

## VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN THE BASIC COURSE

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The basic course, a critical component of the curriculum of many communication departments, is designed to introduce students to fundamental concepts of communication, to provide opportunities for practice of basic skills, and to serve as an introduction to the discipline of communication. Wide variations exist in how the basic course is taught (Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985; Hugenberg, 1989); however, one content area universally neglected is visual communication. In this essay, an argument is made for the inclusion of a unit on visual communication in the basic course, and suggestions are provided for content, exercises, assignments, and resources for such a unit. With elaboration of the content and exercises, the proposed unit could be expanded into a separate course on visual communication.

Because the basic course is designed to provide students with the communication skills essential for interacting effectively in the contemporary world, it should reflect "changes in the world" and "needs to be kept current with societal needs and expectations" (Gray, 1989, p. 3). One change that is altering our society dramatically is the increasingly visual nature of the world. We no longer live in a logocracy—a culture based on verbal texts—but in a culture characterized by omnipresent visual images in forms such as television, film, billboards, architecture, and dress. "Words are now those things that simply link up the images," explains Schrage (1990); they are "a complement to communication, not a focus" (p. D1). He continues: "We are moving to a time when people will grope for the right image before they grope for the right word" (p. D16). Postman (1985) describes the cultural change as the replacement of a print-based epistemology with a visually based one, a change with dramatic consequences for public life.

If communication educators are to respond to such a cultural change, they must prepare students to deal competently and effectively with texts of "architecture, paintings, sculpture, drawing, photography, and in urban, graphic, landscape, and industrial design" (Brown, 1983, p. 11). We no longer can ignore texts "recorded in the dialects of marble, steel, clay, glass, paper and ink, not to mention oils, pastels, and acrylics" (Brown, 1983, p. 11). The basic course should facilitate the development of communicative competence not simply in speaking and listening but also in visual literacy.

Although conceptions of visual literacy vary, it often is defined as composed of three basic skills—reading, writing, and evaluating visual images (Schamber,

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1991). Reading involves the ability to read and interpret visual grammar and syntax. The writing component of visual literacy involves visual composition or the design of visual messages; it includes the development of ideas, the collection and organization of information, and the use of tools to prepare the various aspects of messages. Evaluation of images is concerned with analysis and assessment—clarifying how the features and relationships among them contribute to the effects produced by the images.

The content of the proposed unit is limited to two of the components of visual literacy—reading and evaluation. A focus on these two is consistent with a rhetorical, audience-centered orientation to the study of visual imagery, where interest is in the impact that symbols—in this case, images—have on audiences and the ways in which they are constructed to produce particular responses. A second and more pragmatic reason for this focus is that these two components realistically can be covered in one short unit, whereas the production techniques involved in composition cannot.

A focus on the reading and evaluation of images avoids two common pitfalls in the teaching of visual communication. One is the “technicist bias,” the notion that communication tasks can be accomplished most effectively through the application of the right technology. This notion leads to the teaching of technology rather than the principles that undergird visual communication (Griffin, 1991). Second, such a focus avoids a pitfall frequently encountered in the teaching of visual communication in an arts curriculum: the assumption that studio work alone constitutes a sufficient exposure to the principles of visual communication. As Brown (1988) asserts, “no one preparing a curriculum would allow lessons in speaking Middle English to stand in for a study of Chaucer. No curriculum should permit, much less encourage, the making of a watercolor to preempt the experience and knowledge of Winslow Homer’s late work” (p. 18).

Thus, in this unit on visual communication, visual literacy is viewed in a fashion similar to what Rubin (1990) calls media or television literacy, although the focus is not limited to mass-mediated images. Its primary skills are those of critical viewing and receivership, which enable students to identify conventions through which particular meanings and effects are created in visual communication. The development of visual literacy in this unit is directed at students who are formally untrained viewers—they have not been educated in the systematic ways of seeing and interpreting images offered in fields such as aesthetic criticism, art history, or design.

The gap between a basic course that focuses on speaking and listening and one that also includes visual literacy is not as wide as it first may appear. The same descriptions of competence in listening and speaking can be applied, virtually unchanged, to visual literacy. A report on speaking and listening competencies for college sophomores, for example, is illustrative:

Hence, competence in speaking and listening allows knowledge to replace ignorance as a basis for decision making. . . . [C]ompetent listeners are active and alert; they look for ethical and responsible messages from speakers. They challenge the messages they receive by examining the logic and support provided and the credibility and integrity of speakers. Competent speakers choose to have a voice in determining the kind of world in which they live and to affect change through communication. (Quianthy, 1990, p. 13)

The educational objectives to be achieved in a unit on visual communication are the same as those cited here: to make students competent in their processing of visual messages.

