Analysing Still Images

In visual texts, the basic units of meaning are the elements of which the text is composed, such as representations of people, objects, and places. Conventions such as size, colour, shape, camera angle and framing contribute to representations and thus the interpretations we make of visual texts. How a particular person, object or place is represented will vary from individual to individual. Similarly, when we view a visual text we cannot help but view it from a particular viewpoint. That is, we may unconsciously impose our own context, experiences, ideas, biases and feelings onto the text and that will influence our response to it. Visual texts provide representations of the socio-cultural context in which they were created. Socio-cultural context refers to the shared knowledge or values of a society in a particular setting. Having knowledge of the socio-cultural context of a visual text helps us to understand the text produced in that context.

Contextual Information

Establishing the context in which an image was produced and received before you begin deconstructing the use of codes allows you to have a better understanding of the producer’s intention and the dominant meaning of the image. Consider the producer of the image, the time and place the image was produced in, the genre the image belongs to, the purpose of the image, and the target audience of the image.

Participants

Participants may be people, animals or inanimate objects. They are the crucial active elements within an image. Participants can be put into two categories:

Actors - participants who are doing things

Goals - participants who are having things done to them through action or gaze.

Circumstances

Circumstances are people, animals or inanimate objects in images that are not directly linked to the main participants (actors or goals). Circumstances provide information and context without actively contributing to the narrative, but their removal would reduce the amount of information being communicated by the image. There are three types of circumstances:

Circumstance of setting – where the people, animals or inanimate objects (including props) provide a broader context, or background, for the narrative,

Circumstance of means – where the people, animals or inanimate objects provide the means by which a narrative process takes place.

Circumstance of accompaniment – where a person, animal or inanimate object is associated with another, but not though action or gaze.

Costume and Makeup

The clothing and makeup worn by participants or circumstances are often important contributors to the meaning of an image. Different costumes worn in a culture denote different degrees of power, wealth and social status. They can also symbolise the interests, ideologies, values and belief systems of particular groups of people in society. Due to our repeated experiences with other cultures through the media, we have also compiled a set of ideas about what different international
costumes stand for. These belief systems are often stereotypical and based on the ways that groups of people are represented in our media.

**Body Language**

The posture of people, animals and creatures in images are cues intended to be read by viewers. Body language can signify power and social status and can denote ideas such as strength, dominance, defiance, independence, submission, thoughtfulness, invitation, passivity and dependence. It can inform viewers about the status of individuals or the relationship between participants.

**Gestures**

The gestures of participants are crucial narrative elements. Gestures may be self-directed, such as grooming gestures or those used to show emotion, or may be directed at other participants in an act of control and defiance, or as an attempt to attract others. It is important to remember that the meaning of gestures is culturally determined. Slapping someone on the back in Australia does not necessarily mean the same thing as slapping someone on the back in Japan.

**Facial Expression**

Facial expressions are an important cultural cue that we interpret every day in our attempt to understand the emotions of people around us. Facial expressions are a set of symbols that we have learnt to read through our interactions with others. Our reading of facial expression is often done on a subconscious level, but is crucial in effective interaction. Likewise, facial expression is an important narrative element that influences our reading of images.

**Gaze**

When gaze is discussed in relation to images, we may refer to the **gaze of the viewer** or the **gaze of participants** within the image. The gaze of the viewer is not a narrative element in itself, but is an act that is intrinsic in viewing images. The term gaze implies looking at someone through our formed set of ideologies, beliefs and values. These can include our accepted norms, prejudices, and value judgements. Thus, when we gaze at someone, we inflict our personal judgements upon the subject. The interaction is one way as the gaze effectively reduces the other to a subject, or object, for our scrutiny. This silences the subject as their own ideologies and beliefs are ignored as we make up a truth about them based on our own preconceptions. Whether we are given permission to turn participants in an image into subjects of our gaze is determined by the participants’ own gaze. If we view an image in which the participant is looking directly at the camera, then the participant is turning the gaze around and challenging the assumed right of the viewer to judge the participant based on their values and beliefs. However, if a participant looks away from the camera, it invites the viewer to gaze at the participant and to project their own desires and ideas onto the participant.

**Gaze of Participants:** The gaze of participants can influence the way that we view them and can determine our imaginary relationship with them. Depending on whether participants are looking directly at the viewer or away from the viewer, the participant either makes a demand or an offer.

**Demand:** Participants who gaze at the camera or viewer can be seen to be making a demand on the viewer to enter the imaginary relationship between participant and viewer on the participant’s terms. The participant’s gaze challenges the subjective gaze of the viewer and, in so doing, often challenges the viewer’s set of ideologies and values. Instead, the participant demands that the viewer acknowledge and interact with the participant’s own reality. However, the body language of
a participant can play around with this concept. The passive body language of a female in an image who is looking directly at the camera can be seen as an invitation to viewers to project their desires onto her. Her gaze informs us, though, that she has made the invitation and so is in control of the interaction. She is in a position of power in that she has instigated the imaginary relationship and is gazing at the viewer as he succumbs to her allure. It is important to note that demands are not always aggressive, they can simply be conversational. The way that we read a demand can be determined by other narrative elements such as a participant’s body language, gestures and position.

