

6

Not For Sale

Visual Analysis

Everything looked at closely is full of wonder.

Jacob Grimm, 1785–1863

PHILOSOPHER, JURIST, AUTHOR

British critic and artist John Ruskin, who died in 1900, was best known for initiating the Arts and Crafts movement that celebrated handiwork. The Bolshevik revolutionary Leon Trotsky called him “one of those rare men who think with their heart.” Ruskin once wrote, “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something. . . . To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one.” As you have learned by now, the first step in seeing clearly is to think clearly. Analysis is a way the mind not only engages with the outside world, but also internalizes its lessons and learns from them.

Critics throughout the history of literature have used many methods to analyze works created by others. For example, David Lodge, in his book *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984), lists 14 different analytical perspectives: allegorical, archetypal, biographical, Christian, ethical, existentialist, Freudian, historical, Jungian, Marxism, mythical, phenomenological, rhetorical, and structural. Although most analyses don’t require so many approaches, you must be able to use some sort of critical method to analyze pictures to fully appreciate visual communication. Any type of analysis is always a journey of personal investigation. As Lodge wrote, “Analysis reveals the person making the analysis—not really the piece itself” (Weblink 6.1).



Image analysis teaches two important lessons about the creation of memorable pictures: A producer of messages should have an understanding of the diversity of cultures within an intended audience and she should also be aware of the symbols used in images so that they are understood by members of those cultures.

Although visual analysis is vital in understanding a picture’s place within a cultural context, the concept of visual analysis is fairly new given the long

history—more than 30,000 years of visual message production. But from the dawn of modern typography—Johannes Gutenberg’s commercial printing press—the visual media were rarely employed for any purpose other than as margin drawings or as sensational, attention-getting devices to attract the nonreading public to performances. At best, images might be used as maps or medical diagrams. Consequently, those who produced pictures were often regarded with less worth than their written word counterparts. For example, newspaper photographers in the first half of the 20th century were often considered to be “reporters with their brains knocked out.” However, later in the century, critics and educators such as Rudolf Arnheim, John Berger, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and others took image production and visual communicators seriously. Consequently, visual literacy gradually developed into a serious study.

John Berger is a British critic, artist, and novelist born in 1926. For visual communicators he is best known for his landmark book on visual culture, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which was developed into a television series for the BBC (Weblink 6.2). For Berger, an image must be analyzed within its presentational context. A quick-click photograph viewed on an iPhone, a somber and respectful gallery exhibit with viewers enjoying cheese and drinks, a series of travel images on Facebook or Flickr, murals sprayed on subway trains, any photograph published in this book, a newspaper front page or magazine cover, a movie in a theater or shown on television or a computer monitor, a large advertisement on a billboard—all create unique contexts of meaning and, thus, of analysis. But as varied as the contexts are for viewing images, so too should be the varied ways in which images are analyzed (Figure 6.1).



Historian and educator David Perlmutter identifies eight ways to help understand an image:

Production (how was the image physically produced and how are elements combined within a frame),

Content identification (what are the major elements and what is the story being told),

Functional (what is the context for the image and how was it put to use),

Expressional (what emotions are conveyed by the content and how are those feelings translated across cultures),

Figurative (how are the symbols and metaphors employed and what are any culturally sensitive elements),

Rhetorical-moral (what are the philosophical justifications for making and showing the work and what are any responsibilities the producer has to the subject and viewers),

Societal or period (how does the image reflect the culture and morés of the time it was produced and what does it communicate to future generations), and

Comparative (how is the image similar to previously created works and how does it fit within the body of work of the image creator).

Not surprisingly, Perlmutter admits that such an analysis “involves a great deal of effort.”

Analytical approaches, although time-consuming, are valuable because they help you notice the smallest details that make up an image, which often leads to greater, universal truths. Meaning/perceiving should be the goal of any type of visual analysis—whether for personal, professional, or cultural reasons. The process also requires that you become familiar with the biography of an artist, the details of her culture, and her life that led to the picture’s creation. Analysis should come after a detailed viewing of the work itself and the impact, if any, the work had on the artist, other artists, the subjects, the viewers, the genre, the culture, and society. As such, an analysis of *any* image, whether still or moving, seen in print or screen media, should not be taken lightly.

As you will note in the subsequent chapters, six perspectives for analysis—personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural,

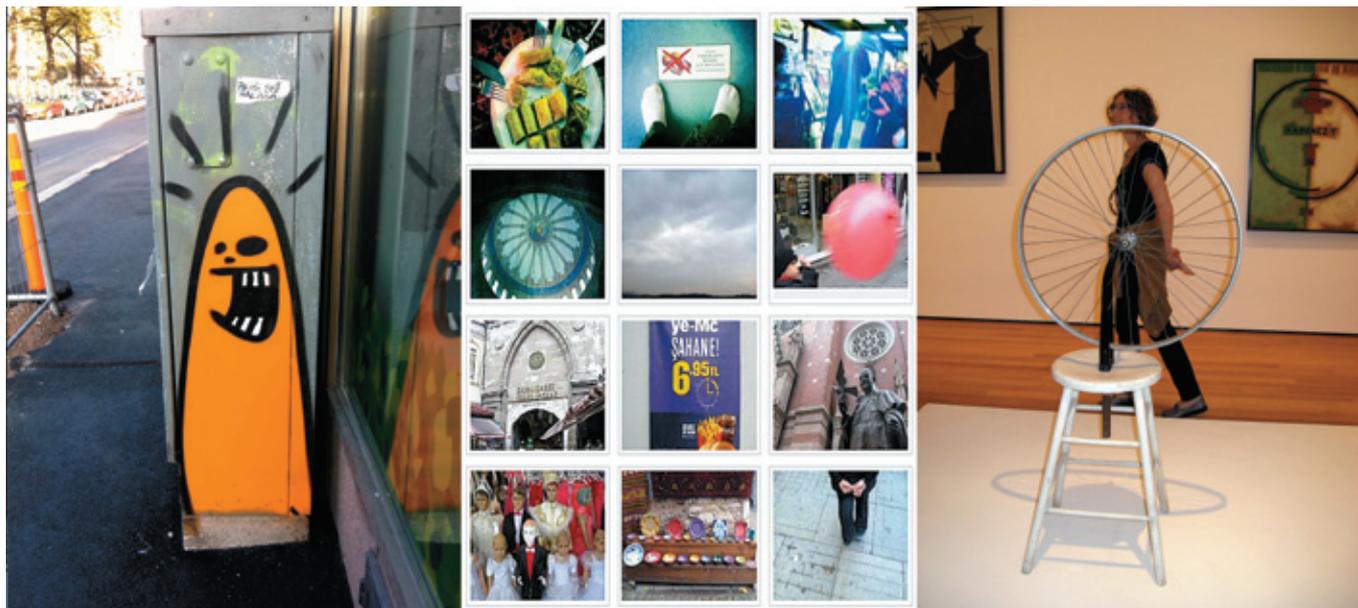


Figure 6.1

Whether images are considered graffiti seen on a street or as part of a Facebook album from a trip to Istanbul, Turkey, or are seen at an art museum, each venue requires a unique set of analytical considerations.