The proposed unit on visual communication is divided into three sections. The first section introduces students to the basic elements of images, the second focuses on the process by which viewers formulate messages from images, and the third concerns the evaluation of images and the means by which messages are formulated to appeal to particular audiences. Because we have not discovered a textbook that covers these three processes, we suggest that a collection of readings be used as the text for the unit, drawn from the resources listed at the end of each section.

The course is designed to be applicable to a wide variety of images, such as architecture, interior design, furniture, paintings, sculpture, dress, record-album covers, videos, films, and advertising from magazines and television. Some of our favorite images to use for examples and demonstrations in class include various rooms of Elvis Presley's Graceland; the album cover from the Talking Heads' *Little Creatures*, which is a copy of a painting by primitive artist Howard Finster; Michael Graves' buildings, including the Humana Building in Louisville and the San Juan Capistrano Regional Library; Memphis furniture; Christo's *Valley Curtain*; and Disneyland.

### BASIC ELEMENTS OF IMAGES

The first unit begins with an introduction to some of the basic or fundamental elements of images, that is, the presented elements of the image or the actual physical data with which the viewer is confronted. A variety of ways are available for conceptualizing and presenting these fundamental elements; each source listed below provides a different schema. Among the simplest of the frameworks is Berger's (1989), which includes the elements of dot, line, shape, volume, scale, spatiality, balance, direction, lighting, color, perspective, and proportion.

Saint-Martin's (1990) system of basic elements is more complex. She sees as the basic variables of images color, texture, dimension, boundaries, vectoriality, and position in the plane. These unite in what she considers to be the minimal unit of visual language, the *coloreme*, defined as the cluster of visual components perceived at any given moment in a particular point of the visual field. In addition to these basic variables, Saint-Martin identifies basic syntactic rules that regulate the interactions of the visual variables.

Zettl's (1990) system, which focuses on the fundamental elements of television and film, includes the elements of light and color, two-dimensional space, three-dimensional space, time-motion, and sound. While the visual communication unit is designed to be applicable to a variety of images, his detailed descriptions of these five dimensions provide comprehensive coverage of the elements of mass-mediated images.

Whatever system or combination of systems is used as the framework for discussing the elements of images, the objective is to provide students with a basic vocabulary of the dimensions of images that can be used as a foundation throughout the rest of the course for understanding the meanings and effects produced by images.

**EXERCISES OR ASSIGNMENTS**

Any of the basic elements of visual images can be applied in an exercise in which students select an image and write a short explanation of the use of a basic element in that image. For example, they might be asked to explain the use of shadow, camera angle, or color in the image.

**RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

- Arntson, A. E. (1988). *Graphic design basics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Barthes, R. (1967). *Elements of semiology* (A. Lavers & C. Smith, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang/Noonday. (Original work published 1964)
- Berger, A. A. (1989). *Seeing is believing: An introduction to visual communication*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Dondis, D. A. (1973). *A primer of visual literacy*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Saint-Martin, F. (1990). *Semiotics of visual language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1987)
- Zettl, H. (1990). *Sight sound motion: Applied media aesthetics*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

**MESSAGE FORMULATION FROM IMAGES**

Visual images can function as arguments in that viewers derive claims or assertions of some kind from them. How viewers formulate such claims from visual images and, thus, assign meaning to them is the focus of the second section of the unit. In this section, a three-step procedure for the formulation of a message from an image is presented: identification of presented elements, processing of the elements, and formulation of a message (Wildeson-Kanengieter, 1991).

**IDENTIFICATION OF PRESENTED ELEMENTS**

Identification of presented elements involves the naming and sorting of the basic physical features of the visual image. In this step, students use the skills developed from the first section of the unit to identify the actual physical data that comprise the image. These include such elements as line, texture, rhythm, color, point, camera angle, lighting, architectural embellishments, interior furnishings, and accompanying verbal text. Identification of presented elements also may include relationships among the basic variables governed by, for example, laws of interaction of color or perception (Saint-Martin, 1990).

**PROCESSING OF ELEMENTS**

The processing of the presented elements is the means through which the viewer moves from the presented elements of the image to the formulation of its message. This step consists of two phases: identification and organization of the suggested elements. Identification of the suggested elements involves formulation of the concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions suggested by the presented elements identified. For example, the gold leafing identified as a presented element in a Baroque building might be seen as suggesting wealth because gold is a precious and expensive metal.

