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### Visual Information Literacy: Reading a Documentary Photograph

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Like a printed text, an architectural blueprint, a mathematical equation, or a musical score, a visual image is its own language. Visual literacy has three components: learning, thinking, and communicating (Randhawa and Coffman 1978). A “literate” person is able to decipher the basic code and syntax, interpret the signs and symbols, correctly apply terms from an academic discipline or field of study, understand how things fit together, and do appropriate work. Visual *information* literacy is the ability to understand, evaluate, and use visual information.

Just as reader response theory (Rosenblatt 1994) conceptualizes textual literacy in terms of an interaction between the text and the reader, a theory of visual literacy ought to take into account the transaction of the viewer with the image. To represent that relationship of the subject, the medium, the photographer, and the context with the viewer, I modified the classical rhetorical stance to model the reading of a photograph (see diagram to the right). In visual information literacy workshops, I refer to the elements of this diagram so that students and teachers can conceptualize visual rhetoric.

### Teaching Visual Information Literacy

I prefer to use documentary photographs in teaching because they span many disciplines and rest on the premise that they faithfully depict a subject. I choose questions (Alfano and O’Brien 2005, 89–90; Center for Media Literacy 2005; Koechlin and Zwaan, 90) based on the learning goals. Then we practice interpretation: decoding the composition of a photograph, responding to its aesthetic elements; and calling up personal beliefs

and prior knowledge. Eventually I add background information, including the photographer’s statement—if one exists—to enrich the discussion but not to propose that the creator’s perspective and purpose is the “correct answer.”



1. What do I see?
2. What does it mean to me?
3. What in the photograph leads me to say this?
4. Why was this photograph created?
5. What does it mean?

Our first response to a photograph is unspoken—we look. When you teach visual literacy allow two to three minutes to experience an image without discussion. To prompt students or faculty to share their thoughts, provide a worksheet with questions [www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/newsmedia/polphoto.pdf](http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/newsmedia/polphoto.pdf) or use one of the photograph analysis worksheets at the American Memory site <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/lessons/media.html>. After they label what they see in words, ask them to add inferences based on the visual evidence. For example, notice the subtle cues



*Slab Man and Robert, Cantor Arts Center, Stanford.*  
Photo by Debbie Abilock

from body language and facial expressions that help us distinguish between a human (Robert) and a sculpture (Slab Man, Duane Hanson 1976). Inferences also emerge from the composition: the angle from which the subject is shot, what is illuminated or in shadow, how objects are arranged and the tension among these



*Glanum, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.*  
Photo by Debbie Abilock

elements. For example, the Glanum columns (right), photographed from below and framed vertically, feel imposing, especially since the sun's rays illuminate the lintel from behind. Yet the oddly-balanced top and the unequal lengths of the converging columns seem unstable. Such tension in a photograph creates visual interest. Learn about photo composition elements such as leading

lines, Rule of Thirds, and framing <<http://photoinfo.com>>.

### Collaborating with Faculty

Identifying similarities and differences is one of the nine categories of instructional strategies that research shows is associated with improved student learning (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2001). Select a pair of documentary photographs of similar subjects, composition, and purpose, but created at different times. If you are designing a collaborative project, co-teach this lesson with your faculty partner to “set the table” for a long-term research investigation (Abilock and Kosut 2000). If you are teaching visual literacy alone, choose images that relate to topics that are being studied in the classroom. In either situation, you'll want to meet with the subject-area teacher to explain the visual literacy activity and get suggestions for possible photograph pairings. For a faculty workshop, I select pairs from

Table 1. Perspectives Chart: What do I bring to visual information literacy?

When I look through this lens...	What I see is framed by my...
Personal	Intuition, subjective responses
Moral, ethical	Belief system, code of behavior
Historical, political, economic, social	Knowledge of a time, place, government, society
Cultural	Knowledge of a group's shared way of life
Aesthetic	Appreciation and critical analysis of beauty, art
Critical	Analysis of society and human nature
Metaphoric	Understanding of icons, symbols

An adaptation based on Lester's six perspectives for analyzing any image (2000) 94-96.