Not For Sale

and critical—will help explain a wide variety of presentation media, from the use of typography to the way websites present almost unlimited links. But before using any of these six analytical perspectives, there are nine preliminary steps you should take in order to prepare yourself for a thorough analysis. These nine steps include:

1. Make a detailed inventory list of all you see in a picture,
2. Note the unique compositional elements within the frame,
3. Consider how the visual cues of color, form, depth, and movement work singly and in combination to add interest and meaning,
4. Look at the image in terms of the gestalt laws of similarity, proximity, continuation, and common fate,
5. Identify any iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs,
6. Think of how the four semiotic codes of metonymy, analogy, displaced, and condensed contribute to its understanding,
7. Isolate any cognitive elements that may be a part of the image,

8. Consider the purpose the work might have, and
9. Determine whether the image is aesthetically pleasing.

A picture taken by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photographer Keith Matthews of President George W. Bush greeting children and teachers at the DeLisle Elementary School in DeLisle, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is used as an example of visual analysis. For a more in-depth analysis of this image, see *On Floods and Photo Ops: How Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush Exploited Catastrophes* by the author of this textbook and published by the University Press of Mississippi. Before you read the author's analysis shown subsequently in italic after each analytical component, study the image yourself and come up with your own interpretation. Your response may be quite different. Also, even though a photograph is used for this demonstration, the procedure described here should be used with any form of visual message (Figure 6.2).

1. **Inventory List** Make a list of all you see—animal, vegetable, and mineral—in the picture. If it helps, imagine a grid with horizontal and vertical lines superimposed upon the picture so that you actively consider every possible part of the picture.

In the photograph, President Bush is in the foreground to the left in front of children and adults configured in a receiving line. The president appears to be moving from the left to the right in front of the children. He smiles and looks at something off camera to the right. His right shoulder is toward the camera. His arms are at his sides, but appear to be moving upward to make a gesture. He slouches slightly forward with his back arched. He does not wear a hat. The top and back of his head are lit by bright sunlight. His gray hair is trimmed above his ears. He is cleanly shaved. Bush wears a blue, long-sleeved striped business shirt with vertical and horizontal dark blue lines that form a grid pattern. President Bush's shirt in the photograph has no buttons



Keith Matthews/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

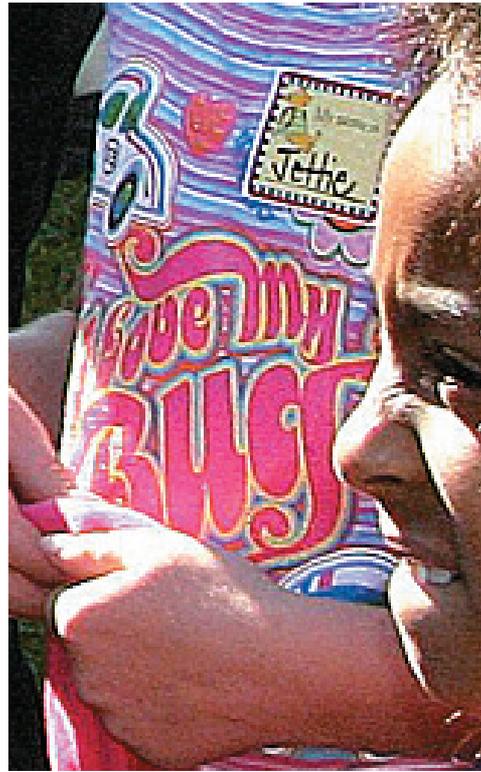
Figure 6.2

The original caption for the photograph read: "President Bush is greeted by students at DeLisle Elementary School where portable classrooms provided by the FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers have allowed students to resume some degree of normalcy in this devastated community (USACE Photo by Keith Matthews)."

on the collar. The top button of the shirt is undone. He does not wear a tie. However, his sleeves are buttoned at the wrists. His left pocket on his shirt appears empty. A white short-sleeve undershirt can be seen under the President's dress shirt. There is a glint from the sun's reflection off a plain gold wedding band on President Bush's left ring finger. He wears a black leather woven belt with leaf-like embossed patterns. A small silver five-point star is the belt's buckle.

To the president's left and configured horizontally along the photograph's plane are approximately 20 Anglo and 7 African American children. There are ten boys (seven Anglo and three African American) and 17 girls (13 Anglo and 4 African American). Sixteen of the children look directly at President Bush, three look at the photographer, and the others look elsewhere; 14 children smile, 2 students seem to laugh, and 1 child attempts to touch the president's arm. The light from the sun is reflected in some of the children's eyes, giving the illusion that an electronic flash was used in the picture. Thirteen of the children wear T-shirts of various colors. One girl at the right has on a pink, blue, and yellow horizontally striped shirt printed with the words "I Love My Bug," and an illustration of a Volkswagen car, known as the "Beetle" and nicknamed the "Bug." The girl wearing the Bug shirt also has a nametag attached that has "My name is" printed and "Jettie" handwritten on the tag (Figure 6.3).

Two other girls in the front row also wear nametags, but their names cannot be read. No other nametags can be seen on any other children. Jettie also has a slightly reddish scrape or scar visible on her cheek. Another girl in the middle of the group who smiles at the camera has a cut on her upper lip. Four of the children wear dress shirts. One boy has an unbuttoned shirt that shows a T-shirt underneath. Two of the girls wear earrings. One girl in the front row has a clip in her hair. Two African American girls wear their hair tied in the back by plastic colored balls. None of the other girls have their hair tied behind them. One tall African American girl in the center and toward the back has her hair in a cornrow style.



Keith Matthews/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Figure 6.3

Jettie's name tag and T-shirt with "I Love My Bug" can be seen in this detail.

There are approximately 12 adults standing behind the children. The women are all Anglo. Two women seem to be laughing, while the others appear to smile. Two hold inexpensive cameras. All have unassuming hairstyles. Nine of the women wear white T-shirts that include "PASS CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS" in an uppercase blue sans serif typeface. Two of the women show an identification card attached to a blue strap around their neck. Four women wear necklaces. Two of the necklaces have crucifix symbols attached. One laughing woman to the left of the president has long brown hair, a dress shirt open that shows a white "PASS CHRISTIAN" T-shirt underneath, and a dragonfly pin. Three women wear eyeglasses, and one sports sunglasses.