In the second phase, the organization of the suggested elements, the viewer looks for interactions among the various suggested elements—how they relate to each other, how they can be grouped, and the tensions among them. The

suggested elements of wealth and privilege, for example, might be grouped into the category of power, the result of wealth and privilege.

#### FORMULATION OF THE MESSAGE

In the third step, the viewer devises an assertion, message, or thesis for the image based on the categories or organizational schema developed for the suggested elements in the previous step. A thesis formulated for a Norman Rockwell painting might be, for example, a celebration of childhood; a thesis formulated for a government building might be a contrast of the ideal with the actual.

An illustration of the three-step procedure using the Humana Corporation headquarters building in Louisville, Kentucky, designed by architect Michael Graves, should clarify the procedure (Wildeson-Kanengieter, 1991). The first step is to identify the major presented elements of the building. In the Humana Building, these elements are: granite; massive scale; L shape; pyramid shape at the top of the building; rounded shaft down the south side of the building; facade columns; water flowing down each side of the entrance; glass panels; crossed lines; grid-like steel truss; lobby, with a marble floor of geometric shapes; rotunda formed by six marble columns; information booth; works of art throughout the interior; wood; and 25th floor with a sitting room, reception hall, auditorium, and terrace.

The second step of the process involves identification of the themes and qualities suggested by the presented elements. In the Humana Building, the presented elements suggest the following: granite—permanence, durability, wealth; massive scale—grandeur, awe; L shape—tombstone, memorial, cash register; pyramid shape—ziggurat, a terraced tower of Assyria and Babylonia; rounded shaft—column; columns—order, ceremony, decorum; water—sustenance, purification, cleanliness; glass panels—water (a lake or pond), flags hung in a row; crossed lines—crosses; truss—bridges; lobby—wealth, grandeur, permanence (marble), Pantheon (patterned floor and vaulted ceiling), cemetery (ordered geometric shapes on the floor); rotunda—tomb or mausoleum; information desk—security guards or caretakers; works of art—wealth and treasure; wood—expensive coffin; 25th floor—elegant mansion (sitting room), outdoor plaza and grand ballroom (reception area), church (auditorium with crosses), outdoor garden (terrace).

After suggested elements are identified, they are grouped into categories or organized into a coherent framework. The suggested elements of the Humana Building cluster into two major categories, *death* and *wealth*.

Several suggested elements call attention to memorial structures used to commemorate the lives of those who have died. The granite and marble used on the exterior of the building are materials used on tombstones. The pyramid-like structure at the top has a tomb-like quality in its allusion to the sacred burial place of kings and nobility. The rounded shaft that bisects the building is symbolic of a grave marker. Perhaps the most obvious "memorial" is the inner circle of the rotunda, where visitors feel the quiet and sanctity of a mausoleum. The information attendant, in this context, becomes a caretaker or guard of the dead.

The suggested elements also can be grouped into various rituals associated with death. The references to water are symbolic of purification; many cultures bathe a person after death in preparation for burial. The references to bridges and rivers call up the water journeys connected with death in various cultures. The various art works displayed throughout the building might be viewed as the treasures buried with individuals in their tombs. The "flags" hung on the side of the building—the glass panels—can be seen as banners hung in mourning.

Many of the suggested elements also reference the various settings or contexts used by the living to deal with death. The 25th floor contains several of these contexts. The sitting room is the "living room" of the funeral parlor, which is suggested by the reception hall. This hall also can be viewed as an outdoor plaza where mourners carry the body in ceremonial procession to the cemetery. The auditorium, with its church-like references, is a place where survivors eulogize the dead. Finally, the terrace suggests a cemetery or sanctuary where survivors may visit the dead.

In addition to the funerary references, various elements of the Humana Building suggest the theme of wealth. The materials of granite and marble are expensive and somewhat precious. The art works, because of their age or the reputations of their creators, are valuable. The theme of wealth is referenced by the stately elegance and ballroom style of the 25th floor and the cash-register shape on the top.

In the final step of the process, the viewer formulates a message from the image derived from the categories of suggested elements. In the case of the Humana Building, the message is derived from the interaction of the two themes of death and wealth. One message a viewer may formulate from this interaction is that the Humana Building is a memorial to those who have suffered or died because of its system of health care—a system that emphasizes profit over charity. The building's message is likely to be unclear to visitors at first because of the ambiguity of the metaphor of wealth. Visitors may see, through the Humana Building's form, that the Humana Corporation is an efficient, prosperous company, or they may perceive the building as the embodiment of corporate greed—a company that has made its fortune from the misfortunes of others. When the metaphor of wealth is coupled with the metaphor of death that is equally prominent in the building, however, wealth cannot be interpreted positively. The message of the building is transformed from a reflection of corporate prosperity to a memorial of lost lives and income that indicts Humana. The images of death linked to the Humana Corporation serve as monuments to those whom Humana has served not for reasons of charity but for reasons of profit—and the service has been less than it would have been in a hospital dedicated to care rather than profit.

