VISUAL COMMUNICATION
Images with Messages

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SIX PERSPECTIVES FOR ANALYZING ANY IMAGE

Critics throughout the history of literature have used many methods to analyze works created by others. For example, David Lodge in his book *Small World* lists fourteen different analytical perspectives: allegorical, archetypal, biographical, Christian, ethical, existentialist, Freudian, historical, Jungian, Marxist, mythical, phenomenological, rhetorical, and structural. To fully appreciate visual communication, you must be able to use some sort of critical method to analyze pictures. In the remaining chapters of this book, we emphasize six perspectives for analyzing images.

1. **Personal**: a gut reaction to the work based on subjective opinions.

2. **Historical**: a determination of the importance of the work based on the medium's timeline.

3. **Technical**: the relationship between light, the recording medium used to produce the work, and the presentation of the work.
4. *Ethical:* the moral and ethical responsibilities that the producer, the subject, and the viewer have of the work.

5. *Cultural:* an analysis of the symbols used in the work that convey meaning within a particular society at a particular time.

6. *Critical:* The issues that transcend a particular image and shape a reasoned personal reaction.

By studying any image—whether still or moving—from personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, and critical perspectives, you become intellectually involved with the picture. Using the six perspectives will encourage you to base conclusions about images on rational rather than emotional responses. You will find that any and all images have something to tell you because every picture created has some meaning to communicate. The producer of the image took the time to frame and make the picture for a reason. The message that the artist wants to communicate may simply be a literal summary, the hope that the viewer will appreciate the image's aesthetic beauty, or an underlying political agenda. Just because you cannot initially see any purpose for the image is no reason to discard it. Many large lessons are lost because of a failure to study small, captured moments.

An image, regardless of its medium of presentation, is forgotten if it isn’t analyzed. A forgotten image simply becomes another in a long stream of meaningless pictures that seem to flood every aspect of communication. Meaningless pictures entertain a viewer only for a brief moment and do not have the capacity to educate. But an analyzed image can affect a viewer for a lifetime.

Image analysis teaches two important lessons about the creation of memorable pictures:

1. a producer of messages must know the culture of the intended audience; and
2. the symbols used in the image must be understood by that culture.

Before using any of the six perspectives, you should first look at all the major graphic and content elements within the frame of the picture. Graphic elements include the four visual cues discussed in Chapter 4: color, form, depth, and movement. Study the graphic elements of a picture to see how the various visual cues interact and conflict. Actively notice a picture’s composition—the use of shadows and lighting effects, utilization of shapes and lines within the frame of the image, creation of depth, the use of color—and the way the eye actively scans the image because of the elements within the frame. Having accomplished that mental exercise, record all the content elements within the picture, listing separately elements that are meaningful and elements that are unclear. Spend time with the symbols that are confusing to figure out their meaning. Treat the analysis of a picture as a game—as an exercise similar to a detective’s challenge in trying to solve a mystery. If you don’t understand the meaning of a content element, ask someone else or research the work in the library. If the picture is famous, chances are that critical writers have analyzed the image and explained the symbols used by the artist. After identifying the graphic and the symbolic elements, you are ready to analyze the image in terms of the six perspectives.

**Personal Perspective**

Upon first viewing any image, everyone draws a quick, gut-level conclusion about the picture based entirely on a personal response. Words and phrases such as “good,” “bad,” “I like it,” or “I don’t like it” indicate that a person initially analyzes an image on a superficial, cursory level. Personal perspectives are important because they reveal much about the person making the comments. However, such opinions have limited use simply because they are personal. These comments cannot be generalized beyond the individual,
nor do they reveal much in the way of how a culture would view the image. A memorable image always sparks strong personal reactions, either negative or positive, and also reveals much about the culture from which it was made. A viewer who rests a conclusion about an image on personal perspective denies the chance of perceiving the image in a more meaningful way.

**Historical Perspective**

Each medium of presentation—from typography to networked interactive multimedia—has a unique history of circumstances that were set in motion and fostered by individuals interested in promoting the medium. For typography, the history of writing dates from the dawn of recorded history. For networked interactive multimedia, the historical developments are relatively recent. A knowledge of a medium’s history allows you to understand current trends in terms of their roots in techniques and philosophies of the past. Creative visual message production always comes from an awareness of what has come before, so present applications also will influence future uses.

**Technical Perspective**

You must know something about how each medium of presentation works. A thorough critique of any visual presentation requires a knowledge of how the producer generated the images that you see. With an understanding of the techniques involved in producing an image, you are in a better position to know when production values are high or low, when great or little care has been taken, or when much or little money was spent to make the images.

**Ethical Perspective**

Six principal ethical philosophies can and should be used to analyze a picture. They are the categorical imperative, utilitarianism, hedonism, the golden mean, the golden rule, and the veil of ignorance.

