

see the overall composition of the image, identify its prominent element, and determine its focal point.

VISUAL ANALYSIS CHECKLIST

Seeing the Big Picture

- What is the source of the image? What is its purpose and audience?
- What prominent element in the image immediately attracts your attention? How and why does it draw you into the image?
- What is the focal point of the image? How does the image direct your attention to this point? What path does your eye follow as you observe the image?

Learning by Doing Seeing the Big Picture

Working with a classmate or a small group, select another image in this book such as one that opens a chapter in Part Two: A Writer's Situations or A Writer's Reader. Consider the image's purpose and audience (in its original context or in this book), but concentrate on its prominent element, which draws the viewer's eye, and its focal point, which suggests the center of its action or moment. Share analyses in a class discussion, or explain yours to another group in a brief oral report or an online posting.

Level Two: Observing the Characteristics of an Image

As you read a written text literally, you become aware of what it presents, what it means, and how it applies in other situations. Similarly, your close reading of an image includes observing its *denotative* or literal characteristics. At this stage, you focus on exactly what the image depicts — observing it objectively — rather than probing what it means or signifies.

Cast of Characters

Objects. Examine the condition, colors, sizes, functions, and positions of the objects included in the image. In Figure 14.2, for example, only one object is depicted in the image: a large magazine. Everything else in the image is either a figure or part of the background.

Figures. Look closely at any figures (people, animals) in the image. Consider facial expressions, poses, hairstyles and colors, ages, sexes, ethnicity, possible education or occupation, apparent relationships, and so on.



Figure 14.8 Stairway.
Source: Design for Communication: Conceptual Graphic Design Basics



Figure 14.9 Type as Cultural Cliché.
Source: Publication Design

VISUAL ANALYSIS CHECKLIST

Observing the Characteristics of an Image

- What objects are included in the image?
- What figures (people or animals) appear in the image?
- What action takes place in the image? What is its “plot” or story?
- What is in the background? In what place does the action take place?
- What elements, colors, and shapes contribute to the design? How are they arranged or balanced? What feeling, memory, or association does the design evoke?
- How are the pictorial elements related to one another? How are they related to any written material? What do these relationships tell you as a viewer?
- How does the image use space? Does it include a lot of white space, or does it seem cluttered and busy?
- What composition decisions has the designer or artist made? What type of shot, shot angle, lighting, or color is used?
- What is the function of the image? How does form support function?
- What typefaces are used? What impressions do they convey?

example, when you first glance at the image in Figure 14.14, it appears to illustrate a recipe for a tasty margarita. However, the list of ingredients suggests a tale of too many drinks and a drunk-driving accident after running a red light. Instead of promoting an alcoholic beverage or promising relaxing fun, this public-service announcement challenges the assumption that risky behavior won't carry consequences. Its text counters its suggestive image and reminds viewers of its theme—that well-being comes not from alcohol-fueled confidence but from responsible choices.

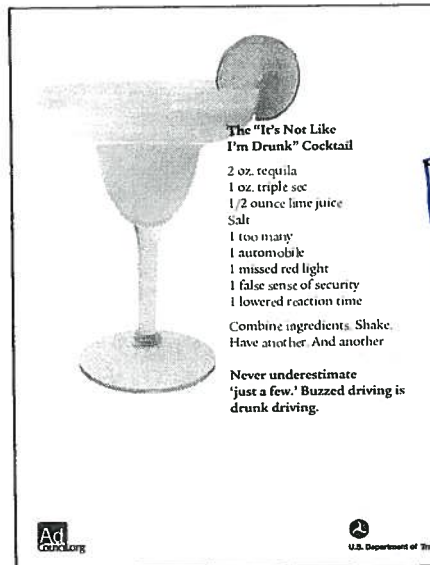


Figure 14.14 Poster Conveying a Theme.
Source: U.S. Department of Transportation/Ad Council

VISUAL ANALYSIS CHECKLIST

Interpreting the Meaning of an Image

- What general feeling do you get from looking at the image? What mood does it create? How does it create this mood?
- What sociological, political, economic, or cultural attitudes are reflected?
- What language is included in the image? How does the language function?
- What signs and symbols can you identify? What role do these play?
- What theme or themes can you identify in the image?

Learning by Doing Interpreting Meaning

Working with a classmate or small group, continue analyzing the image you selected for the activity on page 289. Examine one of its major characteristics—such as feeling or mood, attitude, language, signs or symbols, or theme—to interpret what the image might mean. Share your conclusions with your class or another group in a brief oral report or an online posting.

Learning from Another Writer: Visual Analysis

Because visual images surround us in print, on television, in theaters, and on the Web, you may be asked in many courses to respond to them and to analyze them, concentrating on persuasive, cultural, historical, sociological, or other qualities. Rachel Steinhaus analyzed a television commercial to investigate how advertisements persuade us to buy.

Rachel Steinhaus**Student Analysis of an Advertisement****"Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit"**

The television commercial for the 2008 Cadillac CTS, featuring the star Kate Walsh, epitomizes a car advertisement that focuses not on the vehicle itself, but on the ideas that the company wants to associate with its product. Rather than focusing on the power and features of the car, the commercial emphasizes the ideas of sex, social status, freedom, and Americanism, wrapping the car in a shroud of social contradictions and ideals. Viewers are enticed to see the car as more than a means of transportation. This other image of the car as a sexual object is what resonates most clearly with viewers as it illustrates how the ad manipulates their emotions and ideas in order to sell the product.

