INTRODUCTION

Librarians, especially those in educational settings, are becoming increasingly concerned about information literacy. It promotes critical thinking, and empowers individuals to make informed decisions in their lives. For the most part, however, only print or text-based literacy has been addressed. Patricia Senn Breivik, however, in her 2005 article “21st Century Learning and Information Literacy,” observes that multiple types of literacy should be incorporated, including computer, library, media, network, and visual literacy. Within this broadened context, media and visual literacy are two aspects which are largely overlooked. Thus their impact, inherently powerful, is made more so by most peoples’ lack of awareness of the topic.

Visual Literacy can be defined as the ability to decode, comprehend, and analyze visual images in order to construct meaning from visual representations of ideas and concepts (Burns, 2006). Visual literacy is an important prerequisite for the comprehension of visual media, the enhancement of aesthetic appreciation, and the awareness of visual manipulation – in other words, to enable critical thinking on the part of the viewer. The more we know, the more we see (Natharius, 2004). To illustrate this point, in Albuquerque many planted areas and yards are covered with crushed stone. Looking closely at one of the stones, a geologist would know that the stone had been brought in from a different area, in spite of the proximity of mountains to Albuquerque because the stone is granite, which was formed by heat and pressure, whereas the nearby mountains are sedimentary rocks, which were deposited by erosion.

So the more we know of the tricks of the trade employed in media, film, art, and advertising, the more we see and understand. The focus of this program was to show, through still and moving images, why a picture is worth a thousand words.

To illustrate the process of analysis of visual images, LOEX session attendees were shown a painting, *American Progress*, by John Gast, painted around 1872. It depicts an angelic female figure (although she does not have wings) suspended above a landscape with a covered wagon, Indians, settlers, buffalo, and other images of the Western expansion.

They were asked three questions: When you look at this picture, what do you see? What do you feel? What do you think? (This exercise was taken from a Teaching Learning Technology Group (TLT) presentation entitled Visual Literacy Across the Disciplines, February 20, 2009.)
To the question, “What do you see?”, the responses were:

- Settlers
- Guardian angel
- Spirit of the American Dream floating over the landscape
- Manifest Destiny
- Angel Moroni leading the Mormon settlers to Promised Land
- Exploitation of female figure

To the question, “What do you feel?”, the answers were:

- Nervous – figure is facing the dark
- She’s getting rid of the dark
- Lot going on we are not privy to
- Fleeing
- Telephone poles
- Guilty
- Resistance from picture’s emotion
- Stupid
- Proud
- Confused
- Nostalgic

To the question, “What do you think?”, they responded:

- Progress
- Western civilization’s superiority dominance
- Iconography
- Journey and connections
- Nations personified by women
- Loss

As you can see, there was a wide variety in the audience’s experience of the painting. This variety reflects the breadth of information packed into the symbols and the composition and execution of the painting. The viewers’ backgrounds also influenced their reaction to and interpretation of the symbols and the overall gestalt of the painting.

**BACKGROUND: UNDERSTANDING VISUAL LITERACY**

We are accustomed to thinking of text as a body of writing, such as an article or a book. However, if we expand our understanding of the term “text” to include anything that is intended to convey information, or, as the Merriam Webster Online dictionary says, “something (as a story or movie) considered as an object to be examined, explicated, or deconstructed,” (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/text) we will find a whole world opens up to us. It is a world to which everyone responds but few understand why they do. Images are texts that use a powerful shorthand form of communication (Burns, 2006).

Text then becomes the medium through which the author/speaker delivers the act (e.g., television show, ad campaign, picture, this presentation). Rhetorical criticism or analysis studies a speaker’s use of words, phrases, and visual texts to explicate how her/his arguments have been built in order to make an intended point.

Important concepts:

- Intended Audience: the individuals the author/creator is trying to influence. Who is the target of the visual image?
- Desired Outcome: The effect (on the intended audience) that the creator/author of the image is trying to accomplish.

When we study classical argument, we learn about the syllogism, which is composed of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion, such as:

**Major Premise:** “All men are mortal”
**Minor Premise:** “Socrates is a man”
**Conclusion:** “Therefore, Socrates is mortal”

Most arguments do not provide all parts of the syllogism, but instead rely on the audience to provide part of the argument based on personal experience or referents. In a case like this, the audience is drawn into the argument more fully, and is more likely to be influenced.

