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ABSTRACT

A visually literate person's lexicon for interpreting visual statements, without regard to medium, could include an eclectic array of possibilities. Some definitions and demonstrations of the various approaches are presented. The premodern, or connoisseur's approach, is characterized by a central concern with the assessment of quality, and such assessment was predicated on a deep conviction of a hierarchical aesthetic. The connoisseur's approach encompasses the study of iconography with traditional symbolism and traditional social interpretations. A modern, or structural, analysis entails looking beyond subject matter to the underlying structure of a visual statement. Modern art has celebrated structure and pure form as an end in itself. Postmodernist thought rejects structure especially, along with most previous approaches to interpreting visual statements. As visual communication becomes more important, semiotics, hermeneutics, and deconstruction are increasingly advocated. Whatever the approach, the examination of the visual statement leads to better understanding and appreciation of a broader range of visual statements. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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An Eclectic Approach to the Interpretation of Visual Statements

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An Eclectic Approach to the Interpretation of Visual Statements

Deborah Curtiss

How to interpret visual expressions, whether created as media communications or art, is often a perplexing task. This topic is vast in both scope and possibilities, and has challenged both great thinkers and common citizens probably as long as images have been created. In recent years art historians have engaged in a heated and sometimes polemical and divisive argument on the proper approach to the interpretation of content in art. On one side are those who interpret work based upon a pre-modern, connoisseurial tradition, on another are those who adopt the modern, largely structuralist approach, and finally, those who assert that a work must be interpreted according to its social context and social communication, a post-modern or post-structuralist approach.

During this time I have pro-pounded interpreting visual statements from the holistic perspective of **visual literacy**, which encompasses a variety of approaches. In my opinion, a visually literate individual's lexicon for interpreting visual statements, irrespective of medium, would include an eclectic array of possibilities. Yet few of us identify what these various ways might include. In talks that I have given previ-

ously, I have provided a list identifying the iconographic, connoisseurial, structuralist, social, semiotic, and de-constructionist approaches. There are others, some yet to be catalogued .

As a writer and thinker about issues in visual literacy, I have done little thus far to define concepts of interpretation, demonstrate how they are used, or to provide effective examples of a visually literate interpretation process. In this paper I intend to provide some definitions and demonstrations, not a definitive study., and hope it will bring the topic to the attention of others for thought and development. Feedback and leads would be especially appreciated, as this effort is the beginning of what I expect to be ongoing research for the next few years. I hope that this work will result in a persuasive argument for art history scholars to adopt a broader, more inclusive approach and, secondly, information that will be relevant to interpreting all visual communications, not only works of art.

Pre-Modern

The pre-modern or **connoisseurial** approach, steeped deeply in the cultural traditions of Western art and civilization, carries considerable baggage, baggage that for centuries was considered

to be evidence of its accomplishment: wealth, unquestioned excellence and superiority. It espoused elitist approaches to judging the fineness, the "fine artness," of paintings, sculpture, drawings and prints—those arts commonly held to be the fine arts.

Assessment of quality is central to the connoisseurial approach: quality of the technical ability of the artist, quality of the materials used, quality of the artist's understanding of compositional principles, quality of poetic content, and quality of esthetic merit. All of these assessments and judgments, either implicitly or explicitly, were predicated upon a deep conviction of a hierarchical esthetic. From the essential ideal—toward which all aspire but never quite achieve—of Plato, to the finely honed critical judgment of Kant, a highest order of excellence served as both the basis and the pinnacle of achievement in visual expression. For centuries, few questioned the value of these aspirations as they, in turn, served to inspire generations of artists, clerics, scholars and plain folk alike.

The connoisseurial approach encompasses the study of iconography, symbolism and, to an extent, underlying structure. A few definitions may be in order. A symbol is an image or object, that stands for, is a metaphor for, something else, and may or may not be known or understood by others. An icon can be thought of as a symbol with animate characteristics. A symbol or icon becomes a sign, when it becomes a metonym, a representation of something that has more or less entered common or shared parlance and understanding; i.e., when both signifier and signified are known and understood. In computer-speak, I suspect the term *icon*, actually a sign, was chosen to differentiate it from many ways the word, sign, is used in our language.

From early Christian art we were introduced to icons and symbols as a form of shorthand to express, in a simple or single image, a depth of meaning and significance. All indoctrinated with the religion would understand these symbols, from which they would draw moral and religious messages, content, and inspiration.¹ For example, in *The Annunciation* by Jan van Eyck (1385-1441),² one discovers a number of symbols that were in conventional use in the first half of the 15th century, as were architectural analogies that the artist used to communicate specific content. The Romanesque clerestory in which this scene is placed represents the Old Testament and Judaism as indicated by the single high window which depicts the Lord of Hosts of the Israelites. It is flanked by mural paintings of the finding of Moses and the giving of the Ten Commandments. These events were thought, by early Christians, to respectively presage the acceptance of Christ by the faithful, and the giving of the New Covenant.