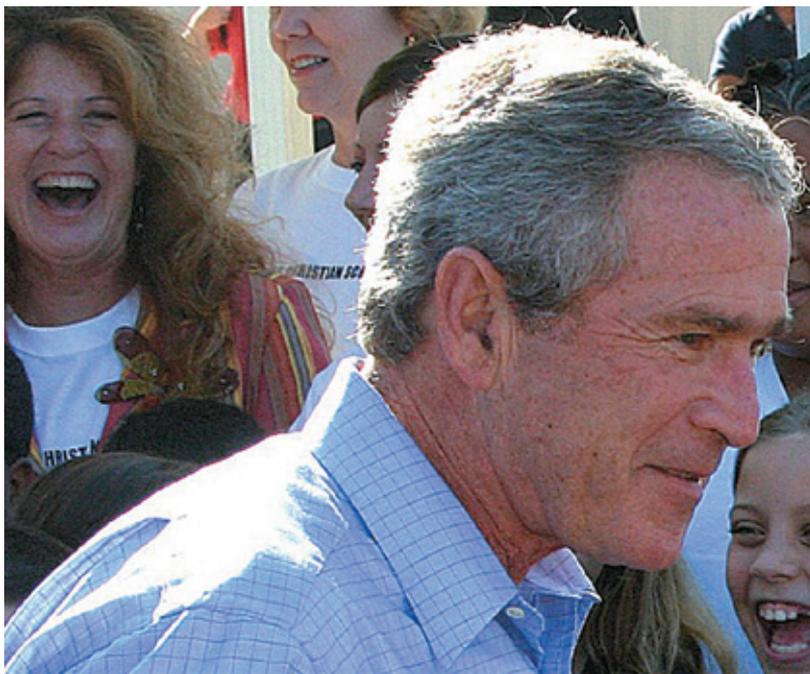
In the background approximately 30 feet from the photographer are eight men, although two might be older boys. One of the men might be a Latino, one is African American, and the rest are Anglo. Three of the men wear sunglasses. One man appears to be dressed in a police uniform. The African



Keith Matthews/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Figure 6.4

Because the photographer is tall, a high perspective reveals four rows of people—president, children, teachers, and security personnel.



Keith Matthews/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Figure 6.5

The backlight on President Bush helps to separate him from the others.

American man wears a white T-shirt that has “MBI” printed on the left side.

There is a school structure at the back and right that has “T-4” printed on a building. To the left, there is at least one portable trailer in the back.

2. **Composition** Actively notice the picture’s elements. How do the individual parts contribute to or distract from the picture as a whole?

The camera angle is slightly higher than the president’s height and with a horizontal view. With the president, children, teachers, and security personnel in the background, there are four rows of persons in the photograph. Three sides of the picture are filled to the edges with people. The top contains space between the men and the edge of the frame (Figure 6.4).

3. **Visual Cues** Study the visual cues of color, form, depth, and movement within the image. Note how they interact and conflict. How are colors used? Look for the source and direction of light in the picture. Does light come from a natural or an artificial source? How are shapes and lines utilized within the frame of the image? If there are persons in the image, take notice of their eyes to see whether they are looking at or away from the camera or are hidden from view. How is the illusion of depth achieved? Are your eyes actively moving around the frame?

Color: The photograph is taken in color. The intense sunlight on the president’s hair and shirt indicate the picture was taken near noon. Pink is the dominant color worn by the girls. The white T-shirts worn by the teachers help to visually link them.

Form: As the photograph was taken with a horizontal perspective, the arrangement of those in the picture creates a strong rectangular form.

Depth: With Bush in the front and larger than the others combined with the backlight from the sun, he is clearly in the foreground while everyone is in the back (Figure 6.5).



Figure 6.6

Working for different government agencies, the security men in the background probably do not know each other well, as indicated by the space between them.

Movement: There is a sense of movement from left to right as President Bush greets the static children. Also, since his gaze is concentrated upon someone off camera to the right, there is graphic movement in that direction.

4. **Gestalt laws** How does the visual communication theory of gestalt contribute to the understanding of the image?

Similarity: The different sizes of the four rows of people tend to divide each one into separate bands.

Proximity: President Bush, the children, and the teachers seem closely connected because of how near they are to each other. Conversely, the security personnel in the background have gaps between them and are not as coherent (Figure 6.6).

Continuation: Bush's eye contact off the frame leads a viewer's eyes in that direction.

Common fate: The children and teachers that look toward the president are separated from those that look in some other direction.

5. **Semiotic Signs** What are any iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs that can be identified in the image?

Iconic: The photograph itself is an example of an iconic sign, since there is little doubt that the individuals pictured lived and are accurately portrayed.

Indexical: The fact that most of the subjects are wearing casual clothes is an indexical sign that the weather was warm.

Symbolic: President Bush is dressed casually except for his buttoned sleeves. He has a belt buckle with a silver star and wears a wedding ring. These symbolic signs indicate that he is

nevertheless treating this event a bit formally, he is from Texas, and he is married (Figure 6.7).

6. **Semiotic codes** Do any of the metonymy, analogy, displaced, or condensed codes contribute to its understanding?

Metonymy: Since almost everyone is smiling, the assumption is that this is a pleasant event for all pictured.

Analogy: The group of excited school children is similar to any politician visiting with fans during a political campaign (Figure 6.8).

Displaced: Unlike followers during a political rally who reach for a politician's handshake, these children are more subdued and perhaps respectful of the office of the president. Instead



Figure 6.7

Buttoned sleeves, a belt buckle, and a ring reveal much about the man.



Tim Sloan/AP/Getty Images

Figure 6.8

President Bush greets supporters in Orlando, Florida, in 2004.



Keith Matthews/U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

of shaking Bush's hand, they offer him support with their eye contact and smiles.

Condensed: Although seemingly a simple picture to document the President's visit to those affected by Hurricane Katrina, the image also is a contrived media event meant to show that Bush cares about children.

7. Cognitive Elements How do the cognitive concepts of memory, projection, expectation, selectivity, habituation, salience, dissonance, culture, and words contribute to the image's understanding?

Memory: This photograph may be more meaningful if it helps you recall a time when you were as close to someone famous.

Projection: You might assume that the only woman wearing sunglasses is blind.

Expectation: With any gathering of typical school children, it is a bit unusual to see the President of the United States.

Selectivity: Obviously, because of his placement in the foreground, one notices the president first.

Habituation: The security personnel in the background seem distant and a bit bored probably because they have seen this type of media event many times in their careers.

