

The Elements of Visual Analysis



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- Suggested visual subjects to write about, including photography, landscape, and fine art
- A bibliography of works for further research

Each chapter features assignment ideas that draw on chapter concepts and examples:

- **Re-Vision** questions and assignments invite you to create your own analyses of key images in each chapter.
- **In Focus: Image and Analysis** directs you to apply the concepts and questions introduced in each chapter to image texts of your own choosing. The In Focus sections can be used to initiate an independent project.
- **On Display** offers a new image, related to the chapter topic, as a writing or discussion prompt.

A brief handbook such as this can provide only a few examples for you to begin your investigations. The examples of visual information provided in this book are of people and places. Within each chapter, particular terms are brought to the fore that will enable a critical analysis of the subject. The images used here range from family snapshots to famous paintings and photographs. Some are contemporary; some are historical. Chapter One introduces you to the basic concepts of visual culture studies. Chapter Two focuses on the elements of design such as color, line, and texture. Chapter Three investigates place. Chapter Four examines positive and negative representations of people. Seek out further examples and applications of the ideas and concepts introduced in each chapter. There is literally a world of visual ideas in front of you.

Remember that, whenever possible, take yourself to places where you can see original images. Try to move away from reproductions in books and on the Internet to broaden your experiences with the different types of media that are used to create visual imagery, from sculpture to painting to interior design.

M. H.

1

Visual Culture

The World of Images and Texts

What Are You Looking At?

When you walk down the street, how many images do you see? You probably will notice signs for businesses, such as the golden arches of McDonald's. You might see a billboard advertising a restaurant or a sightseeing destination. Do you recognize any logos for name-brand objects? Do the people you pass on the street wear shirts, caps, jackets, or shoes that display images or icons like the Nike swoosh? Stop at the corner and look at the walk sign, another icon. The stoplights above it use color to tell drivers how to handle their cars: stop, go, use caution.

All of these uses of fashion, signs, images, and icons are a part of American **visual culture**—and they are subjects for written analysis. As media pundits and educators tell us, for better or for worse contemporary society is dominated by images. Efforts to provide the American public with the tools of **visual literacy** are increasingly placed at the forefront of educational efforts.

Images are created to express an idea or emotion. Images are used to imagine alternatives, to create new ways of looking at something. Images record parts of the world that are inaccessible to the majority of the public, document major events, or examine emotions that are at the

extreme ends of pain or pleasure. Images communicate: they motivate, persuade, or warn.

When educators and media commentators argue that ours is a visual culture, they are indicating that images are the primary mode of communication and expression in contemporary society, replacing verbal composition and expression. The term **visual culture** is of recent origin and derives from work in art history, sociology, and cultural studies. The three primary modes of communication in contemporary society are the written word, the spoken word, and the use of images. Visual culture studies emphasize that images convey meanings, perhaps even more so than the written word. Those interested in studying the visual aspects of contemporary culture include in their perspective fashion, photography, dance, opera, musical theater, electronic images, medical illustrations, advertising, billboards, graphic design, museum displays, film, television, architecture, public sculpture, and industrial design. The approaches used to study images are primarily political, questioning who has the money and access to materials to produce and distribute images and how social and gendered groups (such as men, women, African Americans, and Native Americans) have been depicted in the media that are publicly available.

A third term, **visual rhetoric**, refers to the way that images persuade viewers to adopt attitudes or perform certain actions. **Propaganda** is one type of persuasive visual image that is designed to affect how viewers see the world—or people—around them. American war posters from World War I and World War II frequently featured broad caricatures of Germans and Japanese. These cartoon-like drawings were designed to make an “enemy” look as hideous, demonic, and nonhuman as possible in order to allow for more patriotic feeling for the Allies. Propagandistic caricature served as shorthand for national expression.

Advertisers also use images to persuade consumers to purchase particular products or services or to undertake certain actions, such as joining the Army. This use of images to persuade is called a “rhetorical use” of the image. However, many images affect viewers in particular emotional or intellectual ways and are not advertisements or instances of propaganda. Part of what you will think about in this book is how visual culture persuades us. Visual cultural studies are not limited to **two-dimensional** print objects such as cosmetic advertisements or

children’s book illustrations. Even **three-dimensional** objects such as cars are constructed to persuade us to purchase them. For example, cars have a particular color scheme that is gender-biased. While there is nothing intrinsically “unmasculine” about the color pink, messages in our culture condition young men to avoid that color choice. (Even the idea that there is something essentially “male” or “female” is constructed through messages in our society.) When purchasing a car from the dealer’s lot, a petal pink Dodge Ram 4 × 4 pickup would not be a persuasive color option for a young man. Again, there is nothing essentially “feminine” about pink. That color has been repeatedly used in our culture to denote “femininity,” therefore we have been persuaded by this association. Most automobiles are offered in colors that are assumed to be gender-neutral, such as black, red, white, and blue. These sell to the widest audience because they are generally free of culturally coded associations.

At a very broad level, then, we can say that images are used to express attitudes toward subjects in the world. Regardless of whether someone owns a television or picks up a copy of *People*

magazine at the grocery store, no one is entirely free of images in our culture or their persuasive qualities. Visual culture studies help us to realize that we never simply look. We are constantly engaged in a process of looking and forming an opinion about what we see. We make judgments of taste when we like or dislike the “look” of something. We can act out of cultural bias or prejudice when we refuse to “look beyond the surface.” We can react emotionally—with tears or laughter—when we see something that moves us.

Why do these reactions occur? Are there basic ways that people react to images? What are some of the common elements of visual display that persuade viewers—consciously or unconsciously—to react in particular ways? As you read this book and see the images around you, ask yourself these questions. By asking “Why?” you will begin to solve

Discuss

Visit two websites and compare their color schemes and design schemes. Can you tell whether they are designed with a female audience or a male audience in mind? Some sites to consider are the National Football League (www.nfl.com) and Oprah! (www.oprah.com).

problems, respond reflectively and creatively to the myriad of images in our society, and construct a meaning from the world around you.

Experimenting with Image, Word, and Sound

When you were young, you probably drew pictures in school. Now, you most likely take photographs to commemorate events in your life, such as graduations and birthdays. All of those images collected in your home and all of the visual experiences you have had in your life can become the subjects for analysis. Here are some activities to get you started thinking visually. Use these ideas for journaling, group projects, or formal essays.

- Listen to a popular song or a folk song. Find an image that seems to go with that song. Ask yourself why the image expresses the emotional content of the song. Is it possible that a different image would yield a different interpretation of the same song? When writing about this, you will be working with **multimodal** forms of expression, combining sound and image to create meaning.
- Have someone take a photograph of you. Using this portrait as the basis for a metaphor, journal on the prompt, “I am like. . .” Describe the ways that the photo portrait conveys your beliefs and attitudes.
- Create a collage of images drawn from magazines or newspapers that reflects you and your life history and interests. Select four or five key moments in your life to illustrate. This is often referred to as a “life graph.” Compose a prose statement that goes with the piece. Present the image and narrative to the class.
- Bring an object to class that is meaningful to you. Have a partner look at it objectively and describe its shape, size, color, and use as if the object were being catalogued for a museum. Then, describe what the object means to you. Compare the two responses to the object. What does each prose description capture? What is missing from either description? What are the tangible elements of the object that cannot be captured by words?

Text and Image

Two-dimensional images in print, such as those in magazines and newspapers, are sometimes seen as purely decorative or as **illustrations** for text. In this conception, the image cannot be separated from the text. It depends on written language to make it intelligible, in other words, to make it “make sense.”

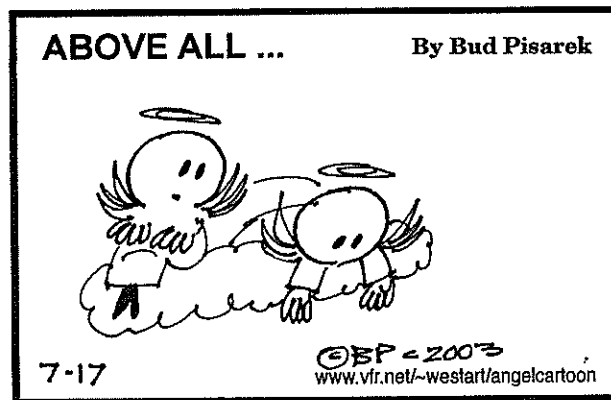
Cartoons are familiar formats that regularly use images and text to convey ideas. We are familiar with this form from childhood, when the daily “funny papers” are passed to us from the newspaper. Political cartooning has a long and distinguished history extending back several hundred years to seventeenth-century Europe. Comics use a sophisticated shorthand of visual elements to convey motion and the relationship between characters, such as viewing angle, close-ups, and lines. Traditional elements in the comics help us to read and understand them: “thought balloons” hold speech, lines drawn around figures indicate motion such as running or shaking, and bodies of humans and animals stretch disproportionately to emphasize movement. We may not question, though, which is the most dominant aspect of the cartoon: is it the text or the image? Is a comic or a cartoon possible without the text?

For example, without text, this cartoon by California artist Bud Pisarek could be a picture of two cute angels gazing down upon Earth. Perhaps it appeared in a religious publication. The angel on the right looks rather wistful. Perhaps the angel on the right is a recent addition to the heavenly host and is thoughtfully considering what he (or she) has left behind in the material world below. The angel on the left appears to be speaking to him. Perhaps he is consoling the angel, reminding him of the riches of the eternal world to which he now belongs. What can you say about these angels?

Freewrite

Create a double-entry journal by drawing a line down the center of your page.

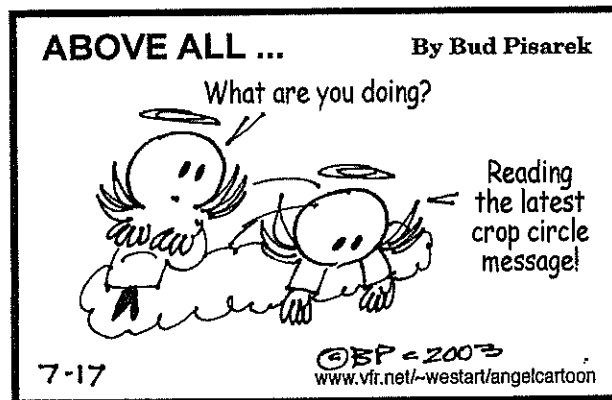
In the left-hand column, list as many types of images as you can see around you or think of. In the right-hand column, consider what purpose these images may have (such as providing information or persuading consumers).



"Above All," 17 July 2003

© Bud Pisarek

Here is the cartoon again, this time with the text that Pisarek added to their conversation.



"Above All," 17 July 2003

© Bud Pisarek

With the words added to the image, the angel on the right suddenly appears "worldly wise" and a bit of a rebel, ignoring holy messages and timeless religious thought to study spurious "messages" from UFOs. Even more extreme, he defies conventional religious traditions to study

"crop circles," messages supposedly cut into cornfields by alien visitors from outer space. Is he dissatisfied by Eternity?

