



Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy: Writing About Photography

Because “photography” literally means “to write or draw with light,” it seems natural that we are able to “read” photographs just like we read any other text. This handout will provide you with some basic skills of visual literacy as they apply to photography—strategies for reading, comprehending, and translating images into verbal language.

What are visual literacy and visual rhetoric?

Visual literacy refers to the ability to “read” an image, much like the way we “read” language. This form of literacy requires an awareness of “visual rhetoric”—the ways that visual images communicate meaning. Visual rhetoric does not only include specific concepts of design or aesthetic theory. It also describes how images reflect, communicate, and even shape cultural meaning. Visual literacy involves all the processes of knowing and responding to visual images as well as the ideas that inform the construction or manipulation of cultural images.

How was photography originally conceived, and how has it changed?

Then: When Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre began their first photographic experiments in the 1820s, the field of photography seemed stable and easy to define. A photograph was simply an image captured on film with a camera, and photographs were described as a means of capturing or freezing “real life.”

Now: The advent of digital photography and graphic design software (such as Adobe Photoshop®) have signaled a significant change in the medium. Methods of capturing images have become quicker, easier, and more portable. The digital revolution has also created the unprecedented possibility to manipulate images far beyond their original forms. For example, is a digitally touched-up “glamour shot” still a photograph? What about a time-delay image or a screensaver downloaded from the Internet? Likewise, the way we think about images has dramatically changed, from a vehicle of meaning to the meaning itself. In 1964, cultural critic Marshall McLuhan famously announced that “the medium is the message.” Since then, new methods of sending, posting, “sharing,” and altering images through interconnected media have rendered photography an ever more ambiguous, complicated, and changing field.

What are the standard composition elements of a photograph?

Overview

- Where does your eye settle when first looking at the photograph? Why?
- Where does your eye move next?
- What are the planes/regions of the photograph (i.e. dividing, horizontal or vertical lines)?



Ansel Adams, *Moonrise over Hernandez, NM*, 1941

Light Values

- What is light and what is dark in the photograph?
- What is significant about what is light?
- What is significant about what is dark?
- How do these light values draw attention to details in the photograph?
- How do they obscure details?

Background/Foreground (Focus)

- What is foregrounded in the photograph?
- What is backgrounded in the photograph?
- What is sharply in focus?
- What is blurry or out of focus?
- What details are emphasized or obscured by these techniques?

Detail

- What do you see (literally) in the photograph? Are there people, places, or things?
- Are people shown? Describe them (in terms of race, class, gender, occupation, etc). What are they doing? Can you get a sense of how they feel, based on their facial expressions, body poses, or interaction with others?
- What type of space does the photograph show? Is it urban or rural? Inside or outside? In a home, work, or leisure environment? Can you tell the specific location (town, state, region or country)? Is the space open or crowded? Calming or disorienting? Is it an everyday scene or something unusual?
- What other objects are in the photo? How do they interact with or augment people or places in the photo?

Gaze

- Where are people in the photograph looking?
- Do they seem aware of the camera? If so, what is their attitude towards it?
- What is significant about where they are looking or what they are looking at?
- Is there anything significant about what the person is not looking at?

Frame/Cropping

- How closely is the photograph cropped to the subject? Is there lots of background or almost no background? Does the main portion of the photograph go almost to the edges of the photograph? Does it feel crowded or spacious?
- What might lie outside the frame?
- What is not shown in the photograph, and how might that be significant?



The Blue Marble, 2002. NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Image by Reto Stöckli (land surface, shallow water, clouds). Enhancements by Robert Simmon (ocean color, compositing, 3D globes, animation). Data and technical support: MODIS Land Group; MODIS Science Data Support Team; MODIS Atmosphere Group; MODIS Ocean Group. Additional data: USGS EROS Data Center (topography); USGS Terrestrial Remote Sensing Flagstaff Field Center (Antarctica); Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (city lights).
http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/view_rec.php?id=2429

What are the key strategies for photographic analysis?

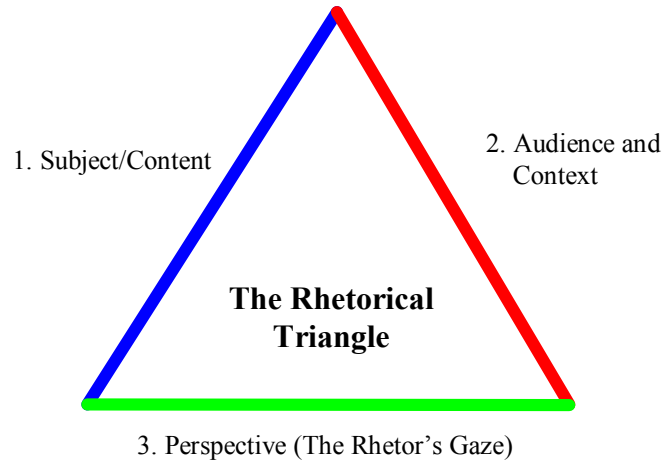
- Distinguish between facts and evidence
- Discover how various parts of an image support a larger idea or concept
- Demonstrate how explicit parts combine to form implicit wholes
- Address specific ideas (how, for example, an idea of poverty is supported by elements within an image), or more theoretical positions (how, for example, the parts of an image speak to an understanding of war).

According to Wendy Hesford and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, photographic analysis involves examining the image(s) in terms of subject/content, perspective, and audience/content, all part of a so-called rhetorical triangle (*Rhetorical Visions: Reading and Writing in a Visual Culture*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: 2006, inside front and back covers):

1. Subject/Content:
 - The subjects of the image, their appearance and gaze
 - The components of the image, their arrangement, the use of color, and where your eye is drawn within the image
 - The types of narrative elements present in the image—what story is told? Is there an implied chronology before or after the image?
2. Audience/Content:
 - The historical and cultural contexts from which the image emerged
 - The historical and cultural contexts in which the image is seen or read—the contexts surrounding audience
 - The message/image itself, and how historical and cultural contexts shape the way a particular theme or subject is presented

3. Perspective

- The photographer's/filmmaker's gaze or perspective and camera angle.
- The framing of the subject matter.
- The use of the camera to establish an illusion of intimacy, or sense of distance.



Where can I find more information about photography and visual literacy?

- Armstrong, Nancy. *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Beauchamp, Darrell G., Braden, Roberts A., and Baca, Judy Clark, eds. *Visual literacy in the digital age: selected readings from the 25th annual conference of the International Visual Literacy Association*. Blacksburg, VA: International Visual Literacy Association, 1994.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Dondis, Donis A. *A Primer of Visual Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973.
- Hesford, Wendy, and Brueggemann, Brenda. *Rhetorical Visions: Reading and Writing in a Visual Culture*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.
- Messaris, Paul. *Visual "Literacy": Image, Mind, and Reality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1977.

Handouts in the Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series

- Overview: Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy
- Writing about Comics and Graphic Novels
- Writing about Film
- Writing about Paintings
- Writing about Photography
- Writing with Maps
- Using PowerPoint and Keynote Effectively
- Creating Scientific Poster Presentations
- Crafting and Evaluating Web Sites

Banner photographs: Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1933; John Rooney/Associated Press, Muhammad Ali over Sonny Liston, 1965; Steve McCurry/National Geographic, Afghan Girl, 1984; Joe Rosenthal/Associated Press, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, 1945; Matty Zimmerman/Associated Press *Marilyn Monroe*, 1954.