**Categorical Imperative**

Born in East Prussia in 1724, Immanuel Kant greatly influenced Western philosophy. Communications scholar Clifford Christians noted that Kant’s categorical imperative means that “what is right for one is right for all. ‘Categorical’ means unconditional, without any question of extenuating circumstances, without any exceptions. Right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions.” Consistency is the key to the categorical imperative philosophy. Once a rule is established for a proposed action or idea, behavior or opinions must be consistently and always applied in accordance with it. For example, if a person decides to become a vegetarian, the categorical imperative philosophy applies as long as the person consistently avoids eating meat.

**Utilitarianism**

British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Mill developed the philosophy of utilitarianism, which is the belief in “the greatest good for the greatest number of people.” In utilitarianism, various consequences of an act are imagined, and the outcome that helps the most people is the best choice under the circumstances specified. Although an act might not be beneficial to a few individuals, it might result in helping many. Newspaper editors frequently use utilitarianism to justify the printing of disturbing accident scenes in their newspapers. Although the picture may upset a few readers because of its gruesome content, it may persuade many others to drive more carefully.

**Hedonism**

From the Greek word for pleasure, hedonism is closely related to the philosophies of nihilism and narcissism. A student of Socrates, Aristippus (who died in Athens in 366
B.C.) founded this ethical philosophy on the basis of pleasure. Aristippus believed that people should “act to maximize pleasure now and not worry about the future.” However, Aristippus, referred to pleasures of the mind—intellectual pleasures—not physical sensations. He believed that people should fill their time with intellectual pursuits and use restraint and good judgment in their personal relationships. His phrase sums up the hedonistic philosophy: I possess; I am not possessed. Unfortunately, modern usage of the philosophy ignores his original intent. Phrases such as “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” “live for today,” and “don’t worry, be happy” currently express the hedonistic philosophy. In other words, if an opinion or action is based purely on a personal motivation—money, fame, relationships, and the like—the hedonistic philosophy is at work.

**Golden Mean**

Aristotle’s golden mean refers to finding a middle ground or a compromise between two extreme points of view or actions. Formulated in about the fourth century B.C., this philosophy of taking the middle way doesn’t involve a precisely mathematical average but is an action that approximately fits that situation at that time. Compromise and negotiation are actions aimed at finding a link between the opposing viewpoints of two competing interests.

**Golden Rule**

The golden rule teaches people to “love your neighbor as yourself.” From Judeo-Christian tradition, this philosophy holds that an individual should be as humane as possible and never harm others by insensitive actions. A television producer who decides not to air close-up footage of family members mourning the loss of a loved one at a funeral because their grief might be compounded by seeing themselves on television is invoking the golden rule.

**Veil of Ignorance**

The phrase “shoe on the other foot” is a popular adaptation of the veil of ignorance philosophy. Articulated by John Rawls in 1971, it considers all people equal. No one class of people is entitled to advantages over any other. Seeing everyone as if through a veil—without noticing age, gender, race, and so on—results in an attitude of respect for everyone. This philosophy may be one answer to prejudice and discrimination.

By considering these ethical philosophies when analyzing an image you can become much more aware of meanings and motives that may lie hidden below the surface of any image (see photo opposite).

**Cultural Perspective**

Cultural analysis of a picture involves identifying the symbols used in the image and determining their meaning for the society as a whole. Symbolism may be analyzed through the picture’s use of heroes and villains, by the form of its narrative structure, by the style of the artwork, by the use of words that accompany the image, and by the attitudes about the subjects and the culture communicated by the visual artist. Cultural perspective is closely related to the semiotic approach.

**Critical Perspective**

The final step in analyzing a picture is to apply a critical perspective. That requires an attempt to transcend a particular image and draw general conclusions about the medium, the culture from which it is produced, and the viewer. A critical perspective allows the viewer to use the information learned about a medium, its practitioner, and the image pro-
duced to make more general comments about the society that accepts or rejects the images. As such, a critical perspective redefines a person's initial personal perspective in terms of universal conclusions about human nature.

APPLYING ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES

Your ultimate goal with regard to any analysis of a picture is to understand your own reaction to the image. David Lodge wrote that "analysis is ego-driven. The main thing is that it always reveals the person making the analysis—not really the piece itself." Through this analytical process, you review, refine, and renew your personal reaction to the image. Analysis of an image is therefore a cyclic event in which you move from an initial, emotional, and subjective personal reaction to a rational, objective, and thoughtful personal response. Being critical is a highly satisfying intellectual exercise.

The nine chapters on typography, graphic design, informational graphics, cartoons, photography, motion pictures, television and video, computers, and networked interactive multimedia analyze images produced by each medium of presentation within the analytical framework described. Although analysis is time-consuming at first, practice reduces the amount of time required. Because most visual messages are shown with little or no verbal information, you are once again left with the old adage, "The more you know, the more you see." It is up to you, and only you, to find meaning in and use for any image. If you take the time to study images carefully, you will become a much more interesting and knowledgeable person. You will also be more likely to produce images that have more meaning for more people.