In rhetorical studies, the argument that images are dependent on text to "mean" something has been used to say that pictures are not persuasive. Yet, we recognize that our vision persuades us daily: an attractive display of patio furniture and patio ware in Wal-Mart helps us purchase and decorate; an actress in flip-flops on the cover of *People* magazine helps to convince us that these beach shoes are acceptable for daily wear; a swimsuit model on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* convinces us to buy the magazine.

In the case of the cartoon "Above All," the image alone convinces us of many things that we accept immediately, based on our previous encounters with images of angels and political cartooning. While Pisarek's cartoon ran in the *Auburn Journal* in the midsize American city of Auburn, California, during the last decade, that contextual information isn't necessary to recognize that this one-frame image is from a genre of editorial cartooning that appears in newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New Yorker*. We can also recognize that the cartoon is a humorous drawing that reflects current events and is not meant through its illustration to represent reality accurately.

For example, based on the range of cartoons in national publications, we are accustomed to seeing speaking dogs, cats, and birds. Angels, therefore, are just another example of the "speaking subject" and are an appropriate subject for political cartoons. Pisarek relies on the positive association that many viewers have with angels; the reading public finds them to be trustworthy and sympathetic. Angel images appear in many popular secular forms. The chubby duo of angels painted by Renaissance painter Raphael adorns checks, umbrellas, coffee mugs, tote bags, switch plates, and key chains.

Pisarek's angels are drawn as sexless and somewhat amorphous beings, unlike the more fully realized humanlike and almost lifelike

Discuss

Speaking animals are favorites of cartoonists and advertisers. Find examples of this and share them with your classmates. Does the message change if the words are removed? Why are animals popular subjects for cartoonists?

angels of Renaissance art, yet they draw on the tradition of cartoon art, which frequently exaggerates bodily features such as the heads and facial features of political figures. Also, like most imagery of heavenly beings, these angels are fitted with halos, a traditional artistic **convention** that identifies them as sanctified. Reading the image, we accept that these angels have small wings that could not possibly bear the weight of their bodies (yet somehow these wings must allow the angels to fly, since that is what angels do). Like the cherubim of the Renaissance, these angels also enjoy resting on clouds. The angels of “Above All” also take an interest in the material world below, which leads us to conclude (also from the drawing) that angels have a social life and conversations among themselves.

Frequently, Pisarek’s cartoon angels comment on the presidency, on national security, on war, and on foibles of consumer society. None of these textual thoughts are necessary, though, to understand “Above All”’s subject, genre, and major features. Thus, even in a form that we take for granted, the dependency of the image on the word is not a given. We understand the cartoon because of visual cartoon language, elements of visual expression that transfer from one image context to another. Chapter Four of this book expands the idea of how visual cues characterize people, in both positive and negative ways.

Many writers, from journalists to academics, consider how images shape perceptions and reflect societal concerns. Because they are analyzing the structure of images and deriving meaning from them, their published work echoes the type of analysis you are often asked to do in your classes. We recognize that the meanings we find in images extend beyond those that the imagemakers intended. We share cultural knowledge and memories with other viewers that make images intelligible. We also bring a store of personal experience to the viewing situation that affects how we emotionally respond to any image. Furthermore, our reactions can change over time so that an image to which we were once emotionally attached has very little meaning in later years.

There is no one method or best practice for analyzing images. Art historians, media critics, and reviewers for newspapers and magazines all focus on different aspects of images when they compose their written pieces. In addition, each two-dimensional image and three-dimensional object requires its own method of analysis.

For example, Robert Scholes, a former professor of literature at Brown University in Rhode Island, established a useful method for reading images in his book *Protocols of Reading* (1983). Referring to his

analytic scheme of a photograph by American photojournalist W. Eugene Smith as a “protocol”—a description of the practice of making meaning—Scholes offers readers an accessible approach to understanding the problems of reading various types of “texts.”

While his subject, a photograph entitled *Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath* (Minamata, Japan 1972), is no longer available for publication, Scholes’s practice of looking and making meaning is a model for conducting visual analyses. *Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath* is a black-and-white photograph of a woman bathing her severely disabled daughter in a large, square wooden bath. The woman gazes lovingly at the girl, who appears to be about fourteen or fifteen years old. The image was published in *Life* magazine in 1972, part of an effort to raise awareness of the effects of industrial pollution in Japan. Scholes embarks on a process of reading the image that breaks down into five steps, with rereading being a key process in each:

Key Point

Always reread images. A second look can tell you more than the first glance!

1. First reactions: recognize emotional impact
2. First rereading: examine formal elements
3. Second rereading: identify publication context and original audience
4. Third rereading: investigate who took the image, why the image was made, and the creator’s decisions about subject matter
5. Fourth rereading: reconsider the emotional reaction

First Reactions: Emotion

Scholes asserts that we cannot fully appreciate how the image works upon us until we reread it. “First reactions” must become more aware; it is essential to move beyond them to achieve a level of understanding of the image. Scholes’s first reaction to Smith’s *Tomoko* is emotional; he finds the image disturbing because he cannot translate the form of *Tomoko* to any human form with which he is familiar.

First Rereading: Formal Elements

Scholes’s initial level of rereading focuses on the structural elements of the image, what he calls the inner text. We can call these the **formal**

elements of the image because they relate to the form, or design and arrangement, of the entire composition. These **literal elements** are the “humanoid figure” that he has struggled to decode as human, an older woman, and bathtub. He notes that we use a “mental template”—our previous experience with and knowledge of forms—to understand the elements of the image (just as we did when understanding Pisarek’s angels from the halos, wings, and clouds).

Second Level of Rereading: Publication

Scholes considers the **cultural context** in which the image was initially published (*Life* magazine, 1972) and the political consequences of the publication of the image (awareness of the effects of industrial pollution). This level of reading engages the image as a persuasive document, one that can make a difference in the lives of many people.

Third Level of Rereading: Process of Creation

Scholes moves from a brief discussion of the publication of the image in *Life* to quote Smith’s description of why he took the image. Citing an interview with Smith, Scholes allows us a glimpse of the artist’s technique. Readers learn that Smith lived with the subjects of his photographic research and came to know them as friends. After a time in the fishing village, he knew what type of image he wanted to take. The reader is then asked to question whether the fact that Smith didn’t just “find” this image by chance changes its meaning in any way.

Key Point

Robert Scholes’s Five-Point Sequence of Analysis

1. Emotional reaction
2. Formal elements
3. Publication history
4. Process of creation
5. Reconsidering emotional reaction

Fourth Level of Rereading: Rereading Emotion

Scholes argues that it is important, but not sufficient, to leave the analysis at the historical and political level. He comes full circle to the emotional

reaction the viewer has to the image, validating the emotional, initial response as a basis for analysis. However, he turns the critical eye to address the emotion, finding it insufficient for a complete or complex analysis. In fact, through rereading, his initial ambivalence about this image of Tomoko Uemura—in which he found neither beauty nor understanding—turns to a deep appreciation for the image and affection for its subjects.

Writer at Work

In the following excerpt from a book chapter titled “Photographs, Writing, and Critical Thinking,” authors Carol Hovanec and David Freund consider several viewing techniques similar to Robert Scholes’s. Their subject is American photographer Jacob Riis’s Ready for Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar, A Cobbler on Ludlow Street, originally published in the 1890s. They are interested in the historical background of the image’s production; they describe their emotional reaction to the image; and they support their discussion of the image with an itemization of the formal elements of the photograph.

Key Point

Hovanec and Freund’s Four-Point Sequence of Analysis

1. Publication history
2. Emotional reaction
3. Formal elements
4. Consider alternative meanings

Photographs, Writing, and Critical Thinking

Carol P. Hovanec and David Freund
Ramapo College of New Jersey

In Jacob Riis’s famous 1890s work *How the Other Half Lives*, the photographs and text were planned to raise the consciousness of middle- and upper-class New Yorkers who were ignorant of or indifferent to conditions in the tenements of the Lower East

Hovanec, Carol P. and David Freund. “Photographs, Writing, and Critical Thinking.” *Images in Language, Media, and Mind*. Ed. Roy F. Fox. Copyright © 1994 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Side. Riis intended to shock these readers with indisputable statistics, brutal anecdotes, and graphic illustrations. Though the immigrants themselves did not read of babies suffocating or men living in coal bins, their descendants see and study this inhumanity in our classes today. Riis was striving to sensitize the wealthier people of his time, who were ignorant of the slum-dwellers' squalor, or who were indifferent because their visual experience of "the other half" included only the romanticized images that were often used to portray them.

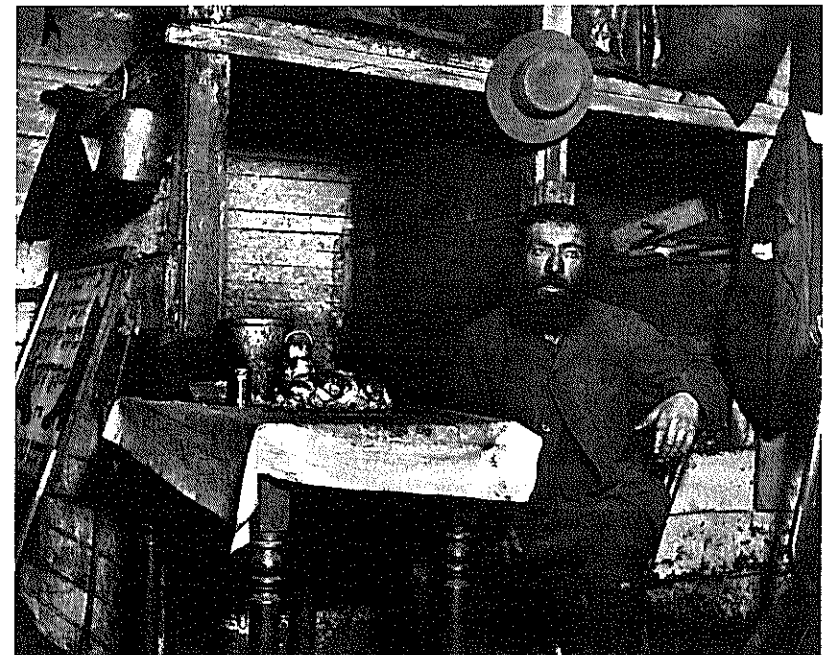
In the carefully titled photograph *Ready for Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar, A Cobbler on Ludlow Street*, Riis shocks us with the cobbler's degrading living conditions. The power and economy of the details that communicate this degradation, as well as a subtler, contrasting idea, are the photograph's main strengths. First we are struck by the grime of the place and the incongruity of household furnishings in such a setting. Our attention is quickly drawn to the man because his bright face emerges vividly from the darker background and because several linear elements lead to him. A few objects similar in size and shape to his face help to emphasize him and to pull our eye through the rest of the photograph: the hat over his head, the shiny metal container in the upper left, the objects on the table, the hanging coat, and the hands holding a shovel to the right.