This commercial begins with the word *Cadillac* scrawled across a view of a city with the lights creating long stretches across the screen, as though the viewer is in a car traveling quickly down the street. This effect, the illusion of fast motion, is maintained throughout the commercial. Kate Walsh, star of the television shows *Private Practice* and *Grey's Anatomy*, then lists a number of the car's optional features, from a pop-up navigation system to sunroofs and 40G hard drives, saying that those opportunities are not what are important "in today's luxury game" (Cadillac). The ad continues to show different aspects of the car as Kate Walsh reveals what she presumably believes is the most important quality in a car: "When you turn your car on, does it return the favor?" (Cadillac). A few more images show the sleek car driving through the city and a tunnel, and then the name of the car, the phrase "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit," and the Cadillac logo appear on the screen sequentially.

The most prominent aspect of this ad is its focus on the automobile as a sex symbol, which is most blatantly expressed by the line in the commercial, "When you turn it on, does it return the favor?" (Cadillac). This colloquial phrase clearly sends the message that cars that are not sexy are inferior to the 2008 CTS. The phrase also personifies the vehicle itself, giving it the capability to turn someone on, which is generally a human action. This use of personification fits with the idea presented in "The New Citroen," where Barthes describes the automobile as "humanized art" (89). The car may be a product with a particular function, but it is designed to look appealing while also having human qualities that allow people to be more emotionally attached to their car than the average product.

Kate Walsh reinforces the sexual ideas connected to the car in this commercial. Her attire, a dress and heels, is clearly chosen to provide sex appeal. The camera shots, angled to show her looking over the steering wheel as she delivers the end of the line and to show her foot as she hits the accelerator in her strappy heels, objectify her as a source of sex appeal (Garfield). Her celebrity status also influences the viewer's idea of what it would mean to own the car. Although the car's available features are casually listed, making Cadillac appear modest about its technology

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and luxury embellishments, Kate Walsh places the focus on the prospective owner's status. Simply attaching the name of a celebrity to a car is enough to raise interest for some viewers as they imagine themselves owning something that a rich and successful star also enjoys. The combination of Walsh's stardom and her sex appeal becomes the main focus of this advertisement.

In addition to these strong sexual and status connotations, the commercial emphasizes the idea that this car is a solid American product. The tagline at the end of the commercial, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit" (Cadillac) is a reference to the well-known line of the Declaration of Independence, automatically connecting the Cadillac CTS to patriotism. Even without finishing the phrase, this added plug connects supporting one's country to buying an American-made Cadillac 2008 CTS. The ad assumes that the typical American viewer will automatically insert the words "of happiness" to complete the phrase and also connect buying a CTS with furthering their own "pursuit of happiness." The context of the phrase within the Declaration of Independence is also important because it describes our inalienable rights, therefore connecting the thought that buying this car is the right of an American.

The open-ended phrase, however, also lends itself to interpretation as a literal statement, alluding to the idea that the Cadillac CTS will give one the freedom to pursue whatever one wishes. In a physical sense, the driver can use the CTS horsepower to pursue other, "lesser" cars. On the other hand, the emotional message is that the driver can pursue different dreams and lifestyles because of the reputation and self-image that the CTS affords. This second interpretation relates well to the celebrity power that Kate Walsh brings to the ad.

The freedom to follow one's dreams goes hand in hand with the freedom of the road that this advertisement conveys. As Walsh goes speeding down a tunnel, nothing inhibits her progress. However, Böhm and the other authors of "Impossibilities of Automobility" see things in a much more realistic light. Both the congestion created by the infrastructure required to support automobiles and our reliance on cars make driving far from pleasurable, according to the article. Driving is often marked by frustration and danger, rather than absolute freedom. Cadillac's commercial, however, ignores these facts, instead showing off speed by the blurred lights as the car flies by and giving Kate Walsh the freedom to go wherever she wishes.

Cadillac's commercial promotes the 2008 CTS without much focus on the car's actual features. Instead, the ad uses appeals to sex, celebrity, freedom, and Americanism. Cadillac is proud to attach its name to a car that could mean so much to the life of the viewer, and the Cadillac logo appears in the commercial no less than six times. Even this constant repetition of the brand name takes away from the car itself, as its name, CTS, is mentioned only once. Despite a lack of focus on the actual vehicle, the advertiser assumes that our culture responds well to the appeals to sex, status, freedom, and patriotism that the automobile industry chooses to show in ads like this one.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The New Citroen." *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1957. New York: Hill-Farrar, 2001. 88-90. Print.
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- Cadillac. Advertisement. Web. 8 Mar. 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkEw1rsBUak>.
- Garfield, Bob. "Taking Cadillac from Stodgy to Sexy: Kate Walsh." *Advertising Age* 1 Oct. 2007. Web. 8 Mar. 2009.

Questions to Start You Thinking

Meaning

1. How does Steinhaus say that the Cadillac ad sells cars?
2. What selling points does Kate Walsh add to the commercial? What does the wording from the Declaration of Independence add?

Writing Strategies

3. Where does Steinhaus introduce her thesis and her major supporting points?
4. How does Steinhaus ensure that readers know enough about the advertisement to follow her discussion?
5. How does Steinhaus help her audience follow her paper?
6. What different kinds of support does Steinhaus draw from her sources?

Learning by Writing**The Assignment: Analyzing a Visual Representation**

Find a print or online advertisement that uses an image to promote a product, service, or nonprofit group. Study the ad carefully, using the three Visual Analysis checklists (pp. 289, 295, and 300) to help you observe the characteristics of the image and interpret its meaning. Write an essay analyzing how the ad uses its visual elements to persuade viewers to accept its message. Include a copy of the ad with your essay or supply a link to it. If your instructor approves, you may select a brochure, flyer, graphic, photo essay, work of art, campus sculpture, campus landmark, or other visual option for analysis.