*Muir Glacier in 1941*  
 Photo by William O. Field  
 National Snow and Ice Data Center/World Data Center for  
 Glaciology, Boulder, Colorado

different subject areas such as these sets about global warming and child labor.

After comparing the photographs and sharing what is observed and already known, the next activity is to research additional information. For example, the two child labor images were taken eighty years apart, one by an investigative photographer [www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos) and the other by an occupational health physician from Harvard [www.hsph.harvard.edu/gallery/intro.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/gallery/intro.html). Information on the Muir glacier photographs taken over sixty years apart is on the National Snow and Ice Data Center website [http://nsidc.org/data/glacier\\_photo/repeat\\_photography.html](http://nsidc.org/data/glacier_photo/repeat_photography.html).

After 10-15 minutes of investigation, invite everyone



*Photograph of a Young Shrimp Picker Named Manuel*  
 Photo by Lewis Hine  
 Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services



*Muir Glacier in 2004*  
 Photo by Bruce F. Molnia  
 National Snow and Ice Data Center/World Data Center for  
 Glaciology, Boulder, Colorado

to share what they've learned, as well as their feelings, opinions, and questions about the photographs. Our values, emotions, and knowledge shape our responses to a photograph, just as they inform our responses to a printed text and indeed every experience in our lives. Using the Perspectives Chart (previous page), ask for elaboration of responses and add questions that prompt further thinking. Does the visual evidence of glacial retreat have a

personal impact? What is the effect of the sharply lit oyster shells and unending stacks of bricks? Some may focus on their "personal lens" by sharing their qualms about climate change or work



*Stolen Dreams; Portraits of Working Children.*  
 Photo by David L. Parker

hazards. Others may be led by their "ethical lens" and become outraged about child labor or global warming. Intellectually, while they understand that these are continuing problems, they may have reservations about the options poor families or third-world countries really have (historical, political, economic, cultural) or question the role that countries and humanitarian organizations currently play or might take in issues of social justice (critical, metaphoric). The purpose is to become conscious of the perspectives we bring to a visual image.

A documentary photograph may have been created to

represent a reality, but it is also a vehicle for conveying ideas and a medium for personal expression. Early photographs were assumed to be scientific evidence. Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of horses and people were trusted as reliable scientific studies of movement and were even published in *Scientific American*. Today there is evidence that he assembled and manipulated them for artistic effect (Freeze Frame n.d.).

Yet the premise of documentary photographs, whether they are of a wedding, an inauguration, a mutation, or a news event, is that they are truthful representations of reality. Arnheim says of them: "We are on vacation from artifice," (as quoted in Steiner 1995, 40). Indeed the events did happen: we were there to see this couple get married (below); Lincoln was inaugurated on the steps of the Capitol (right); the scientific paper provides experimental evidence of the mutations in zebrafish embryos (bottom right); and Buddhist Monks were severely injured in recent demonstrations in Burma (next page). Similarly, anthropologists and sociologists have used photographic inventories of objects, people, and artifacts, images from the past of institutions or individuals, and intimate images of a social group in support of anthropological field studies or sociological



*Wedding Party*  
Photo by Damon and Maria Abilock

interviews (Harper 2002, 13). At the University of Rochester, librarians used photo-elicitation interviews to find out what undergraduates really do in the dorms and library when they research and write an academic paper (Briden 2007).

But, even when photographs are unretouched, there is an eye behind the lens, and a finger on the camera's shutter button. Subhankar Banerjee's collected photographs show the connection between destruction of the Arctic and global issues such as resource wars, global warming, and human rights <[www.subhankarbanerjee.org/projects.html](http://www.subhankarbanerjee.org/projects.html)>; he states unequivocally that oil development at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will "forever unravel the delicate pattern of nature" (Kammen 2006, 287). Another social critic, Lewis Hine, although he never

altered the photographs he took for the National Child Labor Committee, recognized that his own perspectives inevitably influenced his choice of subject, what angle to use, etc. To add veracity to his documentation, he made notes about the time, place, and surreptitious interviews he conducted with his subjects. Yet he calls his photographs a "reproduction of impressions made upon the photographer which he desires to repeat to others" <[www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos/](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos/)>. A documentary photograph is a mediated communication of truthful evidence. When displayed in exhibits or gathered photo essays, these photographs become an argument with evidence for a claim.