As we begin to make inferences, constructing meaning from these details, students might protest that we are just "making it up" and that everyone's opinion will be different. We do not have to arrive at a certain truth, but we must arrive at a plausible tale, carefully based on what we see. More than one narrative may be convincing, but it is unlikely that many will. And one narrative—taking into account all of the elements seen and employing convincing inferences—will prevail.

In Riis's photograph, there is a common, household table, its turned legs in need of dusting. The scrap of oilcloth on the table is so filthy that many would hesitate to eat the glistening challah sitting on it. But a tablecloth hints at civility, as does the cobbler's coat, which is cleaner than his pants (similar in condition to the hanging jacket). Perhaps he put on his better garment for his Sabbath meal, or perhaps he wished to look his best in the photograph. In any case, the jacket, his good hat hanging overhead, and the relatively expensive challah suggest that hope and pride survive in this bleak situation. On the table, another

hat rests on a book, possibly a Siddur, both perhaps deposited as he returned from Shul. The function of the hanging container is unclear, but it brings our eye to the left side of the photo, where we see his shop sign. The sign is in; the work day is over. We see only one chair—perhaps he will eat alone. It is unclear if he will be joined by the person whose hands are on the shovel, who may be the janitor arrived to stoke the furnace. In any case, the tool shown as a fragment disrupts the scene's domesticity.

An interesting tension exists between the visual sophistication of the photograph and the gritty truth it portrays to the viewer. It seems as if Riis did nothing but record the facts as he encountered them. Even the moment of exposure seems to record a conversation taking place between the cobbler and someone off-camera.



Jacob Riis
Ready for Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar, A Cobbler on Ludlow Street

The Jacob A. Riis Collection, #286 Museum of the City of New York.

Photo: © Bettman/Corbis.

Links

Compare this image by Jacob Riis to others.

Collections of his images can be found on the website of the Museum of the City of New York at:

<http://www.mcny.org/Exhibitions/riis/riis2.htm>

The hypertext edition of Riis's influential work *How the Other Half Lives* is published online at Yale University's American Studies website:

<http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/inforev/riis/title.html>

Writer at Work

William Cronon holds the title of Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin. He is not a professional art historian; rather, he is interested in the ways that concepts of wilderness and landscape are developed and disseminated in society through texts and images. "Telling Tales on Canvas" is an excerpt from an art exhibition catalogue of paintings that were exhibited at Yale University and the Gilcrease Museum of Western Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In it, Cronon explores the ways that landscape painting reflected nineteenth-century American values and shaped American desires to acquire land and settle the West. As Cronon argues, sometimes it is almost impossible to separate images from **mythology**, the mix of icons, clichés, and ideology that surrounds a particular idea. The frontier narrative is a key founding myth of the United States, an idea that the western territories were a promised land. Paintings such as those by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, George Catlin, and Thomas Cole persuaded people to move westward. Therefore Cronon reads the images almost as if they were advertisements.

Freewrite

As you read "Telling Tales on Canvas," outline Cronon's analysis. Is he interested in the emotional effect of the image? Is he curious about the formal elements of the painting he studies?

As you read the excerpt below, notice that Cronon describes the genre of nineteenth-century **history paintings** of the American West as if they were historical **narratives** or **ethnographic evidence**.

Telling Tales on Canvas*Landscapes of Frontier Change***William Cronon**

Among the most famous images of western American art—so famous that many no doubt regard it as a cliché—is Emanuel Leutze's mural of migrating pioneers, which decorates the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. An equally famous (and equally clichéd) line from Bishop George Berkeley's poem supplies Leutze's title: *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*. The composition assembles a hodgepodge of familiar icons to celebrate the American migration westward. Horses and riders strain to move covered wagons up steep, rocky slopes. Rifle-toting frontiersmen direct the party forward while axmen toil to clear the way ahead. As the wagons pass, a mourning family erects a cross and conducts a funeral for a loved one who will never complete the journey. And at the center of the composition is a buckskinned figure that can only be Daniel Boone reincarnated, leaning over a mother and her infant—themselves the very picture of a Raphaelite Madonna and child—while gesturing confidently toward the western horizon. Leutze clearly intended this westward gesture to express all that was most hopeful in America's manifest destiny, a vision of national progress in which the frontier experience and the dream of new lives on virgin lands would be the foundation of American unity. The optimism of the mural was all the more poignant for its having been completed in 1862, before the new Capitol was even finished, and as the bloody ordeal of national union had barely begun.

Cronon, William. "Telling Tales on Canvas: Landscapes of Frontier Change." *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the America West*. Edited by Jules David Prown. Copyright © 1992, Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press.

The landscape of Leutze's painting plays backdrop to the human drama in the foreground. The Boone character and his Madonna sit atop a small hillock that is echoed by a large rocky outcrop behind them, where two men have scrambled to get a better view of the way ahead. The outcrop is echoed in turn by foothills leading up toward snowcapped peaks that fill the upper right-hand quadrant of the painting, sublime sentinels looking down upon the great migration below. But the landscape that matters most to the composition lies elsewhere. Off to the west, lit by the golden light of an unseen setting sun, lies a broad flat plain with the glistening hint of an ocean beyond. Our travelers have evidently just crested a pass in the mountains and are about to make their way down to the new Canaan below. Relief and excitement illuminate every face, and if we have any doubt about the ultimate destination of this party, an inset landscape of San Francisco Bay immediately below the main composition shows us the end of the road.

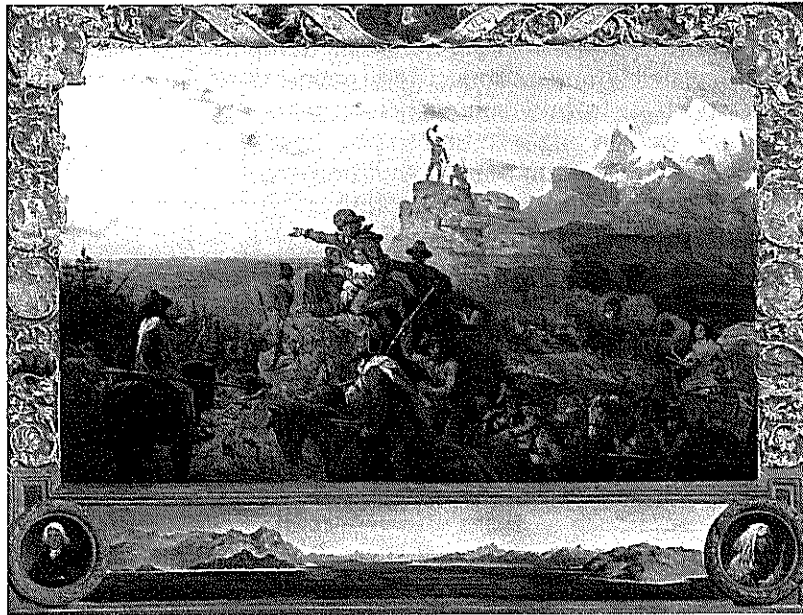
Strikingly, though, Leutze's California is almost featureless. The western portion of his composition is entirely a landscape of expectation, the endpoint of a human drama in which Americans on their westward course of empire plod across the broad plains, struggle over mountain passes, and descend at last to a land of plenty. The mountains these travelers are crossing bear little resemblance to the Sierra Nevada, jumbling together instead geological shapes one might expect to find more readily in the Central Rockies or the mesa country of the Southwest. That hardly matters, of course, for in the symbolic language of the painting the mountains serve a purely narrative function. To the right, they are about the uphill battle to build a nation in the face of natural obstacles; to the left, they are about turning points, downward descents, and the rewards of journeys ending. As for the lowlands that glow like the skin of a peach in the light of the western sun, Leutze leaves to the viewer's imagination what these travelers will find when they arrive at their new home.

...

The Oxbow [by Thomas Cole, 1836] and Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way offer important lessons for those

who would seek to trace the history of the American landscape from the visual record of contemporary artists like Thomas Cole and Leutze. They remind us of the multiple perspectives from which each such painting must be read before we can begin to understand its meaning. The most obvious information that an environmental historian might wish to extract from these paintings is what the land actually looked like at a particular time in the past. But because landscapes constantly change in response to the people who live upon them, they inevitably reflect a human telos. Even an apparently static image like Cole's describes not just its present moment but a long process of human use that has given this valley its form—a process the painting records as a kind of palimpsest. Furthermore, because so much of American landscape art has a prophetic element pointing toward national progress and its consequences, landscapes such as these also reflect the hopes and anxieties of the artists who paint them. Reading the history of environmental change from these images thus requires us to place each painting in a dynamic continuum that encompasses not just the painting's present moment but the past from which the landscape emerged and the future toward which its artist believed it was heading.

Most American landscape paintings locate themselves within a relatively small number of narrative moments, so that one can easily construct a taxonomy of the historical environments they represent. The earliest of these moments consists of what we might call "the first encounter," in which the artist tries to record for the viewer a landscape seen for the first time by European eyes. Many such images were the products of early journeys into territories previously unvisited by European or American explorers. From Sir Walter Raleigh's sixteenth-century expedition to Roanoke to the Pacific Railroad surveys of the mid-nineteenth century, the visual record was a vital adjunct to the enterprise of colonization—educating viewers who might never visit these distant lands themselves, providing information for the use of scientists and politicians, and tempting at least a few people to abandon old homes for new.



Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze (1816–1868)
Westward the Course of an Empire Takes Its Way

(mural study, U.S. Capitol) 1861 oil on canvas
 Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Bequest of Sara Carr Upton.
 Art Resource, NY.

Rereading “Telling Tales on Canvas”

In composing his analysis of the Leutze painting, which is the first part of his extended chapter on the relationship of western art to American idealism, Cronon tells a story about the painting. Why must he use words in order to discuss the painting? Is the “story” of this history painting not evident visually?

This desire to retell the story is actually a common move in art history, especially when figures and settings are part of the story to be analyzed. (Images from the Renaissance, extending approximately from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, were often painted versions of biblical stories; in the eighteenth century there was a fad for paintings of scenes from Shakespeare’s plays.) Narrating puts the viewer and the writer on the same ground, because the viewer now “sees” the way that

the writer is interpreting the painting. At the same time, we recognize that we may have different ways of understanding an image, just as we differ in our understandings of novels, short stories, and films. The stories we tell about any image vary.

Cronon sees the painting as a narrative and thus his critical essay presents his “story” about the characters, actions, and motivations of the painting. This makes his analytical scheme different from those of Scholes and Hovanec and Freund. At the same time, some of the same techniques are used, such as the record of the formal elements of the image and the investigation of the historical context of the work. Looking closely at Cronon’s narrative, we can isolate three distinct steps of analytical development: storytelling, historical context, and formal elements.

Step One: Storytelling. Cronon begins his analysis by itemizing the elements of the painting: horse, rider, covered wagon, and figures. At the center of the canvas is Daniel Boone, who Cronon indicates is the protagonist. As stories have action, Cronon ensures that he uses motion words to describe what is essentially a two-dimensional, static image: “axmen toil” and “wagons pass.” The gestures of the humans are also infused with purpose, as is the direction of the figures’ gaze.