Offer: When a participant has no direct eye contact with the viewer, the image maker offers the participants to the viewer as objects for their contemplation or as targets for the projection of their ideologies, values, desires and beliefs. The viewer is made an observer and there is no direct relationship between the viewer and participant. Viewers are given permission to read the subject, and interact with them, on their own terms. It is important to note, however, that when a participant’s gaze is turned away from the viewer and a participant’s offer or gaze is directed at other participants, this can act to exclude the viewer from actively engaging with what is taking place.

Camera Distance and Angle

The size of a participant or the amount of space a participant occupies in an image can promote a particular relationship between the viewer and participant, and can shape our response to them. The relationship we have with participants is influenced by our accepted ideas of social distance in our culture. These distances include:

Intimate distance – extremely close proximity allows smell and touch, as well as sight. When extreme close ups are used to promote intimacy and interaction between a viewer and participant, it can influence the viewer to experience feelings such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, horror, shock and disgust. It can also position the viewer to share in the participant’s feelings of happiness, joy, sorrow and so on. This can then influence the viewer to develop emotions on behalf of the participant, such as anger at the conditions in which they are placed or confusion as to why something is occurring.

Personal distance – close proximity allows us to reach out and touch the person, and allows awareness of the person’s facial expressions and gestures.

Social distance – proximity allows verbal interaction between people, but does not allow for touch or smell. It discourages personal interaction and positions viewers and participants to gaze at each other from their own social and cultural positions. This distance does not allow the two different spheres or worlds to intersect to create understanding or communication between the two. Rather, the interaction is one sided. The medium shot can be used to create feelings such as shock or horror as viewers are forced to gaze at the participants and make value judgements from their own cultural and social realities, and through their own value and belief systems. This distance can also be used to denote ideas such as loneliness or isolation.

Public distance – distance separates people from others they do not know or do not wish to relate to. The long shot can be used to place the viewer at a social distance from participants to position the viewer to simply witness an event and to prevent them from interacting with the participants. This can prevent the viewer from making value judgements and viewing the events through their own belief systems.
Also consider: what is the shot size and the angle? What effect do these have on the way you view the image? How do these affect the way the objects or subjects are presented? High, low and eye level angle perspectives can determine the relationship of power between the viewer and participant. This dialogue reflects the way we associate power or importance with looking up or down. If we look down on someone, we often view them as inferior, submissive, disempowered, weak or frightened. When we look up at someone, we often associate ideas such as superiority, dominance, power, importance or aggression with them. If we view someone at eye level, it promotes feelings of equality, and makes it easy for a viewer to associate with the participant.

**Positioning**

The way that a participant in an image is positioned in relation to the viewer can enable or limit the viewer’s interaction with the participant. If a participant is positioned so their whole body is facing the viewer, it suggests greater intimacy and invites the viewer to identify or become involved with the participant. If a participant is angled away from the viewer, the participant is distanced from the viewer and the viewer is influenced to remain detached from the participant. These concepts can be overlapped and the relationship made more complex by mixing signals, such as having the body facing away, but the head facing the viewer.

**Symbolism**

The objects shown in an image can have symbolic meanings as well as functional meanings. While symbols are culturally specific, their meaning can also be altered by the context in which they are shown. A simple example of this context driven reading is that the smile of a man with his arms around his wife and children symbolises something different to the smile of a man who has his hands around the throat of another man.

**Leading Lines and Focal Point**

To what point in the image is your attention drawn? Most images direct the viewer’s eye towards the most important elements of an image by using leading lines. Leading lines can include things such as roads, fences, horizons, colours and shadow, and participants pointing, gazing at, or moving towards an element. Elements can also be arranged in such a way as to lead the viewer’s eye in an intended direction.

**Juxtaposition**

To juxtapose is to place one thing beside another. The way that the elements relate to one another creates a particular meaning. The relation between elements in an image can determine how we read the image. Our reading of a young child in an image in which he or she is juxtaposed with a violent war scene will be dramatically different to our reading of a child juxtaposed with a park.

**Colour**

Colour can have an emotional impact on viewers. Colours that are dominant in an image can be used to indicate the importance of elements that are represented in the dominant colour. Colours can be used symbolically or to create a particular atmosphere. Colours can also be limited for a specific effect. An example of this is when black and white images are used to focus a viewer’s attention on elements such as texture and shape.

**Lighting**
Light can be used to highlight elements within an image to indicate importance. In the same way, shadow can be used to make elements seem less important. Lighting can also be used to influence the viewer’s response to participants. Figures engulfed in light can appear holy or special, while participants enshrouded in shadow can be read as evil or dubious.

**Composition and Framing**

The way that elements are arranged in a frame is called composition. The arrangement of elements can affect the viewer’s reading of, and response to, an image. Often, elements in the middle of a frame or at other points of interest seem important, while those that are near the edges are marginalised and are of little importance. However, this concept can be played with for special effect. Consider what is included and what is excluded in the framing. Positioning elements in relation to each other is also an important part of composition. Traditionally, in Western culture, greater importance has been given to elements in an image that are positioned to the right of other elements. This is because we read from left to right, thus we glance at the elements on the left, and they act to direct our view to the elements on the right where our gaze settles. When looking at an image, consider the following questions: Which elements are the largest? Which elements are in the background or relegated to the edges of the frame? Which elements take centre position? Which elements are placed on the left and which on the right?

**Interaction of Print and Visuals**

Many visual texts are accompanied by words or have captions underneath them and these play an important role in influencing how we interpret them. The words can anchor the meaning of the visual texts by encouraging the viewer to interpret them in particular ways rather than others. Consider: the font and the size of the writing and the choice of words.