Salience: If you are a student of history, curious about how Hurricane Katrina affected the Gulf Coast, or a fan of President Bush, this picture will mean more to you.

Dissonance: The woman behind Bush's back with her mouth open and dragonfly pin may be a distraction (Figure 6.9).

Culture: Given the demographics of southern Mississippi, African Americans are underrepresented as students and as teachers.

Words: The original caption for the photograph (see Figure 6.2) gives a positive review of the work from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but does not explain why the children are so happy to see President Bush.

Figure 6.9

With her flowing hair, big smile, over-shirt, and large dragonfly pin, this woman stands out from the rest of the crowd.

8. **Purpose of the Work** Where do you think the picture was made? What do you think is the image's purpose? Is it news, art, scientific, a personal snapshot, or some other type of image?

The photograph was a part of a collection of photographs on a government's website documenting the good work performed by various federal agencies after Hurricane Katrina. It was never printed in a newspaper or magazine. It has found additional "life" however, by being part of a visual communication analysis.

9. **Image Aesthetics** Is there anything about the image that makes it particularly compelling to look at? Does it have formal and/or creative elements that make it particularly beautiful? Does the image make you want to see more of the creator's work?

Although there is a certain charm to this image because of the way a politician can "work" a row of school children, its utilitarian purpose—to make a politician look helpful in the eyes of the public—is tempered by a formal determination of the picture's aesthetic worth. The picture is perhaps one step from a family snapshot, but has little value.

Now you are ready for the six perspectives:

Personal: An initial reaction to the work based on your subjective opinions.

Historical: A determination of the importance of the work based on the medium's time line.

Technical: The relationship between light, the method used to produce the work, and the context in which the work is shown.

Ethical: The moral and ethical responsibilities that the producer, the subject, and the viewer of the work have and share.

Cultural: An analysis of the metaphors and symbols used in the work that convey meaning within a particular society at a particular time.

Critical: The issues that transcend a particular image and shape a reasoned personal reaction.

The goal of this analysis is to move from a subjective, quick, and emotional opinion, often expressed from a personal perspective, to an objective, long-term, and reasoned judgment reflected by the critical perspective.



PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Upon first viewing any image, everyone draws a quick conclusion about a picture based entirely on a personal response. When asked about a movie, words and phrases such as "good," "bad," "I like it," or "I don't like it" are the usual quick responses. These answers indicate that a person initially analyzes the picture on a superficial, cursory level. Personal perspectives are important because they reveal much about the person making the comments. But such opinions have limited use simply because they are so personal. These comments cannot be generalized beyond the individual, nor do they reveal much in the way of how others in the present or future should think of the work. A memorable image, perhaps one that is considered a masterpiece by critics and the public alike, always sparks strong personal reactions, either negative or positive, and also reveals much about the culture from which it was made. A viewer who rests a conclusion about an image on only a personal perspective denies the chance of perceiving the image in a more meaningful way.

It is not surprising that the photograph was never published in a newspaper or magazine. The picture at first glance is not worth a second look. The picture is obviously a set-up and stage-managed photo op or media event so that the politician can show his concern and advance his own political self-interest. Consequently, an initial reaction of the picture is rather negative.



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Each medium of presentation—from typography to the web—has a unique history of circumstances that were set in motion by individuals interested in pro-

Not For Sale

moting the medium. For typography, the history of writing dates from the dawn of recorded history. For the web, the developments are relatively recent. Knowledge of a medium's history allows you to understand current trends in terms of their roots in techniques and philosophies of the past. Innovative and aesthetically pleasing visual messages come from an awareness of what has been produced before while contemporary pictures will influence future image creation. Since images are artifacts that immediately preserve past events, a historical analysis is of utmost importance in understanding the present meaning of any image. Ask yourself: When do you think the image was made? What major developments were happening when the image was produced? Is there a specific artistic style that the image imitates?

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina was the costliest natural disaster to ever hit the United States.

Total damages topped \$81.2 billion (\$91 billion today). More than 169,000 homes, 350,000 automobiles, and 35,000 boats were destroyed. It was the third strongest hurricane to make landfall on American soil and the fifth deadliest storm, with more than 1,800 known deaths. It also sparked widespread criticism of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the design and maintenance of its failed flood protection system and criticism of the slow local, state, and federal responses to the emergency, including that from FEMA. On May 19, 2006, the name "Katrina" was officially retired for use as a hurricane and replaced by Katia (Figure 6.10).

At the time the picture was taken, mass circulation newspapers and magazines were beginning to be overshadowed by web-based publications. The style of photography is common to most media events—a clear picture of a politician in the foreground and seemingly unaware of the camera.



Figure 6.10

With the New Orleans skyline in the distance, a portion of the more than 169,000 homes flooded by Hurricane Katrina can be seen in the foreground.



TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE

You must know something about how each medium of presentation works. A thorough critique of any visual presentation requires knowledge of how the creator generated the images you see. Whether clay for stop-motion animated films, camera settings with still and moving pictures, or software controls for computer-generated images, knowing the ways they are produced gives you a clearer understanding of the meaning and purpose of a work. With an understanding of the techniques involved in producing an image, you are also in a better position to know when production values are high or low, when great or little care has been taken, or when much or little money was spent to make the images. Ask yourself: How was the image produced? What techniques were employed? Is the image of good quality?

During Bush's visit to the DeLisle school at about 10:30 A.M., using a Canon EOS digital camera, Keith Matthews, a photographer and graphic designer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for almost 30 years, took a picture of the president standing amid schoolchildren. Matthews's digital single-lens reflex (SLR) camera is the most commonly used camera by professional photojournalists because, with its small size and through-the-lens viewing system, the camera is easily maneuvered up and down and right and left, is quickly zoomed and focused, and has an almost unlimited capacity of high-quality images that can be taken. The "snapshot," off-the-cuff, and informal style of this image is directly attributable to the use of the SLR camera. The color photograph was made using a wide-angle lens, a medium-size aperture, without fill-in flash, and less than ten feet away from the president. The original technical specifications for the image provided by Matthews included the file name as "bush2000.jpg" (the number designation refers to the number of pixels [picture elements] along its horizontal edge and not the

year); size: 2,000 by 1,333 pixels (27.778 x 18.514 inches); and the dots per inch (dpi): 72, an acceptable setting for images designated for web presentations.



ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ethics is the study of how persons, other sentient beings (those that can feel pain), and systems (such as governmental agencies and the environment) behave (known as *descriptive ethics*) and how they *should* behave (known as *normative ethics*). You should try as much as possible to concentrate your analyses on normative, rather than descriptive, ethics. You want to come to a conclusion of what someone should do rather than simply describe what someone did.