Although there is no way to prove this, Cronon speculates about what the figures in the frame see as they look beyond the frame. His speculations are rooted in history and his knowledge of **ideology**, the aspirations and beliefs of the American people in the nineteenth century as expressed in their laws, religious sermons, newspapers, fiction, and works of art. Cronon’s efforts to place the subject of the painting in a wider context are important for his discussion of the meaning of the painting (Step Two).

How would the story that Cronon tells be different if he identified a different protagonist in the painting? For a creative writing assignment, write the story of this journey from the point of view of another member of the traveling party depicted in the painting.

Key Point

Cronon’s Three-Point Sequence of Analysis

1. Tell the story of the image
2. Examine the historical context
3. Itemize the formal elements

Step Two: Historical context. Because Cronon is setting up an argument that paintings can be understood as historical documents, it is important for him to think culturally outside the frame of the painting. By thinking culturally about the context in which the painting was created, Cronon is able to establish that the mood of America in the nineteenth century was one of optimism. National progress—building railroads, settling the areas between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean, establishing a network of trade—illustrated important political and economic ideas in the century. As a painter living in that time, he argues, Leutze would have been affected by this national optimism and would have either reflected or critiqued it in his painting. That this painting is an endorsement of national ideology rather than a critique can be proved by turning to the structural details of the painting (Step Three).

If a critic were to point out that this painting obscures a darker reality in American history, what historical facts would be brought to bear as evidence? These elements are not likely to be represented in the painting itself, either physically as elements or ideologically in the painter's attitude toward his subject.

Step Three: Formal elements. Creators of images, such as photographers and painters, use a visual hierarchy of size, angle, and placement to convey attitudes toward their subject. For example, the subject of the painting is frequently placed along the center horizontal/vertical axis. The subject of the painting may be larger than all other figures in the painting. Many times, other figures in the image point to or direct their gaze to the central subject. If they look upward—or if we look upward at the subject—a sense of awe or admiration is established. Cronon indicates the importance of placing Daniel Boone, the legendary explorer and guide, at the center of the national narrative and thus the painting. The official approval for westward expansion is augmented by the inclusion of the figures of the woman and child in Boone's arms, a visual reference to the Madonna and child that seems to give divine approval to Manifest Destiny, the duty to expand the United States to all compass points.

If you were to create an image of American idealism today, what would that photograph include? Would any national heroes like Daniel Boone appear in the image? How would you arrange the compositional elements of the image (the figures, the setting) to make an argument about how we should view America?

Like Cronon, many writers begin their analyses with an initial impression that is partial, experimental, and inquiring. They then examine their works closely for details of design that support their interpretation of the image. As you can see, however, emphasizing different elements of the image—even imagining what has been eliminated from the creator's gaze—can create alternative interpretations. The three writers whose ideas are presented in this chapter all offer a reading of an image—a way of understanding its meaning—only after they have considered the time and place in which the image was produced.

We know from experience, however, that the meaning of images changes over time. What seems clever and inspiring to viewers at one point in history can seem dated, passé, even offensive at later points.

Re-Vision

The images by Riis and Leutze featured in the latter half of this chapter are making visual arguments. For this re-visioning of the images in this chapter—applying your own perceptions and perspectives—use Riis's *Ready for Sabbath Eve in a Coal Cellar*, *A Cobbler on Ludlow Street* or Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* as your subject image text. Create a written analysis of the argument or arguments that these images are making.

An argument presents the creator's position on a particular issue. The creators of images, just like the writers of verbal texts, attempt to convince others of the idea's validity and worth by using familiar images that are known to engender a positive or negative reaction. The "syntax" or structure of the visual argument is created by combining images, image elements, and, frequently, text. We recognize this from advertisements, which attempt to persuade the public that their lives would be improved by the purchase and use of a particular product.

Use the **PREWRITING QUESTIONS** to help you focus your analysis as you look again at these images of the American past.

PREWRITING QUESTIONS

- **First Reactions.** When you looked at the image for the first time, what was your first reaction? Even no reaction—passing the picture by—reflects something of your attitude toward the image. If you had an emotional reaction to the image, put that into words.

- **Gaze.** What attitude does the creator of the image seem to have about the subject? For example, is Riis sympathetic toward the situation of the cobbler? Is Leutze in favor of western expansion? Could you describe the stance as positive or negative?
- **Formal Elements.** Isolate the smaller, physical elements of the image. List the materials that are represented, such as a broom or hat. Look carefully at how the figures are dressed and how they are physically positioned on the surface.
- **Historical Research.** Research something about the time that the image was created. What were the major social or political concerns of the day? How does the image draw attention to those concerns?
- **Biographical Research.** Look for information about the methods that the creator employed to create the images. For example, how did Riis find his cobbler in order to photograph him? What were some of the challenges of documentary photography at the turn of the twentieth century?
- **Audience.** Put yourself in the place of someone living at the time that the image was first displayed. What would an audience in the nineteenth century see in these images? Who is the audience now? How does time change the meaning of the image?
- **Storytelling.** Write down the story of the image. What are the characters doing and thinking? What might be their hopes, dreams, and fears?
- **Themes.** A theme is a general idea explored through language or image. Themes might be something like greed, hope, or desire. *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* is an idealistic painting. What are some of the American themes that the painting offers the viewer? What themes does Riis explore with his camera?

In Focus: Images and Analysis

For this IN FOCUS writing and visual display assignment, find your own images that make arguments. You will be composing an essay in which you argue for a particular interpretation of the images. The images you select may be purely visual or may use text. Some good texts to use for investigation are advertisements, real estate notices, book covers, posters

for performing events, recruiting posters for organizations or societies, and daily cartoon strips like *Doonesbury* or *The Boondocks*. Begin your analysis by noting your first impressions of the text, then dig deeper. What are the images arguing? What is the attitude of the creator toward the subject matter (sympathy, endorsement, critique)? What is the image's purpose? Where was it published or disseminated? Who is the audience? Do the text and image augment each other or does the text contradict the image? How might a slightly different image change the meaning of the text? Use this project as the basis of a classroom presentation on the persuasive qualities of images.

On Display: Peter Pan

In this essay, you will compare two illustrations of a popular children's book character: Peter Pan.

From an early age, at school or at home, we learn about the world through pictures. Picture books teach us the alphabet, how to count, or about concepts like "weather." As we advance in years, although pictures begin to decrease in size and frequency in the texts we read, we never quite lose sight of book illustrations. The covers, endpapers, title pages, and spines of textbooks, novels, magazines, and handbooks often contain some illustration. Computer manuals, home improvement and decorating handbooks, gardening books, travel guides, and cookbooks all contain illustrations. Children's book author Welleran Poltarnees writes that book illustrations have three discernable relationships to the words of the books:

1. They show things described in words by the authors. The book illustrations offer demonstration.
2. They show things mentioned in the text, but not described. The illustrations augment or extend the text from the author's world to that of the illustrator's imagination.
3. They show things neither mentioned nor described by the authors. The artist has a full range of creative liberty to interpret the meaning of the text for the audience.

A continuously popular figure in American culture is the boy hero Peter Pan. First created by author J. M. Barrie in 1902 in a book titled

The Little White Bird, the boy has been represented on stage, screen, and in books by actors and illustrators. Yet, in the novel *Peter Pan*, only one line describes the boy: "He was a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees; but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth." Use Poltarnees's criteria to initiate a comparison of these two illustrations of the boy Peter Pan. You may find yourself remembering and consulting the famous film versions of the novel, such as the 1953 Disney movie, to augment your investigation.



Peter Pan

© 1940. Charles Scribner's Sons. Illustrated by Edmund Blampied.



Peter Pan

Reprinted with the permission of Atheneum Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing Division from *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie, pictures by Trina Schart Hyman. Illustrations copyright © 1980 Trina Schart Hyman.

2



The Elements of Critical Viewing

A New Language

As Chapter One set forth, the term **visual culture** applies to the world of visual expression and the history of visual representations. In the first chapter, the arts of cartooning, photography, and painting were emphasized. We know, however, that there are many other forms of visual expression. Each visual image or each object that we respond to visually uses certain elements of design to convey its message. In this chapter, you will discover ways to make a careful accounting of the elements of an image.

When you look at a family photograph, an image in an advertisement, or a poster on a coffee shop wall, what do you see? How might you turn your initial positive or negative reaction into a critical process of analysis? Critical viewing entails looking closely at an image to comprehend its structure and to evaluate the information presented. “What you see is a major part of what you know,” writes Donis Dondis, author of a popular visual studies handbook. Our goal is to move from being passive consumers of images to active interrogators. This takes study. Initially, if possible, we should think consensually and sympathetically, reading the image in the way that it appears to be intended to be read, avoiding critique until after we examine the elements of the image. This process

involves a degree of intellectual largesse on our part, meaning that we grant to the author of the image our attempt to understand his or her judgments, even if we disagree. Thinking consensually is not always possible, especially when we view images of war, strife, and privation, because the images cause us to react with horror and outrage. Yet, our repulsion can be an agent for meaningful change as we seek to investigate the conditions under which images were created and disseminated.

For example, in late April of 2004, snapshots of Iraqi prisoners of war at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad were released to the American press. Apparently taken by the American soldiers responsible for the interrogation of the prisoners, the photos showed the prisoners in humiliating and demeaning postures as the soldiers looked on, smiling. These images were difficult to look at because of their high emotional content, and a consensual stance toward the imagemakers was not easy to come by; nonetheless, the rhetorical question of what purpose the photographs served leads to crucial questions. Personal war images, either snapshots or sketches, are not unique to the Iraqi war. Were the images taken to coerce admissions during interrogation? Was each taken with the same purpose in mind? Were any of the photos individualized as a *souvenir de guerre*—a memento of war—for the personal archives of the individual soldiers? What conditions led to the photos being taken?

Even though we begin by examining what the creator may have intended, we need to keep in mind that there is never a single interpretation of an image, so our goal is not to discover the right interpretation, but to offer potential readings of an image. As Rebecca Platzner and Kay Vandergrift write about analyzing children’s picture books, “meaning is created as the result of a transaction between an individual reader and a text at a specific moment in time . . . it follows that there will be many possible interpretations of any text or illustration.” Images can also form the basis of a transaction between people. Advertising does this regularly by conveying a message to many readers. When you see an image that you like or dislike, show it to a friend and ask what they see in it.

The goal of this chapter is to help you establish a process and develop a language for examining

Discuss

Share images with friends and family to discover what others see and how they react. You may be surprised!

visual images. You not only want to describe what is there before you, you also want to understand why the creator made certain choices. Sylvan Barnett, the author of several texts on analyzing fine art, writes that we “see” with more than our eyes: when we look at objects and images, we engage emotions, memory, and ideology (the system of values and beliefs into which we have been educated).