#### **EXERCISES OR ASSIGNMENTS**

1. A useful exercise to help students understand and use the three-step procedure is to demonstrate it using a highly recognizable image, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the NAMES Project's AIDS quilt, or Picasso's *Guernica*. The instructor may illustrate the application of the framework using the image, or students may be divided into groups and asked to apply the procedure to it. The various messages each group formulates then are

- shared with the class, with discussion focused on the different ways in which the image's elements are identified, what they suggest, how they may be organized, and the theses that result.
2. If an art gallery or museum is located on or near the campus, a class meeting may be held there. The students are divided into groups, choose a particular work of art on exhibit—a painting, sculpture, or photograph—and formulate its message according to the procedure. This assignment also may be done with buildings on campus and works particularly well if the campus contains a variety of intriguing buildings of different architectural styles. Each group is assigned a different building and asked to formulate the message from it.
  3. Many basic communication courses require an oral presentation of some kind. One way to combine a unit on public speaking or small group communication with visual literacy is to assign a presentation in which students, using the above procedure, analyze an image to formulate its message. As part of their presentations, students may be asked to justify the selection of their images and to use them in some way as visual aids as they present their analyses.

#### RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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- Blair, C., Jeppeson, M. S., & Pucci, Jr., E. (1991). Public memorializing in postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as prototype. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77, 265-288.
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- Ulmer, G. (1989). *Teletheory: Grammatology in the age of video*. New York: Routledge.
- Wildeson-Kanengieter, M. R. (1991). Message formation from architecture: A rhetorical analysis (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, 1990). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51, 3561A.
- Williams, M. R. (1991). A re-conceptualization of protest rhetoric: Characteristics of quilts as a protest form (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, 1990). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51, 3561A.

## EVALUATION OF IMAGES

The focus in this unit is on the process of evaluation of images and their effects on audiences. In particular, the focus is on the construction of appeal in images through such processes as creation, in an image, of a particular vantage point for observation of the image and incorporation of patterns in it likely to be decoded in particular ways.

Systems for the evaluation of images largely have been developed in the discipline of aesthetics; this unit begins with a brief overview of these aesthetic systems. One system, represented by Kant (1790/1987), defines judgments of quality solely as personal sentiment or idiosyncratic response. In this schema, no judgment about the quality of an image can make a claim upon everyone's assent because such a judgment is rooted in individual preference. A second schema for aesthetic evaluation is represented, among others, by Blair (1866), Hume (1826/1965), and Gracyk (1990); in this view, judgments of aesthetic objects are located in a faculty of the individual. Although all human beings have a natural disposition to respond to objects favorably or unfavorably, some who have special perceptiveness are able to make such judgments better than others. A third view is that universal criteria or general principles exist for making aesthetic judgments. Among the principles proposed by, among others, Beardley (1962), Rosenberg (1967), and Dickie (1987), are coherence, novelty, continuity, mastery of technique, sensitivity, richness of formal relationships, and expressiveness.

We prefer a rhetorically oriented schema in place of these aesthetic perspectives on the evaluation of images. This schema is organized according to function; an image is created to accomplish a particular function for a particular audience, and judgment occurs in relation to that function (Foss, 1990). If the features of the image serve to accomplish its function, the image is judged to be of high quality or rhetorically effective. The image itself, then, generates its own standards, recognized in and drawn from its function. Using this schema, images are evaluated in a three-step process.

### IDENTIFICATION OF THE FUNCTION OF THE IMAGE

*Function* refers to the rhetorical rather than the aesthetic function of the image. An aesthetic function is a direct, perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the image, for example, an enjoyment of its color. In a rhetorical function, in contrast, the colors of the image are viewed as having meaning apart from themselves, a meaning that is used to formulate the image's function. A function of the decor of an office might be, for example, to convey professionalism and competence, or the function of a souvenir might be to serve as a reminder of a trip. The function is determined both through an analysis of the characteristics of the image itself and the external information available about it.

### ASSESSMENT OF THE FUNCTION

Although function sets the standard by which an image is judged, the function itself is open to scrutiny. The image is judged to be effective not simply because its function is fulfilled; its function also must be a legitimate and appropriate one. This step of the process encourages a consideration of the potential effects



of the image on the audience as a result of the particular ideology it espouses. An image that functions to arouse hatred toward women, for example, would be seen as questionable.