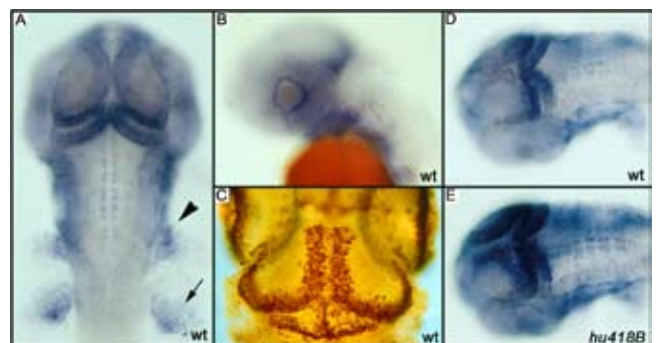


*Abraham Lincoln giving his second inauguration address.*  
American Memory, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

### Visual Rhetoric

The purpose of *argument* is to discover some version of the truth, using evidence and reason. Argument of this sort leads audiences toward conviction, an agreement that a claim is true or reasonable, or that a course of action is desirable. The aim of *persuasion* is to change a point of view or to move others from conviction to action. In other words, writers or speakers argue to find some truth; they persuade when they think they already know it. (Lunsford and Ruskiewicz 2001, 6)

While a single documentary photograph does not exhort



*PCNA and Proliferation Patterns in zebrafish mutant embryos.*  
Image by M.J. Koudijs et al.



*A young demonstrator is shot dead in Rangoon, Burma*  
Democratic Voice of Burma

[.com/id/3251645](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3251645) and “photo essays” are effective visual rhetorical arguments.

This distinction between argument and persuasion speaks directly to the veracity of a photograph. A photographer who is out to persuade you of something makes choices which support his truth rather than reveal the truthfulness of the moment. These distinctions are at the heart of some of the most interesting aspects of visual information literacy: credibility and verification; point of view, reality and truth; journalistic ethics and aesthetics; expropriation as visual plagiarism, homage, or parody; privacy and the public’s right to know.

### Symbolic Meaning

Semiotics is the study of how our reading of signs and symbols communicates complicated ideas in the form of codes (Lester 2000). A visually literate person responds to the icons and symbols, alone and together, to interpret them within certain cultural constraints. In Lincoln’s inauguration photograph, the United States flag and the Capitol behind him are symbols of the authority being conveyed to a president who had not believed he



*Newborn Tobias*  
Photo by Debbie Abilock

you to topple the Burmese government or to buy a hybrid car, at some point the preponderance of the visual evidence will probably convince you that these are faithful representations of a repressive government’s actions and climatic changes. Such “picture stories”

[www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3251645](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3251645)

would get this second chance. Dorothea Lange’s iconic mother and child, “The Migrant Mother,” became symbolic of families struggling to survive during

the Great Depression (Lester 2000). Sitting side-by-side on a box, a Union and Confederate officer, former classmates at West Point, epitomize the Civil War conflict (Brimberg 2004, 65–66).

A photographer is always tempted to arrange a scene for symbolic, aesthetic, or dramatic reasons. In this personal photograph (bottom left), one senses the great value of a newborn infant colored by a rainbow—but, was the child moved to that spot? (Not moved but steadied—see the hand?) But wouldn’t it have been more visually interesting if the baby had been crying? (Yes, but that’s a manipulation we weren’t willing to perform.)