Before continuing with your work, remember two things. First, whenever possible, try to see images in their original contexts. While digital technology has made it possible for many art galleries, museums, and image lovers to put high-quality color images of paintings, photographs, and sculpture online, they all appear on the same small, flat screen. Missing is the context of viewing: the hushed tones of the art museum or the buzz of the coffee house. These ambient noises contribute to our mood and, when viewing the images before us, our mood can lead us to make certain decisions about the image. In addition, if your subject is painting, there is no reproduction that can enable you to experience the texture of thick paint on canvas, such as the daubs of a fine brush that made the painting *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884) by French painter Georges Seurat so famous. Its sheer size is another compelling reason to visit this painting at its home in the Art Institute of Chicago. That the painting is life sized makes those tiny dabs of green, red, and blue on the surface of the canvas all the more amazing.

Second, remember that, if you are working with images accompanied by text, you should try to read the images without the text in order to discover what message the illustrator was trying to convey. As we saw in Chapter One, even media such as cartoons that habitually join text and image still rely on conventions of image production to make sense. Sometimes, text and images work independently, even though they may be joined. At times, the image may contradict the text—or the text may contradict the image. Barbie Zelizer points out in her exploration of World War II photography that images of concentration camps were often misidentified by caption writers. Working in America, far away from the atrocious camps, the photoeditors at newspapers were interested in

Key Point

Try to look at images in their original contexts, whether museum, magazine, or family album.

Initially read images without any accompanying text.

broadly conveying the horror of the camp conditions in Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia; they were less interested in specifically identifying the name of the camp, its location, or the names and nationalities of the human subjects in the camera's eye. Only in later decades, when historians began to reassemble the records of incarceration, did the need to verbally identify all the elements of the images become crucial.

Links

Excellent collections of historical images may be found online at the Library of Congress's American Memory Project, memory.loc.gov/ammem

Step-by-Step Analysis

There are nine steps to follow in this chapter. Each of the steps of critical viewing can be isolated from the others; you can write an analysis using only one or two of these steps. However, they are arranged to proceed in a logical process from initial reaction through research into the life of the creator and into the technical procedures used to create the image. In addition, the steps are **recursive**: they can be returned to at different points in the process of analysis. William Cronon used a protocol very similar to the one outlined below in his analysis of the painting *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* (Chapter One).

Step One	Record your initial impression.
Step Two	Place the image in context.
Step Three	Describe the image in detail (visual discrimination).
Step Four	Identify symbolic elements.
Step Five	Distinguish absences.
Step Six	Examine the self as a viewer of images (exploring the horizon of expectations).
Step Seven	Consider the effect of the image on the viewer (visual communication).
Step Eight	Research the image.
Step Nine	Prepare an interpretation.

Step One: Record Your Initial Impression

Every time we look at images, whether they are book jackets, advertisements, street signs, posters, billboards, or photographs in the newspaper, we immediately have a reaction. The image either compels us to examine it closer or to look away. Sometimes it is the subject of the image that draws us in. A sumptuous chocolate cake on the cover of a cooking magazine may make us buy the magazine so that we can make (and eat) the cake. Sometimes the image is unfamiliar and we look closer to find out what is happening. In the first year of the war with Iraq, news images of U.S. troops interacting with Iraqi men and women made us look closer at the images and read the captions to determine whether the encounters between Americans and Iraqis were (even temporarily) amicable or hostile.

If we are fascinated by a celebrity such as Britain's Prince William, we may be drawn to pick up a supermarket tabloid and page through it while we wait in line with our purchases. Advertisers and magazine publishers depend on "warm," or sympathetic, reactions from patrons to sell their products.

Yet we also have reactions, good or bad, to images that are not strictly commercial. The novel you are asked to purchase for your English class may have an image on the cover. If it is a classic work of literature, the image may be drawn from historical painting. If the novel is contemporary, it may have an abstract image on the cover, or even a photograph of the author. These images lead us to believe that we may want to read the book or initially convince us that the text between the covers is alien to our experiences.

A recent example of a book cover that was redesigned for different readership is the cover for the British edition of the first book in the *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, by J. K. Rowling. (The British edition uses a different title than the American edition.) The first copies of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* were designed for children and used a colorful, cartoonish illustration of the hero Harry near the train that would take him to wizarding school, the Hogwarts Express. Once the book became a best-seller, the

Freewrite

Make a list of objects or concepts that elicit good feelings (warm reactions), such as *sunsets, home, and mother*.

publisher discovered that adults were curious about the novel, but were somewhat reluctant to be seen reading a text with an illustrated cover. Consequently, they reissued the novel with a new cover, a black-and-white photograph of an ominous-looking locomotive traversing an urban landscape, billowing a cloud of black smoke. The tone of the cover changed from lighthearted and magical to dark and foreboding. If you are interested in this topic, search used bookstores, libraries, and the Internet for different editions of the same novel and compare their cover illustrations. The older the book, the more variety you will find in the covers, as they change across time.

Links

Compare cover images for the book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by visiting Amazon.com (USA) and Amazon.com.co.uk (Great Britain). When searching for the book in Great Britain, make sure you use its original English title, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

Step Two: Place the Image in Context

Each image is developed from the knowledge and resources of a historical moment. The availability of materials at a particular time, in a certain geographic location provides a means of expression. Similarly, the audience, once familiar with certain standards of image production, comes to judge future images by comparing them to existing standards. As you conduct an analysis, you will want to take into consideration the time and place in which the image was created. This will mean that you socially situate the image in a context that is greater than just you looking closely.

The basic questions for contextual analysis are:

Who created the image?

When was it created?

Where was it originally published and displayed?

Who was the intended and initial audience?

What medium is the image created from?

Is there a title or caption that explains the subject of the image (or confounds explanation)?

What is the subject of the image?

What was the original purpose in creating and displaying the image?

You may be able to answer many of these questions by simply looking closely. If you are studying an advertisement for an automobile in *Time* or *Wired* magazine, you will be able to answer that the creator of the image is the car manufacturer who hired a photographer and a team of artists to create this image. Generally, advertisements are not associated with specific names of artists or photographers in the way that a fine art image such as an artistic photograph is associated with a name such as "Ansel Adams" or the way that an oil painting commands high respect (and prices) by having the name "Winslow Homer" on its canvas.

Because advertisements are concerned with selling the most up-to-date products, the advertising images were created close to the time of printing. The text in the advertisement also provides clues, by tying into current language, styles, and societal knowledge. If there is no text with the image other than the name of the manufacturer, we would need to look at other visual cues to date the image. Assuming that the image is removed from the pages of a dated magazine—as sometimes happens when the image is reproduced in a textbook or scholarly edition—we would have to think about car design, architectural styles, and even (if we look closely at the models who may be featured) a knowledge of hairstyles and clothing design. From our recognition of these elements, we can date the photograph as "recent" or "historical," even if we are not completely certain when it initially appeared. These visual cues operate continuously and allow us to make decisions about whether something is contemporary with our present experience or whether it is an image from the past. Many advertisers and product designers adopt older (what we might call "retro") visual styles. Developing a familiarity with the visual styles of different eras may also be useful to our analysis.

Freewrite

What are some current fashions that could be represented visually in advertisements? Are there any slang terms or spellings that you might expect to see in ads?

In considering where the image was published, keep in mind that images—especially those in magazines and newspapers—travel from location to location. The context in which an image is viewed includes whether you sight it on the newsstand at the supermarket or have the publication delivered to your home; whether you are browsing the magazine in a dentist's office or whether you have taken it into your bed because you are sick with a cold and want to divert your attention. Images are portable: they move between public and private worlds with ease, and often regardless of the original intention of the creator.

A slick double-paged magazine advertisement is created from film, digitized computer files, ink, and paper. Even though we recognize that most advertisements use photographs (rather than, say, watercolor, finger paint, or cut-paper), we might not know the extent to which the image has been digitally managed by computer photoediting software such as Adobe PhotoShop. On a simple scale, we recognize that there may be manipulation in an ad for diet pills in which the now-slender woman holds up a pair of size twenty pants that the text claims were once hers. However, we may not recognize the degree to which apparently realistic scenes are adjusted by photoenhancement tools that add sheen and depth, that replace backgrounds and even bodies. The "truth" of the advertisement may be created by photoeditors working in a studio.

In searching for the title of the work or the caption of the advertisement, you may find several. A literal caption is designed to identify and classify the type of product pictured so that the reader may develop brand recognition. Other text uses persuasive language that makes the claims for an improved life that the product will offer. As you look at advertisements, separate the identification of the product from the persuasive language of the copy. How does the text enhance or support the image?

Step Three: Describe the Image in Detail

Describing the image in detail allows us to focus on the way that the image has been put together by the creator. As viewers ("readers") of the image, we should be able to conduct a close reading of many elements of the image, such as color, shape, and contrast. The arrangement of all the parts is called the composition of the image. In other words, we develop a vocabulary that allows us to **discriminate**, to make distinctions between different elements that compose the whole.

All images engage formal elements of composition, meaning that they have a certain form for a certain reason. Artists work with seven basic **Elements of Design**: **color**, **value**, line, shape, form, texture, and space. Art historians who engage in **formal** (or “formalist”) criticism study the arrangement of certain elements in a painting or sculpture such as the placement of an image of Jesus in religious art of the Renaissance. Their interest is in the design and arrangement of elements rather than in the content (the subject and meaning) of the image. With this approach, a Renaissance altar piece of Jesus on the cross would be evaluated in a similar way to an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock. While formalist *criticism* is one way to examine an image, a good formal *analysis* of the elements of the composition underlies all forms of criticism, from the psychological to the deconstructive.

As you look closely at images, you can inventory, first, the **literal elements** of the image (Elements of Design), such as gradients of color and shadow; second, you can discuss the **arrangement** (Principles of Design) of the individual elements of the image.

One way to begin a formal analysis is to create a chart and fill in the blanks with notes that you write as you look at an image. This provides you with a list of design elements, the literal qualities of the image.

Elements of Design: Literal Elements

Literal Elements	Definitions
Color	Colors are identified by name, hue, tint, or intensity. Color schemes include primary colors (red, yellow, blue), secondary colors (orange, green, violet), and tertiary colors (the uneven mixture of primary colors). Color schemes can be warm (reds and oranges) or cool (blues).
Value	Particularly important when studying black-and-white images, <i>value</i> refers to lightness or darkness of color. The degree to which the image is given depth by shadows can also be considered here.

Literal Elements	Definitions
Line	A mark made by an instrument such as a pencil, pen, or brush creates a line. Its direction may be identified as horizontal, vertical, or diagonal. Lines can be thick or thin, sharp or blurred, curved or straight.
Shape	The outline or external contour of an object can be traced to find its shape. The term also refers to geometric figures such as the oval, circle, or square. Shape may be represented directly or implied by the arrangement of objects.
Form	Primarily an element of three-dimensional works, <i>form</i> refers to volume (height, width, and depth).
Texture	The surface of an object may be real (as in fabric) or simulated (as in a painting or photo). Surface qualities are described as rough, smooth, bumpy, etc.
Space	The distance between objects, the area around an object, or the open areas inside a three-dimensional object creates space. Space can be two-dimensional (suggested by outlines in a painting or photograph) or three-dimensional (created by form as in sculpture).

