



Visual Literacy for the Enhancement of Inclusive Teaching

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Abstract: As our culture becomes increasingly visually expressive and persuasive, there is a need for all of us to develop greater visual analysis skills for the enhancement of inclusive teaching, as well as an understanding of the visual culture around us. For students and faculty with little visual or art history education, this can be a daunting undertaking. The contemporary academic field of visual communication is complex, yet a promising and accessible place to begin acquiring visual analysis skills is in the realm of contemporary print advertising where images are immobile and often familiar. Students usually respond enthusiastically, pleased to interpret familiar cultural material and challenged to solve visual puzzles that lend themselves to rather easy solution. Beginning with the acquisition of elementary visual analysis skills and moving toward the more complex, instructors can present students with advertising images that still in some subtle way privilege the white blond model, despite recent gains in ethnically diverse model usage. Photographers and corporate advertisers such as Macy's or Old Navy have adjusted visual tactics to preserve traditional racial values by centering specific models, and in positioning them laterally while utilizing light, color, motion, and the model's gaze to give visual precedence to a Caucasian body. Students ultimately can become aware of the prevailing Eurocentric aesthetic that continues to rule in current clothing ads.

Visual literacy can be a mystery to students, and to faculty who specialize in traditionally non-visual material. Yet it can inform and strengthen an inclusive critique of many aspects of contemporary and past cultures. As our world becomes more visually expressive and persuasive (for example in advertising, video games, film, web site construction, travel brochures, newspaper inserts, photography, billboards, text books, corporate logos, etc.), there is a need for all of us to develop greater visual analysis skills for the enhancement of inclusive teaching as well as an understanding of the

visual culture around us.

The contemporary academic field of visual communication is complex. It addresses tools for visual analysis and wider issues such as ethics in visual media, aesthetics, visual literacy theory, reception (audience) theory, and issues of visual representation, to name a few. It addresses content as well as visual construction, and all of their implications. A volume such as *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods and Media*, edited by Smith, Moriarty, Barbatsis and Kenney (2005) presents many of the primary research areas in the

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field, and is a good place to start an education in visual media communication.

Historically, visual analysis skills, which ferret out the character and implications of visual construction in an image, have served art historians and connoisseurs for centuries. Yet many students without an introductory visual arts course are prey to “art anxiety,” a phenomenon that can undermine confidence when beginning to deconstruct visual images of any kind. Since traditional and original art is purchasable primarily by the wealthy, there is an assumption made by many that only the wealthy can intelligently and suitably interpret those images. While students often do feel more secure when analyzing contemporary print advertisements, my experience with student art anxiety compels me to trace the derivation of visual construction devices to examples in painting history so that I can diminish (in theory) the anxiety associated with any sort of visual analysis.

In 2010 we must accommodate not just still images like photographs and other flat media, along with paintings and prints, but moving images as well. In addition, James Elkins argues in his books *Visual Literacy* (2007) and *How to Use Your Eyes* (2008) that visual literacy should take into account such a wide array of images as Chinese and Japanese script, scientific diagrams, a mandala, or an Egyptian scarab. The tools and knowledge required for this breadth of analysis are daunting, yet beginning with still images in a narrow slice of print advertising is a good place to begin building skills.

Print advertising can appear as a ritualistic reconstruction of contemporary social power relations, foregrounding issues of gender, race, class, religion, among others, as well as undermine the present claim that we live in a “post-racial” society. I prompt students with a series of questions about a number of visual tools that can enhance critical viewing, beginning with the most

easy to interpret. Students usually respond enthusiastically, pleased to interpret familiar cultural material and challenged to solve visual puzzles that lend themselves to rather easy solution.