Anyone considered to be practicing ethical behavior should abide by all the role-related responsibilities that a job requires and should not during the execution of those duties cause unjustified harm. Every profession, from graphic design to website production, has a unique set of requirements or role-related responsibilities that combine to form the concept of a person's "job." For example, a visual journalist for a news organization develops sources, conceives stories, takes images, records audio, interviews sources, writes captions, voice-overs, and copyedits the words and pictures, checks to make sure all facts are accurate, and arranges to display the work in print, on television, and/or the web.

Doing your job and not causing unjust harm has been called the "ethics mantra." As long as the professional obligations related to one's role or job are met, the first part of the mantra is satisfied. But to be considered ethical, you must also make sure that any harm that may ensue must be justified. A nurse causes some discomfort that might be interpreted as harm with a needle stick, but the pain is justified in order to get well. A professor assesses your exams and papers that may

cause harm to your GPA, but it is justified to help you learn. Showing a video of a celebrity in an embarrassing situation on a local newscast may be harmful to that person's reputation, but as long as the airing is deemed acceptable for reasonable, objective persons, the harm can probably be justified. Any action that causes physical or mental harm without adequate justification is unethical.

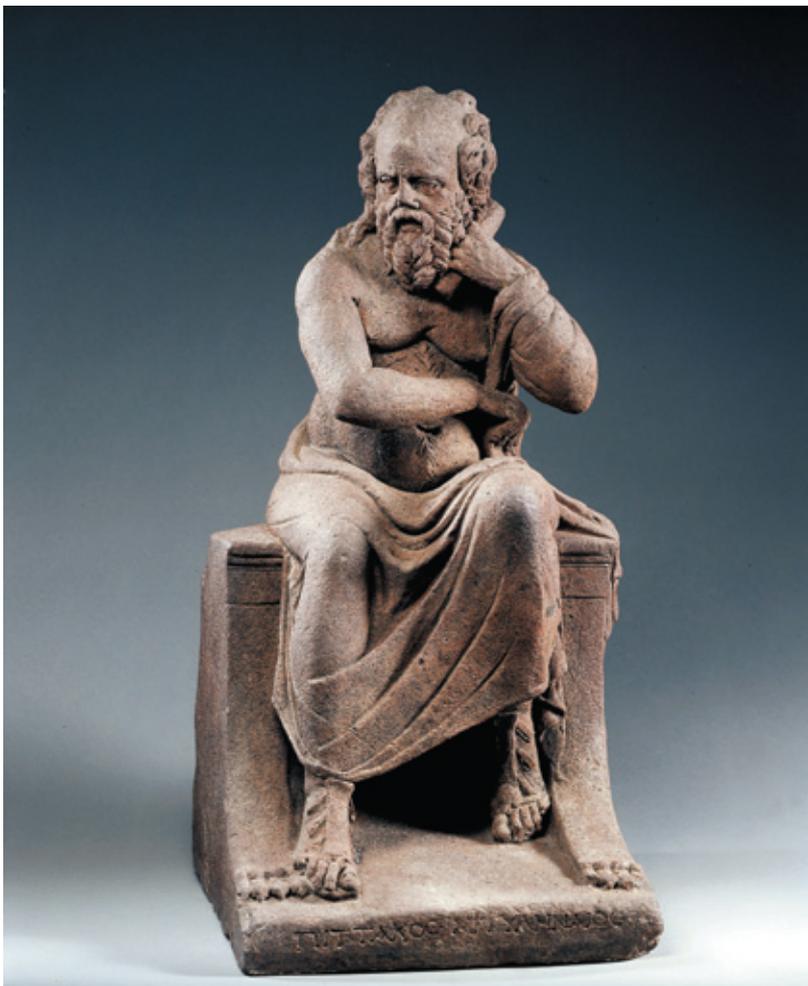
Six principal ethical philosophies can and should be used to analyze a picture. Knowledge of philosophies is important because they help explain how actions can or cannot be justified. In chronological order, they are golden rule, hedonism,

golden mean, categorical imperative, utilitarianism, and veil of ignorance. Although there are many more useful philosophies that could be discussed, these are the principal theories that have survived for more than 2,500 years of Western moral philosophy. Even if the names are new to you, their basic ideas should be familiar to all who have grown up in the United States or other European-influenced cultures. Aspects of these theories are used to justify our public policies, laws, and social conventions.

Golden Rule

The golden rule, or the ethic of reciprocity, teaches people to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This theory has been attributed to ancient Greek philosophers such as Pittacus of Mytilene (died 568 B.C.E.), considered one of the “Seven Sages of Greece,” who wrote, “Do not to your neighbor what you would take ill from him”; Thales of Miletus (died 546 B.C.E.), another Sage of Greece who said, “Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing”; and Epictetus (died 135 C.E.), a Stoic philosopher who wrote, “What thou avoidest suffering thyself seek not to impose on others.” In fact, every major religion has some variable of the golden rule as a part of its scriptures and/or teachings. This philosophy holds that an individual should be as humane as possible and never harm others by insensitive actions (Figure 6.11). A television producer who decides not to air close-up footage of family members mourning the loss of a loved one at a funeral decides not to run the video because it might compound their grief and make viewers feel bad. She invokes the golden rule.

For the Bush image, it is a positive “feel good” moment despite the reality of what life must be like under such living conditions. As such, it probably made those who saw the picture smile to see children entertained by a powerful and famous member of their government.



© DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY

Figure 6.11

A brown terra-cotta statuette recovered from the house of Julia Felix of Pompeii shows the Greek philosopher Pittacus of Mytilene, one of the first to write about the golden rule.

Hedonism

From the Greek word for pleasure, hedonism is closely related to the philosophies of nihilism and narcissism. A student of Socrates, Aristippus (who died in Athens in 366 B.C.E.) founded this ethical philosophy on the basis of pleasure (Figure 6.12). Aristippus believed that people should “act to maximize pleasure now and not worry about the future.” His phrase sums up the hedonistic philosophy: “I possess; I am not possessed.” The Renaissance playwright and poet Ben Jonson, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, once wrote one of the best summaries of the hedonistic philosophy, “Drink today, and drown all sorrow; You shall perhaps not do it tomorrow; Best, while you have it, use your breath; There is no drinking after death.” Phrases such as “live for today” and “don’t worry, be happy” currently express the hedonistic philosophy. If an opinion or action is based purely on a personal motivation—money, fame, relationships, and the like—the hedonistic philosophy is at work.

When an image maker considers only the aesthetic pleasure, monetary gain, or possible awards a picture might bring, hedonism is the dominant philosophy. It is rare for a visual communicator or anyone else to admit to a purely hedonistic justification for an act that others might judge unethical.