While all images have literal elements, they cannot have meaning beyond pure form without an arrangement into a sequence or series of relationships that mimic reality. Abstract art is given meaning by its literal elements of form; however, a family photograph, a photograph in an advertisement, or a painting of shepherds in a field consists of an arrangement of the elements that tell a story, create an emotion, or make an argument. The arrangement of the elements into a form that provides meaning is referred to as **Principles of Design**.

Principles of Design: Arrangement

Arrangement	Definitions
Perspective	A system of arrangement in two-dimensional works that creates the illusion of distance, depth, and proportion.
Angle, Vantage Point, Point of View	The relationship of the viewer to the image. Spectators look on the scene or object from above, below, outside, or inside.
Framing	Beyond the familiar physical object, a frame is a pictorial concept in which one object inside the area of the image encloses another, thereby drawing attention to the second object.
Dominance (emphasis)	Weight, line, shape, texture, and color all bring objects to the fore, or allow them to recede into the background. The dominant items are emphasized as being important to the meaning of the image.
Balance	The harmonious position of objects in the image, frequently brought about because of the symmetrical arrangement of similar or complementary elements.
Proportion	The compatible relationship between objects of the same size and weight.
Pattern	The repetition of elements in an image.
Contrast	A significant difference between objects, colors, or other elements of the image is used for emphasis.
Grid	Intersecting horizontal or vertical lines that cross the surface of the image suggest or actually inscribe a grid. A center point (or dividing line) may create mirrored halves that pattern the image.

The key element of arrangement is perspective. The term perspective refers to a system of lines and proportions that creates the illusion of a three-dimensional surface on a two-dimensional object. One of the principal means of creating perspective is through the manipulation of the size of objects, called **proportion**. An object that is larger and placed in the foreground of an image is understood by viewers to be closer to them than a smaller-sized object placed along a plane in the background. An obvious representation of how perspective depends on a series of lines to create the illusion of receding space and depth is the image of railroad tracks. In this image, the buildings on the plane in the background are miniscule when compared to the train car on the right.



The parallel lines of the tracks appear to converge as they recede toward the **vanishing point** on the **horizon line**. The invisible lines that converge on the horizon line (the invisible horizontal line that marks the division between earth and sky) are called **orthogonal** lines.

Perspective is not a natural system, but one that was developed as a theory in the fifteenth century. Not all images use perspective. Some use a series of converging or overlapping planes. A **plane** is a flat surface or an area within the field of vision. Planes may be divided into foreground,

middle ground, and background. Artists such as Picasso worked with the effects of planes during the Cubist period. This image of a beach is essentially two planes: the sky and the water, divided by the horizon line, where the sea and sky appear to meet.



Another compositional technique used to place objects on the picture plane is that of an imagined or inscribed **grid** of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines. The center of the image may be placed at the center of the grid. Often, a **dividing line** is implied or inscribed and the images are mirrored on either side of that center point. The grid offers a flatter image surface than the perspective system, but it is used often in advertising as a means of laying out the interrelated elements of text and design.

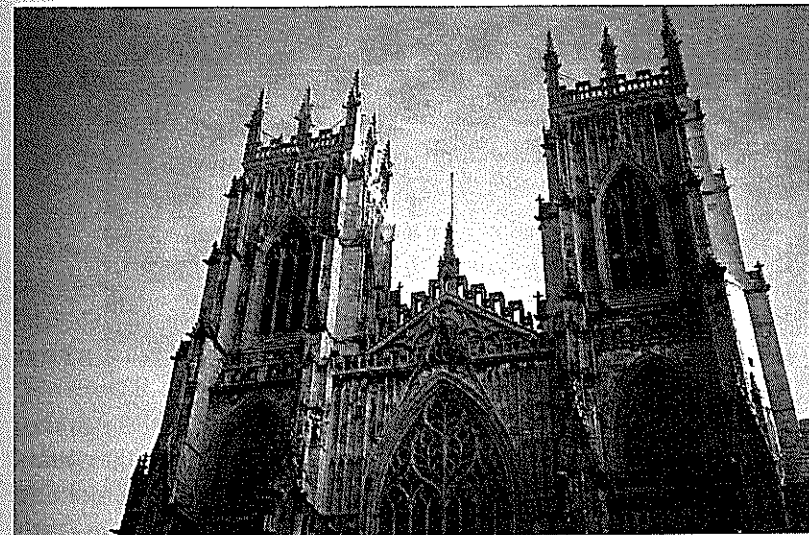
When you look at an image, you will come to see that you are placed in a relationship to the image. In general, you are outside, looking in, as if through a window. Sometimes, however, the subjects of the image directly address you, looking up from their activity as if to ask you a question or invite you into their world. Famous paintings invite us in, such as Diego Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1657), Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Airpump* (1768), and Charles Willson Peale's self-portrait known as *The Artist in His Museum* (1822).

As we look at a picture, a number of different **points of view** are possible: we may gaze from above, below, or outside or be enveloped in the action on the inside. The direction in which we look is represented by angles on the picture plane; however, we also metaphorically call the direction of our gaze the **angle** from which we view a picture. Another term is **vantage point**. If you have ever stopped to take a picture of a building that towers above you such as a cathedral or skyscraper, you will turn your camera upward to catch the image. The building will angle upward in your photograph; your vantage point as a viewer of that photograph will place you below the subject (see the figure below for an example). Most family photographs are taken so that the subjects look straight ahead at us (see the figure on page 89 for an example). Our vantage point is on an even plane, symbolically placing us on an equal footing with the object. Many monuments are created so that

Links

Visit the Web Museum to find digital images of these famous paintings by Velasquez and Wright: www.ibiblio.org/wm/

An image of Peale's painting can be found at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts: www.pafa.org



we look up at them; our posture places us in a position of reverence and awe toward the monument.

Sometimes, in advertisements or in fine art, images are framed in order to direct the eye to the focal point. In this sense, the frame is not a physical object made of wood or metal (such as the picture frames that you have around your snapshots at home), but a construction within the image itself. In this image, the frame of the doorway forces the eye inward toward the courtyard.



In images, certain visual ideas come to the fore, either through their perceived **weight** (using line, shape, and texture) or through their **color**. The **dominance** of particular visual elements gives the picture meaning. A prevalence of black in an image, for example, usually connotes death.

If an object is large, taking up the entire frame, its dominance indicates its importance to the meaning of the image.

Ideas are also conveyed to an audience through **balance**, **proportion**, **pattern**, and **contrast**. While each of these terms has its own definition, they often cross-reference each other. For example, a balanced image gives the viewer a sense of harmony because of the pleasing repetition of shapes or forms in the image. The weight or dominance of these repeated elements unifies the image. Balance may be **symmetrical** (one side repeats the elements of the other side), **asymmetrical** (each side contains different elements, but uses the same weight), or **radial** (using a circle as a design template). Many artists use reflections in water or mirrors to create patterns and symmetry, arranging the parts along a dividing line. If something is balanced, it is also usually proportionate, meaning that the size of the elements and the quantity of the elements are measured according to the standards of perspective and customs of representing physical objects and space in the world.

Balanced images often make use of pattern—repeated images, shapes, colors, or lines—to create a meaning. At the same time, many images convey meaning by using contrast. A good example of contrast in an image is the placing of something old next to something new. Contrast also occurs when colors are altered or when light and dark intersect for effect.

Step Four: Identify Symbolic Elements

In an influential book called *A Primer of Visual Literacy*, author Donis Dondis proposes that visual information is processed on three levels: **representational**, **abstract**, and **symbolic**. Representational information is recognizable as something found in the environment (we sometimes call this “realism”). Abstract information is reduced to elemental components such as geometry, line, and color. Symbolic information takes the form of conventional systems of communication in which humans have constructed signs and attached meaning to them. The alphabet and the number systems we use employ symbols. The curved symbol for the numeral 2, for example, does not replicate something found in nature, but expresses a concept about groups of things such as sheep, candles, or people.

Key Point

Images may be representational, abstract, or symbolic.

As Dondis writes, symbols require “ultimate simplicity, the reduction of visual detail to the irreducible minimum.” Symbols need to be immediately understood, remembered, and replicated. The use of symbols to represent ideas is called **iconography**, from *eikon*, meaning “symbol,” and *graph*, meaning “writing.” Historically, many societies in Europe, South America, North America, Australia, and Asia used icons to represent transactions and record history. Cave paintings of buffalo and horses used symbols to communicate messages about hunting grounds or to celebrate animal gods.

In modern society, traffic signs and restroom signs perform the same function of communication, either aiding the reader or providing a warning. Corporations and organizations use icons to advertise their products or announce their services. Perhaps the most famous icon of the American road is the twin golden arches of McDonald’s. Icons that individuals and groups come to use are often highly abstract and frequently depend on cultural contexts to be fully understood. For this reason, certain icons and images that were created in other countries or in earlier decades can be unintelligible to modern American viewers.

Secret societies or sects such as the Freemasons, Jewish Kabbalists (who perceive the divine name of God in Hebrew letterforms), and modern graffiti artists also use icons. In their survey of icons and symbols, Rosemary Sassoon and Albertine Gaur suggest six possible uses for icons in contemporary society:

1. To make a mark on the world, as in a signature
2. To communicate when alphabetic or numeric systems fail
3. To converse with those who do not understand our language
4. To initiate a story
5. To project our image (here understood as an idea about the self) onto others
6. To offer information that needs to be quickly understood

Discuss

Bring in examples of modern product or corporate icons to share with the class. Do you see a relationship between the shape of the icon and the concept it is meant to represent?

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a complex visual language of symbols was used by painters and book illustrators (who were called **illuminators**). This language is called “iconography,” or writing (*graph*) with symbols (*icons*). Today, some of the same meanings of the symbols are likely to survive; for example, the circle maintains a symbolic meaning in Western society as an image of unity. However, our contemporary icons are more likely commercial shorthand, such as the Nike swoosh.

When we discuss the symbolic content of images, though, we are not just dealing with iconography, but with a complex psychological system of meaning. One of the reasons that images are used so prevalently in American society is that they carry intellectual and emotional content. A photograph used in an advertisement is not merely a display of the product, but often is an argument about how we should live our lives. Similarly, a snapshot of a vacation in a family album is not merely an image of the beach or a mountain camp, but a memory of a pleasant past time. We can say, then, that while images are composed of literal elements, they also have a symbolic quality that constructs their meaning.

Taking the idea of symbolism a step further, certain images consciously employ recognizable symbols that add to their meaning. Before we begin hunting down all the potential symbols in an image, however, we need to ask whether the creator left clues that this work was to be taken symbolically. Some clues may be the subject (a religious work is certainly symbolic) or the title (a university logo that shows a tree can be taken symbolically to mean that it represents the tree of knowledge). Principles of design such as dominance or elements such as color also suggest that the work has a symbolic content.

Although there are many more possible symbols and meanings than those listed here, this short list of common symbols and the ideas that they represent should help you begin to think about the meanings applied to ordinary objects:

Freewrite

Alone or with the class, brainstorm on the ways that the following advertising subjects attempt to persuade us of particular societal values: alcohol, cars, cleaning products.