Other important concepts:

- Ethos – The perceived credibility of the creator of the image.
- Logos – The logical appeals used by the creator in an attempt to affect the intended audience in the desired manner.
- Pathos – The emotional appeals used by the creator in an attempt to affect the intended audience in the desired manner.
So if someone were asking for donations to help people suffering from famine, presenting graphs from the United Nations showing the poverty of the area, accompanied by photographs of the people, particularly children, the argument made would be very strong and more likely to be successful. You would be including all three components: ethos, logos, and pathos.

With these concepts outlined, let’s look at how messages are conveyed by images.

**Techniques of Imaging**

In the world of art, films, and photography, there are several techniques which can be used to portray the subject of the picture as trustworthy or not, as good or bad, as someone to respect or distrust. The first we will consider is **camera angles**. If a picture is shot from below the subject, it implies that the person is deserving of respect or admiration. Conversely, if it is shot from above, it diminishes the subject. If you say someone is a person you can look up to, you mean that they are worthy of regard, and their opinion and advice can be respected. Many press conferences with political figures are shot with this kind of camera angle. Film footage shot from above will give the implication that someone is untrustworthy or foolish. A clip from the Branagh film of *Much Ado about Nothing* shows the drama evoked by use of different camera angles.

In 2008, residents of Stephenville, Texas, reported sightings of what they considered to be UFOs. One television news story showed an interview with people who found stories written in the *Dublin Progress* newspaper in 1891, over a century previously. (Dublin is a small town near Stephenville, Texas.) What the newspaper story described sounded like what the current residents reported, i.e., UFO activity. The interview was filmed with the people seated, showing the old newspapers, and looking up and back at the camera. The camera was looking down at them. Without a word spoken, the veracity of the story, the people, and the entire claim of UFO activity and the stories reported in the 1891 newspaper were called into question by the camera angle. It is always good to realize how these techniques can be used to manipulate the viewer’s reactions to a story, and a topic such as this.

Secondly, there is a technique called **intertextuality**. Applying our expanded definition of text, which includes pictures and films, intertextuality refers to cognitive connections made when we see something and understand that the visual text references an earlier text (Natharius, 2004). This is more easily understood when someone quotes from a well known poem or book. The quotation reminds us of the original and the ideas or feelings they evoked, and can even bring them into the present situation. The same is true for visual media. In *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, when we see Anakin and Padme in the mountain meadow, we remember the beginning scenes of *The Sound of Music*, where Maria is enjoying a day of freedom in the mountains and singing of her joy in the landscape and in life in general. The final scene in *Attack of the Clones*, the middle film in the prequel trilogy, is staged the same way as the final scene in the original Star Wars trilogy’s middle film, *The Empire Strikes Back*. It even has two of the same characters – R2D2 and C3PO, the droids. So George Lucas was referencing his own work.

Lucas frequently referenced the work of one of the seminal figures in film-making, Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl created the propaganda films for the Third Reich, in particular, *Triumph of the Will*. Her use of many of the above mentioned camera angles was masterful, and her ability to incorporate things like films shot from a plane flying over the German countryside and landing in different towns would have caught the attention and the imagination of the German people, for whom flying was a source of wonder at that time. The final scene of *Star Wars: A New Hope* is a direct reference to footage seen in *Triumph of the Will*, with some significant changes made: in *Triumph* three figures, Hitler and two of his henchmen, are shown walking down a long aisle consisting of orderly ranks of people toward the red, black, and white swastika banners after a ceremony saluting the dead. In *A New Hope*, three figures, Luke, Han, and Chewbacca, walk down an aisle formed of ranks of their comrades toward a symbol of life, a woman dressed in white and silver, with banners of white fabric and green vines behind her.

The third technique is a **lighting** technique, showing figures with an extremely strong light source behind them. This has a long history and is found in many cultures. Briefly, God (or gods) and holy people are shown with light sources behind them. Examples include the figure of Jesus in Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine chapel, the Shiva Nataraja, in paintings and sculpture, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. In film posters and in films, examples include a shot of Lord Voldemort with darkness surrounding him while Harry Potter stands behind him and is backlit by a fire; and the film poster for *Lord of the Rings* where there is an extremely strong light source behind Gandalf, extending to Aragorn. This technique found its way into the evening news, where a film clip showed soldiers and tanks silhouetted by the setting sun.