A freelance professional photographer, known as a paparazzo after a character in the movie *Irma la Douce* (1963), who stands in wait for a celebrity to exit a concert, restaurant, or home so that a picture can be made solely for the purpose of making money from it uses the hedonism philosophy. As such, this philosophy is probably the least admitted to by practitioners out of the six principal ethical philosophies.

The photograph demonstrates hedonism because the photographer wanted to feature the notable person in the picture, George W. Bush and his work in aiding those affected

by the hurricane in the most positive light possible. The president is using hedonism too as he wanted to be seen with children to seem more compassionate.

Golden Mean

The Greek philosopher Aristotle was born near the city Thessaloniki in 384 B.C.E. As his parents were wealthy, he studied

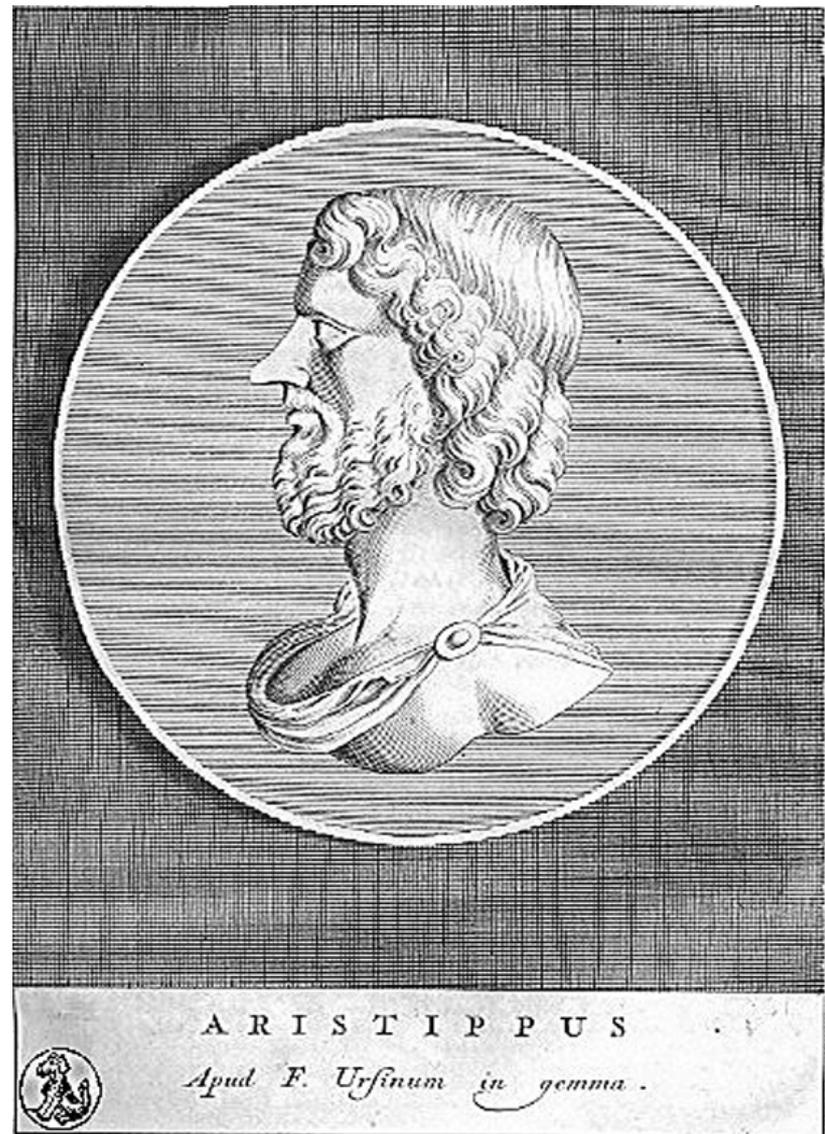


Figure 6.12

The Greek philosopher Aristippus as seen on a Roman coin. A native of Cyrene, Aristippus was born of wealthy parents and studied under Socrates. Aristippus viewed pleasure as the ultimate goal of life. He reportedly never turned down an opportunity to indulge himself before a table or in the company of sex workers.

at the Athens-based Academy led by the renowned Greek philosopher Plato (Figure 6.13). After learning and teaching at the educational institution for 20 years, he traveled throughout the region studying the biology and botany of his country. He was eventually hired as a tutor for Alexander the Great and two other kings of Greece, Ptolemy and Cassander. When he was about 50 years old he returned to Athens and began his own educational

institution, the *Lyceum*, where he wrote an astounding number of books on diverse subjects that made breakthroughs in science, communications, politics, rhetoric, and ethics. He was the earliest known writer to describe the phenomenon of light noticed in a *camera obscura* that eventually led to a further understanding of how the eyes and the photographic medium work.

Although the golden mean was originally a neo-Confucian concept first espoused by Zisi, the only grandson of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, Aristotle elaborated on it for Western readers in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*. The golden mean philosophy refers to finding a middle ground or a compromise between two extreme points of view or actions. The middle way doesn't involve a precisely mathematical average but is an action that approximately fits that situation at that time.

When using the golden mean philosophy, you must first think of the two most extreme examples. For a particularly violent or controversial news photograph or video, there are two extreme choices. The first is to take and then use the picture large and in color on a front page of a newspaper, the cover of a magazine, in the lead for a news broadcast, or the top of a web page. The other extreme choice is not to use the image at all. A compromise or middle way might be to use the image in black and white, small, on an inside page, as a short, edited video, or on a website where users are warned before clicking a link to it. Generally speaking, most ethical dilemmas are solved with the golden mean approach.

The school picture is a compromise or golden mean between images of the children in their harsh day-to-day living conditions and not taking any pictures at all.

Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg, the capital of Prussia (now Kaliningrad,



Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Figure 6.13
The Greek philosopher Aristotle as painted by Joos (Justus) van Ghent in the 15th century.

Russia) in 1724 (Figure 6.14). The fourth of 11 children, at an early age he showed intellectual promise and escaped his crowded household to attend a special school. At the age of 16 he graduated from the University of Königsberg, where he stayed and taught until his death. Kant never married and never traveled farther than 100 miles from his home during his lifetime. Thirteen years before his death in 1804, he published *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is considered one of the most important works in philosophical history. Kant established the concept of the categorical imperative. *Categorical* means unconditional and *imperative* means that the concept should be employed without any question, extenuating circumstances, or exceptions. Right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions. Consistency is the key to the categorical imperative philosophy. Once a rule is established for a proposed action or idea, behavior and opinions must be consistently and always applied in accordance with it. But for Kant, the right action must have a positive effect and not promote unjustified harm or evil. Nevertheless, the categorical imperative is a difficult mandate to live up to.