#### **ANALYSIS OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE FEATURES AND FUNCTION OF THE IMAGE**

At the third step of the process, the presented and suggested elements that structure the image are juxtaposed to the function to discover whether or not they contribute to the achievement of the function. Implicit in this analysis is a comparison of the features of the image with those of other images with the same function; the goal is to assess the features selected in light of available options. If the object of the decor of a living room is to create a warm, cozy environment, for example, its early American style of furniture might be compared with a contemporary, overstuffed style to discover which achieved the function most readily.

A brief illustration of how the schema might be used can be seen in an analysis of dining room chairs of bright green Naugahyde, with square cushions and aluminum legs. Given the context of the rest of the decor of the house in which they are located, the function might be identified as the creation of a decor that might be termed "funky Fifties." A discussion of the appropriateness of the function might include consideration of the ideology that characterized the decade of the Fifties and the value of its revival.

The various elements of the image that contribute to the achievement of the function then are identified. Presented elements include the smooth texture, green color, fabric that imitates leather, and square shapes. These suggest qualities such as high technology, functionality, efficiency, humor, and playfulness. The chair is considered to be rhetorically effective if its elements contribute to the accomplishment of the chair's function. To facilitate this analysis, a comparison of the chairs with other furniture designed to accomplish a funky Fifties' decor can be made, highlighting options that were or were not selected in the design of these particular chairs.

#### **EXERCISES OR ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Students are asked to analyze one image to which they respond negatively and one to which they respond positively. Their objective is to provide an explanation for their responses, using the three-step schema for evaluation.
2. Students select a work of art that is (or was) controversial, such as Christo's *Valley Curtain* or Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. They then use the schema for evaluation to explain the source of the controversy. They also might be asked for suggestions for dealing with controversies in which diverse responses are generated to an image in the public realm.

#### **RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

- Alexander, C. (1979). *The timeless way of building* (chpt. 2). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barbatsis, G., & Gonzales, V. (1990, November). *Negative campaign commercials and media rage: Understanding that pictures cannot lie*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago.

- Beardsley, M. C. (1962). On the generality of critical reasons. *Journal of Philosophy*, 59, 477-486.
- Berger, A. A. (1989). *Seeing is believing: An introduction to visual communication*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
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- Rosenberg, J. (1967). *On quality in art: Criteria of excellence, past and present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Roskill, M., & Carrier, D. (1983). *Truth and falsehood in visual images*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Tufte, E. R. (1990). *Envisioning information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.
- Vermazen, B. (1975). Comparing evaluations of works of art. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34, 7-14.

### GENERAL EXERCISES AND ASSIGNMENTS

1. As an exercise to introduce themselves to the class, students are asked to create a logo that represents them. This should be a logo that, if it replaced the student's name on a paper or exam, would indicate clearly to the instructor whose work it was. Students explain their logos to the class (Kidd & Wagner, 1990).
2. This exercise is useful for introducing students to the notion of visual communication and to how illiterate individuals can be in their understanding of or verbalization about images. A slide of an abstract work of art is shown. Students are asked to write brief answers to these questions: (a) What is the message, thesis, or claim that is being made in this work? (b) What in the work supports this as the message? In other words, why do you think that's the message? (c) What is your response to this work? Do you like it or not? Why or why not? (d) How comfortable do you feel doing this exercise? The papers then are collected and shuffled, and the instructor reads the answers aloud for each question. The answers are used as the basis for a discussion of the material that will be covered in and the rationale for inclusion of a unit on visual communication in the course.
3. Students are divided into groups and asked to assume that within one generation, people on the earth will be transformed into a totally deaf population. They are asked to discuss and/or present to other class members what they anticipate will be the resultant changes in communication behavior and their impact on society (Marsh, n.d.).
4. Students are asked to keep a journal in which they daily record a description of something that catches their visual attention. No particular format or style of writing is required. This exercise is designed to increase students' awareness of the visual nature of their environment (Tiberghien, 1991).
5. Students are divided into groups, and each group is assigned a different kind of visual image on campus, for example, the facade of a Dairy Queen, a sculpture in the student union, a seating area, or the interior of a professor's office. They are asked to analyze the image to answer one or more of these

questions: What are the primary visual elements in the image? What message can be formulated from the image? How should the image be evaluated? At the end of the exercise, class members tour all the sites of the various images, and the groups share their findings.

6. In a paper or presentation to the class, students analyze their favorite image and discuss why they respond positively to it. As part of the assignment, students also may be asked to identify the basic elements of the image and the message formulated from it.

### GENERAL RESOURCES

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