Various visual devices, at the service of artists for centuries, can situate products and clothing models in relation to current social rituals. These can be devices that organize any flat *visual field*, for example, a postage stamp, an advertisement for cigarettes, a corporate letterhead, or a painting. My focus when teaching non-art students is on the mundane and ubiquitous fashion ads in newspapers, mailers sent to homes, and in newspaper inserts, sent by corporate entities such as J. C. Penney, Macy’s, the Gap, Old Navy and Nordstrom. These are not the most innovative or popular of contemporary print advertisements, but conceivably among the most viewed by the public, and therefore of interest, at least, for their pervasiveness. These ads are by no means all shaped by ethnic stereotyping. In fact, by 2010, there is a healthy diverse mix of fashion models of varied color in advertising inserts as well as fashion magazines. Yet some advertisers still privilege a white model using a variety of visual devices, and it is those devices to which I hope to attune students. It is important, moreover, to be cognizant of the simultaneous dearth of persons with disabilities, Native Americans, Southeast Asians, East Indians, Muslims, and gays or lesbians of explicit cultural expression, among others, in 21st century corporate fashion ads.¹

CENTERING

One of the most basic visual devices for organizing a flat visual field is centering.

¹ Here I do not refer to those models in magazines such as *Vogue*, models who pretend diverse sexuality for the titillation of the viewer and the sale of clothes, but to those who express their sexuality indigenously.

While centering is a rather transparent privileging device, with students quickly perceiving its import, it is important to discuss its use so that its absence can be evaluated. Centering of a person or object on a canvas or on newsprint can connote importance as well as a set of beliefs about the visual import of a privileged zone. Symmetry has long been linked in the visual arts to a sense of harmonious or aesthetically pleasing proportionality and balance.² For example, in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* Christ is centered at the table with six disciples on either side in a display not only of a prized symmetry but a ranking of Christ as the most important figure in the scene. He is flanked by six disciples on either side and haloed by a central background window behind him. This kind of central ranking is still used today in painting, for example, in the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, Francis Bacon, or the more contemporary Kehinde Wiley. In the case of Wiley, the centering of a hip-hop styled portrait figure carries none of the religious value of the Leonardo fresco but rather a declaration of contemporary African American cultural prowess and artistic invention. This centering tradition privileges a model in clothing ads as well. For example, Benetton's "Tongues," first appearing in February 1991, and showing three children with tongues aimed at the viewer in a "naughty" and assertive gesture, self-consciously³ centers the decidedly blond child between two others with dark hair, one Asian and the other of African descent. This centering of a blond Caucasian child represents a traditional and hegemonic ordering of race hierarchy in a culture (the ad is Italian in origin) where persons of color are still marginalized.

² See, for example, the section on symmetry in Stewart, Mary. *Launching the Imagination 2: A Comprehensive Guide To Basic Design* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

³ See Henry A. Giroux, chapter 1 on The United Colors of Benetton campaign in *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (New York: London: Routledge, 1994).

Blond hair has long denoted beauty and coveted ethnicity, and here it occupies the traditional privileged zone.

ADULT VS. CHILD CENTERING

Many clothing advertisers, for example, Macy's, Nordstrom and J. C. Penney, still commission commercial images that grant a lone blond child a place of centered distinction. In a contemporary 21st century marketplace where diversity actively molds recent adult fashion ads, the practice appears more common in child-focused advertisements where a blond ideal is sometimes still at work. It may reflect a more conservative approach to ad construction in tune with white parental ideals. Asking students about those ideals can spur animated classroom discussion as to whether it might be easier for the consumer, and safer for the corporate advertiser, to idealize childhood along Caucasian lines when clothing purchases may express parental emotion tied to status, offspring expectations and dreams.

RIGHT-SIDEDNESS

Next, I guide students toward an evaluation of right-sidedness in advertising. Moving a blond model to a lateral position in a clothing ad while clustering models of diverse ethnicity can still reveal a photographer's and an advertiser's assumptions about race value, unless the example is simply a variation for visual interest on a page of multiple and varied model-staged clothing ads. As stated above, clustering of models of varying ethnicities is now commonplace in clothing ads. It can signal a commitment to equalizing rank among Caucasian and models of color or, conversely, to preserving a traditional rank while still shifting model positions away from a blond-centered ranking. Presenting a Caucasian blond model placed to the far

right of a grouping can lead to animated student discussion of design principles that assign greater visual import to the right side as opposed to the left, based on the fact that we, in this part of the world, read from left to right and will settle our eyes to the right in an image. Students quickly point out the proximity of a bright advertising legend on the right in a Macy's ad. The strong red and white field brings further attention to the blond model, as does the stand-out white-blond color of her hair. An Old Navy ad from 2008 presents a similar construction, with the long-hair blond model to the right, adjacent to a large legend running down that side. To the far left, a zone sometimes identified by designers as a "dead zone" for the infrequency of the eyes settling there, is a dark-skinned model, assigned an inferior visual status.

