall, the program was not designed for students working away from a lab setting, or away from a station with a printer. Perhaps the updated version will provide possibilities for saving documents as Rich Text Format (RTF) or Microsoft WORD files, which would allow users to work on this friendly program at the local café.

What really impressed me was the CD’s seemingly natural progression of the exercises. Although they do not cite theorists in the exercises, it is clear that their work is based on current visual theory. The CD’s relative ease, reminders, and ample examples remind me of another well-used visual literacy text by Robin Williams (2004), *The Non-Designer’s Design Book*. If you are successful with Williams’ text, you will find the Ball and Arola *ix* CD the natural next step. Ball and Arola’s training in rhetoric and technological literacy shows as their questions and set-up require students to think Critically—with a capital “C”—a skill that often gets lost when teachers use media to enhance their teaching. Students, in my experience, sometimes choose the coolest or best picture but fail to critically analyze the image’s worth for the overall need of the document’s purpose. The images that Ball and Arola chose for the CD are current and classic and are useful for a broad audience of youthful and mature students.

The CD has nine exercises as stated in the title. The exercises focus on element and contrast, text and purpose, audience and framing, alignment, context, emphasis and color, proximity, organization, and sequence. The range of topics covered in the exercises is excellent even for experienced visual learners. I also appreciate that Ball and Arola focus specifically on nine exercises, because there are three steps per exercise with several questions and discussion points to think about. If there were five more exercises, that would be five too many. Students will appreciate the seemingly compact nature of the content. Teachers will appreciate the rich content and critical assignments given at the end of each exercise. As I stated earlier, I am a visual learner. For visual learners, this CD is an exciting tool because of the images chosen. Moving from retro (a disco 1970s flashback) to actual current events (an Iraqi P.O.W. with a child), I am never bored going through the exercises, and I see some new element each time I walk through the exercises. For novice learners, this CD is ideal because it is interactive and purposefully detailed. In fact, all the exercises are purposefully detailed, explained, and simply smart. I could not skim, could not skip over, I could not leave an exercise without wanting to know what was next.

A useful and creative touch to this program is the actual work students can do by clicking, dropping, and dragging. In exercise eight, for instance, the topic is organization. The student follows the first two steps (Definition, Analysis). Then, without needing to know how to create Microsoft POWERPOINT slides or Macromedia FLASH or SWISH slide shows, the student is asked to create a “visual argument” within the CD itself. I, and many other teachers, often

wished we had more lab time and more lab assistance to teach our students more software in order for them to create slideshows or other visual arguments. With this program, I do not need to teach students software programs as they will learn the concepts or fundamentals of visual composition from the CD. I recommend this program to teachers, students, staff, and those interested in rhetorical development and visual composition. If my dad had seen this program, I am sure he would have agreed that maybe computers have a place in learning after all. My dad, unfortunately, only saw the digitized text on a screen. “Mmmmm, puras letras. You spent how much for something you could do con un lapiz?” Besides the memory capabilities and revision possibilities of text-only computers and software, my dad was right. In the end, early computers were expensive type-writers. Had he seen this CD, I believe he would have sat in front of a computer and would have wanted to know how he could scan in his drawings of my mom’s big hair-do, and then he would have wanted to re-do the colors and the organization of the pictures. He would have lectured me on the reasons why he decided to arrange the pictures in a particular way, engaging me first-hand in “visual argumentation.”

Ball and Arola are certainly developers to watch. Their work in this, their first CD, moves our field of writing, language, and technology onto a new plane. If this CD is any hint of what is to come, it will be a very accessible, fun, and exciting format to teach with.¹ I highly recommend this CD, and you most likely will see your non-visual learners with relieved expressions on their faces.

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¹ It is perhaps, a little ironic that a review on visual exercises is strictly done in text. We are in an age where text and visuals each have their own place, and each skill supports the other. We can segregate or mix media. This CD is a great way to have students approach visuals separately from traditional text.