Book	Knowledge, wisdom
Circle	Totality, wholeness, seasonal cycles
Cross	Christian symbol of redemption; also, the tree of life
Dog	Loyalty, vigilance
Keys	Keys to heaven in Christianity; liberation or confinement
Moon	Femininity, the unconscious, the phases of life
Skull	The mutability of life, but also the indestructibility of life
Sun	Power, universality
Tree	Life, knowledge

In addition, the use or dominance of particular colors has symbolic meaning. Red can mean passion or anger. Yellow often connotes joy and optimism. Blue, commonly used in flags, frequently means loyalty. Green, the color of spring leaves and grasses, denotes renewal and fertility. Black is the color of death, mourning, and mystery.

Often, though, color is used in ways that are less symbolic. Colors may underscore the setting, season, or personality of the subject of the image. A man or woman seated in a subtly decorated, elegant restaurant wearing a large purple-feathered boa around an orange sweater may indicate the displacement of this guest in this location. While the color choice is startling, it is less of a symbol for royalty (purple) or enthusiasm (orange) than a comment on identity, personal style, and contextual expectations.

Links

Search the following websites for images:

Washington Crossing the Delaware: the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

www.metmuseum.org

Mona Lisa and *The Last Supper*: WebMuseum:

www.ibiblio.org/wm/

Pieta, The Artchive: Artchive.com

"I want you for the US Army," The Library of Congress Online Exhibitions pages:

www.loc.gov/exhibits/

Finally, images can also be symbolic when they allude to other works: Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851); Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (circa 1503) and *The Last Supper* (1498); Michaelangelo's *Pieta* (1499), and James Montgomery Flagg's World War I recruiting poster of Uncle Sam ("I want you for the US Army," 1917) are all images that have been borrowed or parodied. This process is called **intertextuality** or **transtextuality**. These terms refer to the ways that images refer to each other and in so doing, cause viewers to rethink the meaning of the original as well as the imitation.

Step Five: Distinguish Absences

Images are so prevalent and persuasive that, even after identifying all the literal and symbolic elements of them, we may still not be aware that they contain significant **absences**. The theory of analyzing absence is called **deconstruction**. Deconstruction emerged as a critical force in the late 1960s from the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida asserted that when we read, we understand what is being told to us by setting those words and ideas against their opposites. A well-known example is that we understand the meaning of *man* in part because *man* is *not woman*. But deconstruction asks readers to press this point and ask, in effect, "Why not *woman*?" Does the absence of *woman* reveal a bias on the part of the creator? Is the author attempting to manipulate us by showing us *man* and not *woman*?

This theory of reading for absence has been called "reading against the grain." All texts, visual and verbal, have **manifest content**, that which is immediately evident and shows us what the creators wanted us to see. When we read against the grain, we read for **latent content**, that which reveals the prejudices or biases of the creators or demonstrates unconscious misgivings about the subjects. In the arts and humanities, it has been used to investigate the stories and cultural contributions of African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and members of the working class; in literature, to open up the range of works studied in

Key Point

Read against the grain to examine what is absent from an image. What don't you see and why?

the literary canon; and in media studies, to ensure equal representation on television news and entertainment programming.

What don't we see and why? What is at the margins of the picture and why? A good example of how we might use this line of inquiry to deconstruct images is to interrogate tourist brochures and vacation photography. Opening the travel

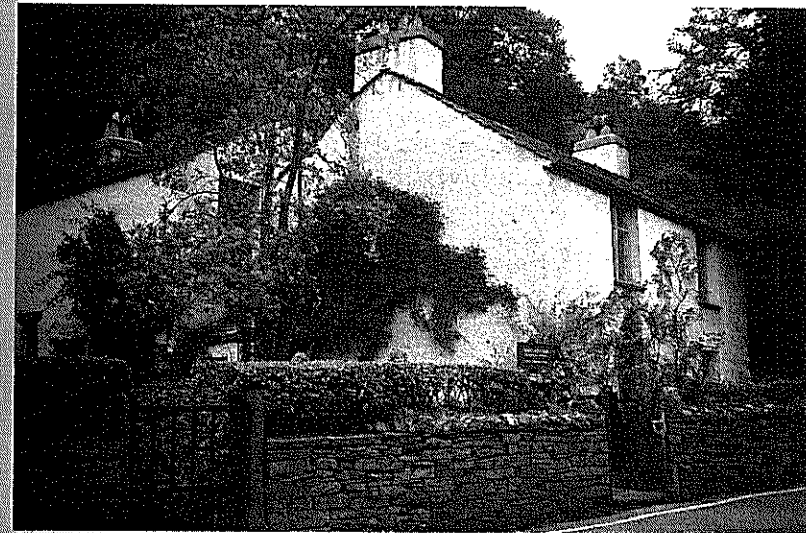
section of the newspaper, you will find many ads for sunny vacation spots in the Caribbean. The residents of the Caribbean Islands, including the Bahamas, Jamaica, Cuba, Aruba, and Puerto Rico, are a diverse group of people who trace their ancestry to Africa, France, and Spain. As residents of the Islands, however, they are rarely shown in advertisements, unless it is to emphasize how ready they are to serve the typically white, fit, and middle-class visitor. Because the people in print advertisements for cruise lines and special airline packages are meant to represent the American consumer, who envisions himself or herself in the scene, the advertisements generally emphasize the activities of nonresidents, the visitors who use the islands for pleasure. These visitors take advantage of the sun, the water, the beach, and the services provided by the residents. The young visiting couples (who are constructed visually without children present and as heterosexual couples) enjoy leisure activities such as lounging on a pure white sand beach or preparing to snorkel (they are rarely in the midst of physical activity). Their adventure into the Caribbean is an escape from the cooler weather, urban sprawl, and workaday cares of their American city.

Arguably, these images are meant to portray and purvey a fantasy and should not be examined as documentary evidence about life in the Caribbean. However, in order for the young, white, middle-class, heterosexual couple to enjoy their quick trip to the exotic and sunny south, they must depend on the work of the local residents, who cook the meals in the hotels, clean the hotel rooms and pools and wash the dishes, and make sure that the hotels are supplied with water and electricity. That the workers are often Afro-Caribbean is also significant. The manifest

Discuss

Go to a travel office for brochures, look at the travel section of the newspaper, or purchase a glossy travel magazine such as *Travel & Leisure*. Examine the images for the social class, ethnicity, and gender of the people represented. What activities are the tourists engaged in?

content of the advertisements privileges white, middle-class experience. The latent content of the image tells us that people of African descent are not privileged to take part in leisure activities either as workers, residents, or consumers.



Our own photography reveals certain biases toward leaving things out as well. This image of a picturesque cottage in northern England, for example, conforms to various standards of tourist photography: there are no people to intrude upon the scene (which might “date” the scene or destroy its visual purity) and the subject of the photograph is something *historic* (rather than the Burger King on High Street). The cottage is in fact Dove Cottage, the home of the nineteenth-century English poet William Wordsworth, and it is thus already marked as a “significant” sight for the tourist. What is missing from this image is any acknowledgment that this building represented the lived experience of inhabitants. The picture is abstract, representing American ideas about England and Englishness. The photo confirms our notions of what a “typical” English cottage should look like and that we were able to witness this traditional scene. Still influencing our tastes today, the guidelines set forward for picturesque imagery in the eighteenth century often stressed the degree

to which writers and painters should include rustic elements such as cottages, gates, bending trees, and ruins. For example, to the picturesque artist, a cottage was often a better choice than a mansion. Over a century ago, British novelist George Eliot, writing in her socially conscious novel *Middlemarch* (1871), critiqued her countrymen for their failure to recognize poverty and deprivation in the midst of picturesque ruin:

It is true that an observer, under that softening influence of the fine arts which makes other people's hardships picturesque, might have been delighted with this homestead called Freeman's End: the old house had dormer-windows in the dark-red roof, two of the chimneys were choked with ivy, the large porch was blocked up with bundles of sticks, and half the windows were closed with grey-worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance; the mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it was a perfect study of highly-minded subdued colour, and there was an aged goat (kept doubtless on interesting superstitious grounds) lying against the open back-kitchen door. The mossy thatch of the cowshed, the broken grey barn-doors, the pauper labourers in ragged breeches who had nearly finished unloading a wagon of corn into the barn ready for early thrashing; the scanty dairy of cows being tethered for milking and leaving one half of the shed in brown emptiness; the very pigs and white ducks seeming to wander about the uneven neglected yard as if in low spirits from feeding on a too meager quality of rinsing—all these objects under the quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds would have made a sort of picture which we have all paused over as a "charming bit," touching other sensibilities than those which are stirred by the depression of the agricultural interest, with the sad lack of farming capital, as seen constantly in the newspapers of that time.

Eliot demonstrates her awareness of the conventions of the picturesque while critiquing the consequences of erasing the knowledge of actual hardship. Thus, when reading images, we must consistently remind ourselves to read against the grain, to pursue the meanings latent in the content of the image, to speak of what is not visible.

Step Six: Examine the Self as a Viewer of Images

One reason that we find ourselves looking at particular kinds of pictures is personal preference. Preferences are not natural (we are not born with

particular dispositions toward, say, French Impressionist paintings of the late nineteenth century), but are learned. Our knowledge and biases are socially constructed from a host of influences: parents, teachers, friends, and the media. Too often, though, we become accustomed to tacitly acknowledging received notions of beauty. Imagine saying a sunset is ugly or that you hate bouquets of roses!

It is difficult to work against the grain and challenge ourselves to see things differently, because so many aspects of visual understanding in our society rely on the same codes: balance, symmetry, conventions of beauty, even moral codes about what is proper to display in public. Without realizing it, we approach each visual or verbal event with what literary critic Hans Robert Jauss termed a "horizon of expectations," a mental construct of what is possible or desirable for particular situations. And most of looking closely is not changing our behavior but learning to understand our own behavior better.

One of the clearest examples of how we approach images with inherent biases is that of abstract art, such as the works of Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko. Pollock's canvases are wild, colorful, paint-spattered abstractions, while Rothko's works are elemental and planar. The work of these painters often appears to viewers to be overly simple. Many viewers say, "I could do that." What conditions some viewers to refuse to designate these works "art"? This is the question that must be investigated, in addition to the study of the work's conception, execution, and history.

Therefore, before you move on to the stage of interpreting an image, take a careful inventory of your own biases, preferences, and knowledge. Compare the self-inventory with the subject, the literal elements, and the design principles of the image. Perhaps you will notice a disjuncture or confirmation between the elements that helps explain why the image has prompted a reaction in you that is startling or pleasing.

Step Seven: Consider the Image's Effect on the Viewer

Not altogether separate from our self-inventory is the consideration of how the literal elements of the image affect us. While creators of images employ color, shape, line, and texture to communicate certain meanings, readers interpret those meanings based on their cultural position

and personal experiences. We call this **affect**. Affect theory describes the psychology of emotions that are prompted by images or words. Our memories of similar images combine with the present image in order for an image to have an effect on our emotional state (in other words, in order for us to be angered or interested). Thus, affect is not purely immediate, but involves a history and pattern of response.