Subjects have been moved, and negatives cropped and retouched, for every imaginable purpose from enlightening to misleading the viewer. Alexander Gardner, a Civil War photographer, carried a dead body to a more picturesque location to evoke poignancy and pity in his audience <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>



*Adolf Hitler in Paris*  
Office of the National Archives

[cwphtml/cwpcam/cwcamI.html](#). Public figures are notorious for scripting the camera's eye to their advantage (Muir 2005). Conscious of the propaganda value, Hitler staged this scene in front of the Eiffel Tower after Paris fell (previous page). Even after events have been shot, a photographer might substitute a similar photograph taken at another time because it was truer to the story, sharper, more visually appealing, etc.

Access to cheap, powerful editing software provides every grassroots reporter and amateur photographer with sophisticated tools for photo manipulation. Computational photography automates thousands of microlenses, smart flashes, three-dimensional apertures, multiple exposures, and cameras stacked in arrays to allow a photographer to take multiple shots of a scene and mathematically combine them to choose the lighting, the camera position, the focus point, and even the expressions on people's faces (Barry 2007).

Professional guidelines for visual journalism have been created to clarify the legal and ethical issues of documentary photography. The German Press Council [<www.presserat.de/uploads/media/Press\\_Code.pdf>](#) makes a distinction based on the viewer's assumptions:

*Guideline 2.2—Symbolic Photographs*

If an illustration, especially a photograph, can be taken to be a documentary picture by the casual reader, although it is a symbolic photograph, this must be clarified. For this reason:

- substitute or auxiliary illustrations (i.e., a similar subject at a different time, or a different subject at the same time, etc.),
- symbolic illustrations (reconstructed scenes, artificially visualised (sic) events to accompany text, etc.),
- photomontages or other changes

must be clearly marked as such either in the caption or in the accompanying text. (Deutscher Presserat 2007, 10)

A new Code of Ethics (2008) from The National Press Photographers Association promotes “accurate and comprehensive representation,” and cautions against active involvement in events that are being photographed and vigilance to avoid influence or coercion by others. As in good journalistic writing, the assumption is that the

documentary photographer should maintain a neutral point of view. When we look over the exhaustive list of permissible and impermissible procedures enumerated in “To Protect The Integrity of Journalistic Photographs in Digital Editing” [<http://digitalcustom.com/howto/mediaguidelines.asp>](#), we can begin to appreciate the complexity of this problem. It distinguishes between “true-to-life” enhancing procedures (e.g., removing red-eye, correcting color, eliminating glare and repairing a deteriorating historical image) and impermissible alterations (e.g., doctoring a news photo to increase the impression of war damage; adding another animal to a nature scene to make it more picturesque; and falsifying photomicroscopical evidence for scientific profit or recognition). Egregious alteration procedures are easy to acknowledge but, just as there is a fascinating gray area between argument and persuasion, ethically ambiguous examples complicate the job of news, travel or nature editors. Moreover, an editor usually selects from a series of photographs each of which conveys something slightly different; each editorial choice is but one version of the reality. So, a photograph chosen to “sell” the front page might conceivably be more compelling, but less “true-to-life.”

One way to appreciate this dilemma is to study images of the same event, selected for the front pages of multiple daily newspapers. On the Newseum's website [<www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages>](#), front pages can be examined by state, country or region of the world, and then compared side-by-side using a tabbed browser. If the publications are in a language that you can't read, the image can be partially isolated from the verbal, political, and social context. If it is an English language publication, then the interplay between image, typography, layout, and knowledge of a particular time and place will contribute to the “reading.” Whether it is a newspaper's front page, a scientific paper, or a family album, the context in which the image is embedded is inevitably part of the communication.

At first, when I used rhetorical analysis to frame my visual information literacy teaching, it felt contrived. As I practiced using the worksheet, the model, and the perspectives, my comfort level rose. My next challenge is to add digital cameras (as De Abreu and Palmquist describe in this issue; see also Tyehimba 2007) so that I can teach the process of constructing and deconstructing in a visual language. Innovation and improvisation are fundamental to twenty-first-century literacies.

School librarians can learn to turn a seven-power lens on documentary photographs (Abilock 2003) to teach visual literacy skills within an information literacy context. And

our learners will find this process transformational when they understand, evaluate, and use visual information for authentic reasons.

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