The shift from the Romanesque on high to more gothic elements lower in the painting symbolizes the shift to Christianity and the New Testament. The three windows at the rear represent the Trinity. The holy spirit, in the form of a dove descends toward the Virgin, symbolizing immaculate conception; the lilies represent her purity. Subjects in the floor panels support, in more ways than one, this pivotal moment in the history of religion. They depict the death of Samson, prefiguring the Crucifixion, and David slaying Goliath, pre-

1 Unable to include all the images shown when this paper was delivered, the following locations and descriptions are offered for those who wish to look them up.

2 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Analysis acknowledgment to Ralph Mayer, *A Dictionary of Art Terms & Techniques*, N.Y., Thomas C. Crowell, 1975.

figuring the triumph of Christ over Satan. Signs of the zodiac, seen in the corners of the floor panels were, at the time, a common device for proclaiming God's dominion over both the physical and spiritual universe. The footstool may illustrate, together with the high single window, a passage from Isaiah (66:1): "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool."

By using an example from the early 15th century, I run the risk of leaving iconographic and symbolic analysis lost in the past. So let us look at a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat called *World Crown*,³ painted in the 1980s. Let's make a similar analysis—based upon symbols, icons and analogies—of this work by someone of Haitian and Puerto Rican descent, who catapulted to early fame as a New York City "writer," a euphemism for graffiti artist, shortly before this work was created.

The architectural environment appears to be that of the boxing club, not an arena, perhaps symbolizing a private rather than public encounter. The two crowns, one appearing to be a representation painted on a paper tacked to the wall, the other an object floating over the head of one of the combatants, together with the sign stating "ACRLA World + Crown," require us to draw upon our knowledge of boxing (acronym unknown). A champion fight is being waged here. The figure on the left appears to be mortal, but could be what in Haiti is called the *bon ange*. The figure on the right, black with a skull-like head is a common icon of death, and was featured in several of Basquiat's works as a self-portrait. That he died a few years later at the age of 28 of a drug overdose, suggests that this painting depicts a moment no less pivotal in his life and times than that of

the Virgin and the history of religion in van Eyck's *Annunciation*. Even though we have taken an approach, steeped in Western esthetic tradition, and applied it to a decidedly post-modern work, we are unavoidably enmeshed in the social: social content, social comment, social context, political meaning, and so forth.

A strictly social interpretation tends to look outside of, as well as at the work being studied. Who is the artist? How was he or she placed in society? What are the cultural forces in the society in which the artist was raised and/or is working? What is the message of the visual statement in terms of political and social import? How can this message be evaluated using the prevailing values of the culture of the artist rather than the viewer?

This approach has no less validity with respect to Renaissance art than contemporary visual expression. In Botticelli's (1445-1510) *Annunciation*,⁴ painted a generation after the van Eyck, the distinguishing aspects have to do with place and culture. Notice the open door, the warmth of the Umbrian landscape in the background. Both Virgins are wearing garments common to the times, yet the sensuality of the figures and the garments swirling around them, suggest a passion in the Italian Botticelli that is quite absent in the more staid and static Netherlander, van Eyck.

Similarly, George Bellows (1882-1925), American realist of the early 20th century, depicts boxers quite differently from Basquiat of Haitian background, although both works were created in New York during the 20th century. Entitled, *Both Members of this Club*,⁵ and painted in 1909, the social intent appears clear. A white and black fighter

3 Location unknown, published in *Artforum*, December, 1981.

4 Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

5 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

locked in combat as equals in the boxing ring presaged the triumph of Joe Louis by 28 years; the boxing ring a metaphor for our boxed-in society. Looking at visual statements within a social context for their meaning in sociopolitical terms can be both illuminating and deeply rewarding.

Modern

To continue our lexicon, a modernist or structural analysis entails looking beyond the subject matter to the underlying structure of a visual statement in which energies and suggestive powers such as hierarchies, may be embedded. I have frequently shown these structural analyses of two paintings: one by Georgia O'Keeffe,⁶ showing that it is gracefully poised and composed, the other by William Sidney Mount, which is helter-skelter.⁷ Each underlying structure impacts the effectiveness of the content. Looking at the structure of the Mount painting, a late 19th century work entitled *The Painter's Triumph*, from a 20th century psychoanalytic perspective, we may interpret that Mount, like most viewers, was so taken with the message he was trying to convey that he was unaware of the undercurrents of chaos, of conflicting forces that detract from the success of the painting as a whole, and subsequently, Mount's reputation as a significant painter.