For example, conventional wisdom tells us that red roses are beautiful. We might recite the lines from Robert Burns's poem, "My love is like a red, red rose." Yet, Jemima Shore, a sleuth in Antonia Frazer's series of murder mysteries, abhors red flowers of all kinds because they remind her too greatly of blood. She draws from her memory of unpleasant events to interpret the flowers and their color. The effect upon her of a gift of red flowers is disgust rather than pleasure. Contemporary film director M. Night Shyamalan played on the association of the color red with blood and violence to create an element of fear in his thriller *The Village* (2004). Residents of the village are not allowed to wear red, hold red flowers, or use red to decorate their homes. By the rules of the village, it is "the forbidden color."

Freewrite

Quickly write down your own "history of emotions" with any of these concepts and images:

Flag
Flower
Dog
Cat
Sunset
Picnic
Dance

Step Eight: Research the Image

Depending on the scope of your project, you may want to engage in research on your topic. In your research, you will consult books, journals, and websites. Because images appear in many contexts, your work may involve investigating business journals for articles on corporate image and advertising, researching art history books for biographical information on particular artists or schools of painting, consulting theater journals for articles on set design, or browsing online dictionaries for terms used in design. You may even consult interviews with the creator of

the image to discover what he or she intended. Biographies also provide insight into the thought processes of the imagemakers.

As you conduct your research, you will want to ask questions about the purpose of the information in the source material. Does the author intend to provide historical data to help readers better understand the social and material conditions under which a particular work of art came into being? Does the author intend to provide background data on a photographer's life? Is there a theoretical perspective that is strongly evident in the work, such as feminism and psychoanalysis? Is the piece offering a value judgment on whether an image is good or bad?

Depending on the purpose of the piece, the author may be creating **scholarship**, **critique**, or **theoretical criticism**. Each type of critical perspective begins, as you did, with a careful inventory of the evidence from the image itself; however, each will have a different result. The scholars will work from documents to position the image in its cultural, historical, and biographical milieu. The critics will offer a personal point of view that derives from their judgments as connoisseurs of many images. The theorists will use particular images to advance ideas about society, such as whether women are too often portrayed as the subjects of men's gazes. Each point of view is valuable for its contribution to knowledge about images; however, the perspectives are not interchangeable.

Step Nine: Prepare an Interpretation

After conducting an inventory of the image and gathering your facts, you will be able to make an informed interpretation of the image. Interpretation offers a thesis about the meaning of the image, but also

Links

Consult your library's print or online holdings for the following indexes:

Art Full Text. Refereed and popular articles on folk art, graphic arts, and art history.

Grove Dictionary of Art. Encyclopedia entries on artistic periods, movements, and individual artists.

Oxford Reference Online. Encyclopedia articles from several sources.

can make an argument about the value of the image. Art critics generally emphasize the latter, making a judgment about whether a picture is worth study: Is the subject a good one? Is the technique well executed? Has the creator of the image been overlooked by generations of scholars and critics? Has the image been overvalued or undervalued? Art historians often use critical theory to frame their perspectives, drawing from social history, biography, psychoanalysis, and gender theories. Each of these theories of interpretation is complex and nuanced, the sum of numerous practitioners who developed and refined certain theories. A short list of the types of theories you may encounter in your secondary research appears below. You may also feel comfortable writing from within one of these perspectives yourself, as you conduct your analysis.

Criticism falls into two categories: **applied** and **theoretical**. Applied criticism is an interpretation that one writer (usually an art critic, historian, or teacher) has created about an image. The goal of applied criticism is to use biographical, historical, and theoretical works to illuminate an image. Theoretical criticism works with a particular school of interpretation, an idea from a prominent philosopher or critical theorist, or a critical term (such as intertextuality). The goal of theoretical criticism is to use an image or series of images to illuminate a problem, idea, or critical term. Although there are many different types of theoretical criticism, certain dominant approaches are evident in critical work today. A brief overview of these approaches includes the following six modes of interpretation. Consult the bibliography at the end of this book to pursue your own inquiry into the complexities and nuances of these schools of thought.

Structuralism Structuralist critics tend to emphasize the binary differences that exist between signs. These oppositions, such as light/dark, sun/moon, and man/woman, demonstrate how the privileged term (usually *light, sun, man*) depends upon the marginalized term to create a synthesis, a whole, a unified meaning.

Deconstruction While deconstruction and post-structuralism are not synonyms, they are part of the same critical impulse to read the ruptures and imbalances in the text (rather than the structuralist balance, pattern, and design). Post-structuralists acknowledge binary

opposition, but interrogate and break the binary to demonstrate that one term is always privileged and another marginalized.

Feminism, Gender, and Queer Theories Gender critics argue that notions of gender (what is “male” and “female”) are constructed by social conditions such as education, religious dogma, and media representations. While we are born with a biologically defined anatomy, we learn what it means to be “feminine” or “masculine.” Assertions that there is a basic nature that is embedded in men and women are essentialist, reducing identity to an irreversible set of characteristics. Critics thus examine the images, language, and societal assumptions (**ideology**) that construct identity.

Psychoanalysis There are two schools of psychoanalytic theory: Freudian and Lacanian. Popular culture has disseminated the key ideas of Freud such as the tripartite division of the self into ego, superego, and id; dream analysis; the uncanny; penis envy; and the Oedipus Complex. Freudian psychoanalysis is generally used to examine the neuroses of the author or creator, rather than to examine the workings of the text. Freudian critics examine the manifest and latent content of the works, the *manifest* being the working of the conscious mind and the *latent* being the intrusions of the unconscious.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is a psychology of reading that draws on the influences of deconstruction. Lacan developed his own language for reading texts, and many of his concepts apply to reading images, such as a theory of “the Other,” which may be useful when considering images of human subjects. Like Freudians, Lacanian critics sense that the text is always suspended in a network of unconscious desires.

Marxism Marxist criticism is actually the product of mid-twentieth-century thinkers who drew on the works of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, rather than a school of literary criticism that employs their writings as central texts. Marxist literary criticism is overtly political in nature. Texts and images are interpreted according to themes such as the class struggle. The social class of the author may also be considered in producing a Marxist analysis, since the access to class privilege (money, education, travel) may be unconsciously conveyed in the text.

Cultural Studies, New Historicism, and Cultural Poetics One of the most prevalent modes of analysis, yet perhaps the most difficult to understand, is cultural criticism, which has emerged as a dominant force in literary, artistic, and historical criticism in the last half-century. Those who claim to be cultural critics work in an interdisciplinary field that may include literature, popular fiction, television, film, historical narrative, travel literature, art, and popular, classical, and folk music. Drawing from Marxism, the cultural critic examines the everyday aspects of cultural production (rather than the highly artistic products of the elite). Cultural critics look at the cultural context of a work drawn from popular or everyday culture. The choice of work may be a previously artistic text that has been televised or adapted to film, such as an adaptation of *Dracula*, or it may be authentically popular, such as a soap opera.

Re-Vision

In Chapter One, you were introduced to Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*. Using this painting as your subject image, you examined how scholars developed a method for examining the meaning of the image. You then were able to study the way that the image created a visual argument.

Use the image by Leutze for this RE-VISION assignment in which you write your own analysis of the painting.

This time through, develop your sense of visual discrimination, your ability to identify key elements of meaning. Beginning with the PREWRITING QUESTIONS, engage in a process of formal analysis, investigating the form and structure of the images. Examine the way that the artist uses **literal elements** of the image (**Elements of Design**) and **arrangement** (**Principles of Design**) of the individual elements of the image. Finally, after you have completed your analysis, reflect on what is gained or lost by focusing exclusively on the elements and principles of design rather than on the argument of the image.

PREWRITING QUESTIONS

- **Color and Value.** Is the original image in black and white? Is the image rich in many different colors? Are the colors predominantly

warm, cool, or a combination of warm and cool tones? If the image is black and white, to what extent does it develop contrasts between light and dark areas (value)?

- **Meaning.** Does the use of color or value contribute to the meaning of the objects in the image? Consider other color possibilities for the image; would different colors change the meaning?
- **Line and Shape.** Trace the contour of the objects in the image. Are the lines curved or straight? Are there strong horizontal, vertical, or diagonal lines? Does the image feature persistent geometric shapes such as circles or squares?
- **Texture.** Does the image make use of any simulated textures such as bricks, bark, or satin fabric? How is your response affected by the representation of the surface area or background?
- **Space.** What is the relationship of one object to the whole of the image? Is the object surrounded by white space? Are objects closely spaced or far apart?
- **Perspective.** Does your image have a sense of depth? What do you see in the foreground of the image? What is in the background? Do any of the objects in the image angle from foreground to background in order to draw attention to the horizon line or a vanishing point?
- **Vantage Point.** Where are you situated as a viewer? Do you look down on the object? Do you have the illusion that you are looking up at it?
- **Dominance.** Which objects in the image are emphasized as the most important? Do they announce their importance by their color, shape, texture, or other means?
- **Balance and proportion.** In what ways are the objects arranged? Are larger objects placed in the foreground of the image, in keeping with objective proportions? Does an implied dividing line create mirrored halves of the image? Do elements of color, line, texture, or shape repeat themselves from one side of the image to the other?
- **Pattern.** Are elements of the image (such as objects, textures, or gestures) repeated to form a pattern?

- **Contrast.** Are colors, light, and shadows used to present a comparison of objects within the image? What meaning is suggested by the dissimilarity?

In Focus: Images and Analysis

For this **IN FOCUS** writing and visual display essay assignment, search for images that can be used as examples of strong Elements of Design and Principles of Design. You will compose a written analysis of your own images. For example, look for advertisements, book covers, posters, billboards, a photo from a family album, or another type of printed, visual image that you can bring to the classroom and share with others. Begin your analysis with the **PREWRITING QUESTIONS** above.

You may want to go beyond the analysis of individual elements in the images to work with some of the other key concepts in this chapter. For example, you could study the symbolism of a posed, professional wedding photograph, the formal senior-year photograph in your high school yearbook, or your university's promotional materials. Next, you may choose to read against the grain and identify absences and overt biases in representation. For example, you might choose to write from a feminist position about the photography in wedding magazines.

On Display: Icons

The image on display for your analysis (opposite page) contains at least three overt symbols: the yellow traffic symbol for caution, the cow, and the UFO. Using Sassoon and Gaur's rubric for analyzing icons and symbols, create a written analysis of this image. What part of the sign makes "a mark on the world," as in a signature? What do the various symbols communicate visually? Do any aspects of the sign initiate a story? Does the sign project any kind of self-image onto the world? Does the sign offer information that needs to be quickly understood? The photograph is of a sign along Route 66 in Arizona, itself an iconic stretch of road. Does this knowledge of the context in which the image appears affect your analysis? The four circular dots along the lower right of the traffic sign are bullet holes; are they also symbolic?