After viewing film clips and stills exemplifying these techniques, the audience was asked to analyze several *TIME* magazine covers showing the presidential candidates, utilizing their new knowledge.

Here are two covers featuring Hillary Clinton.

For this cover, from November 19, 2007, the comments were:

- Light is on her; she’s wearing white
- She is looking up and so is the camera
- Comment on the colors used
- She looks visionary
For this one, from March 17, 2008, the comments were:

- Friendly
- Smaller
- Less powerful
- Dressed in dark colors
- Shot from below
- Text + visuals = fighter

Looking at a slide which showed all three candidates’ covers, the audience observed:

- Obama is new – his crossed arms indicate he’s more detached
- Red print on the Obama cover – TIME magazine’s covers – only one to have red text on his cover
- Rigidity of McCain

One of the attendees mentioned a pairing of images of O.J. Simpson from two different magazine covers. Here are reproductions of the covers:

Here are two covers for Barack Obama:

Taken from the December 10, 2007 cover, the audience commented:

- He’s gonna win
- Divine figure
- “Contender” – has resonances of the black fighter image.
- Pose is like Superman

This interesting cover was from March 10, 2008, and the observations were:

- Vulnerable
- Out of tunnel into light
- Wasn’t there a similar picture of Kennedy, Oprah?
- (In the) Absence of his face the light (aura) highlights his brain

Mr. McCain’s cover from February 6, 2008, generated these comments:

- He has something up his sleeve
- He’s rolling up his sleeve to punch someone.
- Word “Time” is grayed out
- Gray – like a statue, a memorial

There was a good bit of outcry about the alteration of the TIME cover; Newsweek’s was an untouched reproduction of the mug shot taken of O.J. Simpson, whereas TIME’s was changed to enhance the drama and show a literally darker Mr. Simpson. The attendee had shown these pictures to her class of middle or high school students, who felt that the TIME version showed Mr. Simpson as a heroic figure, citing the words, “An American Tragedy,” and the bright light behind his head. This difference from the reactions of older Americans highlights the difference in the way the generations understand visual images. In the case of older Americans, who lived through the O.J. Simpson trial, they bring more information to the table. But younger people, who were not alive at the time of the Simpson trial, take the photo and the words at face value. As Mr. Natharius says, the more we know, the more we see.

Conclusion

In summary, visual objects or texts influence us in ways that are very subtle, drawing strength from cultural and religious roots. Knowing about the ways in which this is done helps us live our lives more consciously and make decisions that are free from outside influence. Knowing that this is being done in the media empowers us with the ability to see through manipulations, and teach the students of all ages who come through our libraries how to see clearly and make decisions more consciously.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Natharius, D. (2004). The more we know, the more we see: The role of visuality in media literacy. American Behavioral Scientist, 48(2), 238-247.
APPENDIX 1: VISUAL AND MEDIA LITERACY, THE OVERLOOKED COMPETENCIES: QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE ANALYSIS OF IMAGES

• What do you see? What do you feel? What do you think?
• Who is the author? Is the author credible?
• Who is the intended audience?
• What is the desired outcome?
• What is the main argument of the image?
• Do the images use intertextuality?
• Are the images being manipulated?
• What is left out?
  • “What is not seen is as important as what is seen” (Natharius, 2004, p. 244).
  • Example: US Media Coverage of Iraq War
APPENDIX 2: VISUAL AND MEDIA LITERACY, THE OVERLOOKED COMPETENCIES: PRESENTATION CLIPS

Hitler [videorecording]: a career / a film by Joachim C. Fest; a Werner Rieb production; director, Christian Herrendoerfer. Imprint Chicago, IL: International Historical Films, c2001.

1:09:19 to 1:10:05


1:11:00 to 1:13:27


1:20:47 to 1:22:32 – chapter 14


Last scenes, showing the Emperor reviewing the troops


1:58:32 to 2:00:07 (Last chapter, just before credits)


1:35:17 to 1:35:40