If a visual reporter's rule is to document any situation and take pictures regardless of whether she thinks her newspaper will print them because she considers that action to be part of her job and to be performed without objections, then this decision becomes a categorical imperative. She takes photographs because it is her duty to do so, and it leads to a positive conclusion—the pictures document an activity for historical purposes if for no other reason.

As a photographer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Keith Matthews had little choice but to take a picture of President George W. Bush with a group of children. Regardless, Matthews no doubt felt it was part of his professional role-related responsibility to take the picture in order to document the event. Therefore,



Figure 6.14

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant painted during his lifetime by Johann Gottlieb Becker.

his categorical imperative would be to perform the same act under any similar set of circumstances.

Utilitarianism

This philosophy is usually considered the combined work of British thinkers Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor. The legal scholar and philosopher Jeremy Bentham developed his theory of utility, or the greatest happiness principle, from the work of Joseph Priestley, who

is considered one of the most important philosophers and scientists of the 18th century. Bentham acknowledged Priestley as the architect of the idea, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.” John Stuart Mill was the son

of the Scottish philosopher James Mill and was tutored for a time by Bentham (Figure 6.15). When he was three years old, he was taught to read Greek; by the time he was ten, he read Plato’s works easily. With the aid of his wife, Harriet Taylor, he developed the philosophy of utilitarianism expressed in his books *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1863). He gave credit to Taylor for her influence but, as was the custom of the time, did not give her coauthorship credit.

Mill expanded on Priestley and Bentham’s idea of utilitarianism by separating different kinds of happiness. For Mill, intellectual happiness is more important than the physical kind. He also thought that there is a difference between happiness and contentment, which is culminated in his phrase, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” In utilitarianism, various consequences of an act are imagined, and the outcome that helps the most people is usually the best choice under the circumstances. However, Mill specified that each individual’s moral and legal rights must be met before applying the utilitarian calculus. According to Mill, it is not acceptable to cause great harm to a few persons in order to bring about a little benefit to many. However, if everyone is being treated justly, then it is acceptable to do something that might provide a large benefit to the community as a whole.

Editors and news directors frequently use and misuse utilitarianism to justify the printing of disturbing accident scenes in their newspapers and magazines, on television, and on websites. Although the image may upset a few because of its gruesome content, it may persuade many others to drive more carefully. That action is acceptable under the utilitarianism philosophy because people do not have a moral right to be sheltered from sad news on occasion. For many, the educational function of the news media—from the



HIP/Art Resource, NY

Figure 6.15

In this cartoon from *Vanity Fair* in 1873, John Stuart Mill is labeled “A Feminist Philosopher” by the cartoonist *Spy*, a pseudonym for the British portrait artist, Sir Leslie Matthew Ward.

typographical and graphic design displays that can be easily read to informational graphics that explain a complex concept—is most often expressed in the utilitarian philosophy.

Keith Matthews most likely thought that by taking a picture of President Bush's visit with school children he would be educating others that although the flooding from Hurricane Katrina destroyed most of their homes, the children looked reasonably well fed and happy to be visited.

Veil of Ignorance

Articulated by the American philosopher John Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, the veil of ignorance philosophy considers all people equal as if each member were wearing a veil so that such attributes as age, gender, ethnicity, and so on could not be determined. No one class of people would be entitled to advantages over any other. Imagining oneself without knowing the positions that one brings to a situation results in an attitude of respect for all involved. The phrase “walk a mile in someone’s shoes” is a popular adaptation of the veil of ignorance philosophy. It is considered one answer to prejudice and discrimination. Rawls taught at Harvard University for almost 40 years (Figure 6.16). In 1999 he received the National Humanities Medal from President Bill Clinton, who said that he “helped a whole generation of learned Americans revive their faith in democracy itself.” A viewer of a print or screen display might invoke this philosophy in an e-mail of thanks to a visual communicator or journalist, if the viewer were made to think of her own loved ones after seeing a picture of subjects of a visual message.

Someone looking at this photograph might think of a child she knows and imagine the living conditions at home after a terrible environmental catastrophe. Thinking of such a connection with “the other” and feeling

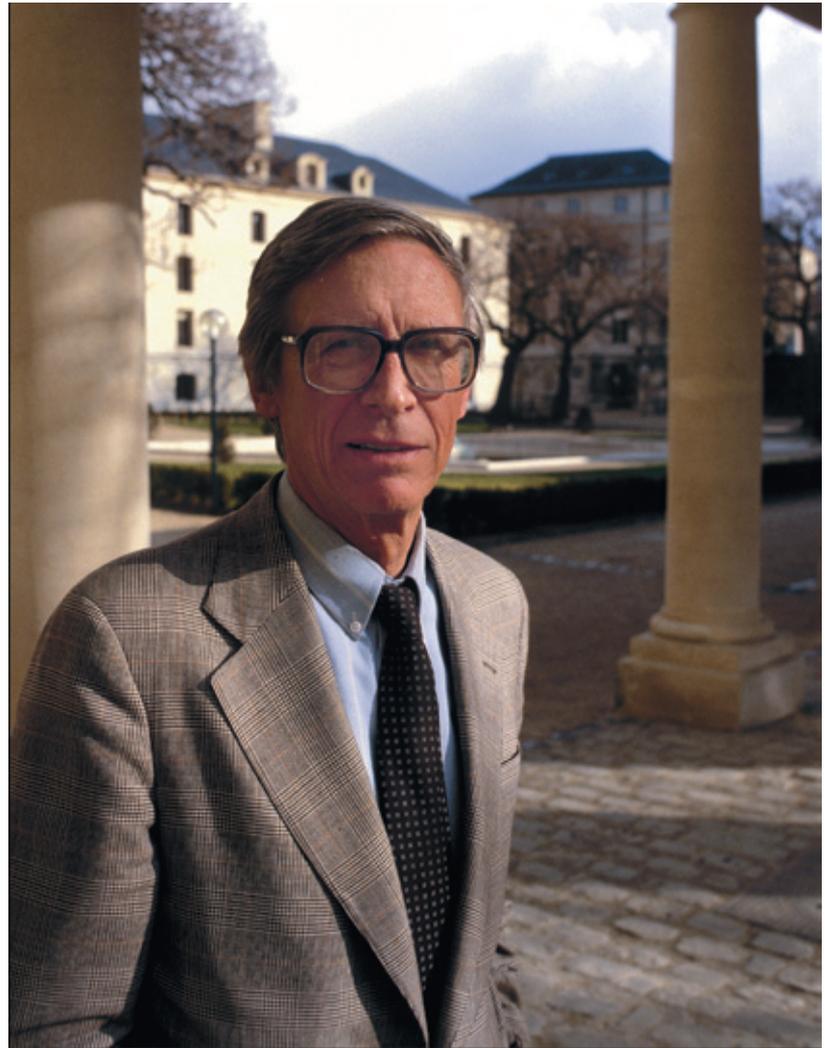


Figure 6.16

The philosopher John Rawls poses for a picture in Paris, France in 1987.

empathy for those affected by Hurricane Katrina might result in contributions to the Red Cross and Salvation Army.