LUMINOSITY AND MOTION

Photographic studio lighting and clothing color can also assign a hierarchical visual status, and students can sort out this fact with ease. Since visual perception is based on the ability to interpret information and surroundings from visible light reaching the eye, it stands to reason that in most cases the human eye will draw toward higher intensities of light. Photographers can then strategically manipulate viewing by organizing those higher intensities, as did painters beginning in the Italian Renaissance. In the same Old Navy ad referred to above, as in many others, the dark-skinned model wears darker clothing while the blond model's clothes light up the right hand side in pale yellow and white, both of which manifest a large quantity of luminosity. Nordstrom mailer ads have recently moved blond or near-blond models to the left side of an ad but made them a privileged visual focus by assigning them the bright or white clothing that attracts the viewer's eye, while models of

color wear darker outfits. Advertisers employ dynamic contrasts of neutral and vivid color, light and shadow, as well as of activity and stillness to assign distinction to blond models. In ads where a blond model raises a leg, steps, jumps or gestures, focus goes easily to that activity in contrast to still poses. Motion can create diagonal alignments that diverge from the still verticals of conventional model postures, drawing our eyes to that divergence as a noteworthy visual departure. This kind of activity/still contrast appears in Nordstrom and Gap ads for children's clothes and privileges the animated figure, usually white and sometimes blond. A model of color can occupy the center or right-sided position, yet dissolve into stillness or shadow.

THE GAZE

Achieving high status in a print advertisement frequently occurs by the use of a model's direct gaze, a gaze that invites the viewer to "enter" a constructed fashion scene. This device originated in painting centuries ago where it served, and still serves, as a door to an image's meaning, its organization or erotic content. I give students examples from traditional painting to first attune them to the device, for example, Louis le Nain's 17th century *Peasant Family*, or Edouard Manet's 19th century scandalous *Luncheon on the Grass*. The first painting invites the viewer to the family's hearth and gathering, and the second to a "racy" (for the era) 'tete-a-tete" with a prostitute. Students often need some prompting to recognize this artistic strategy in painting since it occurs frequently in lateral, non-central groupings of figures. In recent advertising it is the Caucasian model, male or female, that more often makes eye contact with the viewer. Often that direct gaze is allied with a spatial position closer to the viewer, and the fact that the model's head touches the top of the photographic field

while the heads of others are a distance from the top enhances this prominence. In some ads, where a white model and one of color are paired, each may make eye contact with the viewer, equalizing model's assertiveness, yet there may be other subtle factors giving slight precedence to the white one.

THE PREVAILING EUROCENTRIC VISUAL AESTHETIC

While familiarity with some of the implied decision-making processes of graphic designers and photographers who produce ads can illuminate for students issues of race status for models of color in print advertising, discussion of the traditional Eurocentric aesthetic that has dictated conformity for a majority of those models in physical body and facial appearance, hair styles, clothing, clothing color, gestures, postures and skin color is also useful. Light-skinned, Caucasian-featured models of color predominate and can simultaneously represent two groups, African Americans and Hispanics, giving an advertiser an opportunity to signify both in the use of one model. Students recognize this aesthetic hegemony with ease when given contrasting examples of Eurocentric and Afrocentric models of color—the latter, for example, from the Ebony Fashion Fair, Africa-based clothing designers, contemporary hip-hop “bling” style, or the newly published *Gentlemen of Bacongo: The African Dandies*, by photographer, Daniele Tamagni. They can also recognize the Eurocentric aesthetic in American paintings and sculptures of African Americans in past centuries, including the work of African American painters and sculptors who were pressured to conform to Eurocentric standards in figure design until the early 20th century.

As I guide students from the familiar centering device to the more technical ef-

fects of lighting, depiction of stillness and motion, and the model's gaze, they develop greater confidence in their ability to encounter advertising critically and to recognize the prevailing aesthetic despite the rise of the cultural influence of African Americans and Hispanics, among other peoples of color in advertising culture.

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