After a thorough study of the six ethical philosophies briefly described earlier, an analysis of the Bush picture might also include the following:

George W. Bush was an American politician who understood the power of positive publicity. Five days before President Bush's visit to DeLisle Elementary, a CBS News poll revealed that his “overall job approval rating reached the lowest ever measured in this poll.” Bush needed to be seen by sympathetic

Not For Sale

and energetic children excited by a visit from the President to their small town after his administration's disastrous non-reaction to Hurricane Katrina. He and his publicity handlers thought the photo op would show Bush, the compassionate conservative, as a politician who cares (Weblink 6.3). But the picture demonstrates the exploitation of the good graces, best wishes, and innocent hopes of those most vulnerable—the children—who naively looked up to a powerful adult visiting them (Figure 6.17).



CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Here is your chance to further refine your analysis given the influences from the historical, technical, and ethical perspectives. Cultural analysis of a picture involves identifying the symbols and metaphors used in an image and determining their meaning for the society as a whole. Symbolism may be analyzed through the

picture's use of heroes and villains, by the form of its narrative structure, by the style of the artwork, by the use of words that accompany the image, and by the attitudes about the subjects and the culture communicated by the visual artist. The cultural perspective is closely related to the semiotic approach.

Metaphors combine a viewer's experiences with the meaning of a visual message. Aristotle, in *Rhetoric*, wrote, "It is a great thing, indeed, to make proper use of poetic forms, . . . But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor." Real world experiences infuse an image under analysis with special meaning for the viewer so that underlying metaphors can be discovered. Educator Stuart Jay Kaplan defines metaphors as "combinations of two or more elements in which one element is understood or experienced in terms of the other." For Kaplan and others, "Metaphors serve as interpretive frameworks for organizing information about the world



Figure 6.17

Inside a DeLisle Elementary School classroom, President Bush talks with reporters. None of the attention from the President, First Lady Laura Bush with hands clasped in front of her, and Superintendent Sue Matheson is toward the children. It is no wonder why they look bored, frightened, or preoccupied.

and making sense of experiences.” George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By*, expand the point when they write, “No metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis.” The American anthropologist Evelyn Payne Hatcher, author of *Art and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Art* (1999), wrote that metaphors “are a matter of trying to understand and comment upon what is going on [within a picture] in terms of our previous experience.” As such, metaphors that are commonly understood across time and cultures “rest on the common experiences of the human.” For Hatcher, “Visual art is not merely a matter of aesthetics, but one of visually developed ideas, usually conceived in some metaphorical form.” Ask yourself: What is the story and the symbolism involved in the elements of the visual message? What do they say about current cultural values? What metaphors can be expressed through the work?

The symbolism of power and dominance as expressed through social perspective is clearly evident in the photograph. Bush is in the front and slightly separated from the others who do not dare to shake the politician's hand. Although he removed his coat and tie in the photo op with the children, his buttoned sleeves indicate a business-like demeanor and purpose for his visit. Several of the children look up at him with awe, and yet all his attention is directed off camera.

The children seem at ease in their familiar environment, whereas Bush, a symbol of technological progress and an urbane attitude, looks out of place. As seen by his clothing and pose, the government versus ordinary citizen conflict is a metaphor for modernism that divides those who are content and secure from those who have lost everything and must begin anew.



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The final step in analyzing a picture is to apply a critical perspective. In this last

step, you should attempt to transcend a particular image and draw general conclusions about the medium, the culture from which it is produced, and the viewer. A critical perspective allows the viewer to use the information learned about a medium, its practitioner, and the image produced to make more general comments about the society that accepts or rejects the images. As such, a critical perspective redefines a person's initial personal perspective in terms of universal conclusions about human nature. Ask yourself: What do I think of this image now that I've spent so much time looking at and studying it? What lessons does it have for those who view the image?

As an artifact that illustrates the public relations profession, the Bush elementary school photograph has value for visual communicators who study the photo op genre. It also is useful for biographers of George W. Bush, who may use the image to illustrate an aspect of his personality and media savvy. Consequently, an initial negative opinion of the picture is changed to one of positive worth through the analytical process.

Whether it is a still or moving image, if you study it by first making an inventory list, then by noting its compositional elements, include a discussion on the gestalt laws, visual cues, semiotic signs and codes, cognitive elements, possible purposes, and aesthetic qualities, and then from personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, and critical perspectives, you become intellectually engaged with the picture. Using the six perspectives will encourage you to base conclusions about images on rational rather than emotional responses. You will find that all images have something to tell you because every picture created, no matter how banal or ordinary it may be at first glance, have some meaning to communicate. The producer of the image took the time to frame and make the picture for a reason. The message that the artist wants to communicate may be simply a literal story, the

hope that the viewer will appreciate the image's aesthetic beauty, or an underlying political agenda. Just because you cannot initially see any purpose for an image is no reason to discard it. Many large lessons are lost because of a failure to study small, captured moments. An image, regardless of its medium of presentation, is forgotten if it isn't analyzed. A forgotten image simply becomes another in a long stream of meaningless pictures that seem to flood every aspect of our lives. Meaningless pictures entertain a viewer only for a brief moment and do not have the capacity to educate. But an analyzed image can affect a viewer for a lifetime.

The nine chapters on typography, graphic design, informational graphics, cartoons, photography, motion pictures, television, computers, and the web are analyzed within the six-perspective analytical framework described earlier. Although analysis is time-consuming at first, practice reduces the amount of time required. It is up to you,

and only you, to find meaning and use for a picture. If you take the time to study images carefully, you will become a much more interesting and knowledgeable person. You will also be more likely to produce images that have greater meaning for more people. These images are also remembered longer than unconsidered pictures.

Your ultimate goal with regard to any analysis of a picture is to understand your own reaction to the image. Through this analytical process, you review, refine, and renew your personal reaction to an image. Being critical is a highly satisfying intellectual exercise.

Words in the Glossary from this Chapter

- Archetypal
- Bolshevik
- Existentialist
- Freudian
- Jungian
- Marxism
- Mythical
- Phenomenological
- Rhetorical
- Structural



To access the weblinks in this chapter, go to the “Free Study Tools” on the book’s website at www.cengagebrain.com.