If we look at the structure of the paintings previously considered, we observe that the format of the *Annunciation* is lofty, aspiring; that of *World Crown* compressed. Both are slightly

unbalanced, using similar bilateral or mirroring weightings of figures in space, the right side heavier in each. In one, space is deep, the other shallow. The van Eyck figures are in positions of reverence and awe, the Basquiat in striking agitation. These observations lead us to understand and appreciate the effect of the structure on the meaning of each painting. Each structure represents social meaning and social context, none more or less than the other. Structure was a favorite of modernist thinking. Modern art, as in this painting by Sonja Delaunay,⁸ celebrated structure and pure form as an end in itself.

Post-Modern

As with any movement that uses post as a prefix, post-modernist thought rejects structure especially, but also most of the foregoing approaches to interpreting visual statements. As an artist, I can create what I want, with no concern whatsoever for an audience. In fact, I feel, when thoughts of interpretation creep into my creative process, they contaminate it, both the process and the work. When this happens, I am no longer creating art, but a message to which the visual statement becomes a servant. In the realm of art, how others interpret my work is entirely up to them. In Dewey's terms,⁹ my paintings are only half of the visual experience which must be completed by a viewer. While delighted with the variety of interpretations of my work, I must never let them affect or dictate what I create. That would be, in the struggles of an artist, corruption.

Yet today, in the age of infology and edutainment, the overwhelming production of visual images pervading every reach of contemporary life, most

6 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Pelvis with Moon*, 1943, Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, FL. Reproduced in Curtiss, D. *Introduction to Visual Literacy*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1987) p. 56.

7 William Sidney Mount, *The Painter's Triumph* (1838) The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA. Reproduced in Curtiss, D. op.cit., p. 57.

8 Sonja Delaunay, *Rhyme Color Opus 1541*, 1967, Gimpel Gallery, London, UK.

9 Dewey, John, *Art as Experience*,

members of IVLA must be actively concerned with the *content* of the visual statements they make. What is it they *intend* to communicate? What media and techniques will *serve* that message most effectively, *enhance* it, *clarify* it, and *carry it forth* into the world? How can we assess the success of the communication?

This process of intentional visual communication with specific message is, I posit, no less important than creating art. Today, pragmatically, visual/verbal communications may well be much more important—due to their widespread and far-reaching use—than the lofty ideals that have traditionally defined art. Most significantly, visual/verbal communications are essential to the quality of life in a post-modern world, a world defined by global intermedial and intercultural communications.

Enter semiotics, hermeneutics and deconstruction. Enter socio-political movements such as feminism, multiculturalism and pan-sexualism, all of which question the dominance of the Western, male, heterosexual perspective.

A semiotic approach goes beyond the image to meaning embedded in the pragmatic, semantic and/or syntactical purpose or intent of the creator. Developed largely within language with literary texts, semioticians and their compatriots, hermeneuticists concerned especially with meaning—both disciplines, by the way, dating to the first millennium—represent a natural response to the information explosion of the late 20th century. When they emerge from their self-referential, closed system, and relate to consensual reality, their relevance and importance lies in establishing the paradigms by which we may develop the ability to interpret visual statements *as they are being created*.

Thus we may look at a couple of images used in advertising—images that have the explicit purpose of conveying specific information to affect a specific audience to respond in a specific way.¹⁰ Most are geared to the audience thought to be, and demographically demonstrated to be, most vulnerable to suggestion, most likely to take self image seriously, and therefore most responsive to the appeal to buy, buy, buy. This population, young adults, is also perceived to be at the height of their sexual powers, prowess and insecurity. The next older segment of society, the mid-life group, likes to believe they are still at the height of their sexual powers and prowess, but with security. Therefore, images of actual and implied sexuality abound in advertising today. It doesn't quite take a hermeneuticist to figure out what is being said, to whom, for what purpose, yet the focus upon hermeneutics in literature, its use in anthropology and history, impacts the way we understand interpretation of visual statements today. That understanding, in turn, influences those of us who make visual statements with the specific intent of communicating a message. The medium is *not* the message. We claim and use the medium as the vehicle of the message. The message is thoroughly worked out and reworked, on paper and on story boards, sometimes long before production of the visual statement even begins.

Enter deconstruction. Do deconstructionists have all the fun? Upon

10 A Newport cigarette advertisement with a young man and woman looking at one another across a candy machine spewing forth candy balls; and an advertisement for Obsession perfume with a nude couple entwined in a complex, Pilobolus Dance Theater-like clutch. Also shown were works by Barbara Kruger, *Buy Me*, Annina Nosei Gallery; Robert Mapplethorpe photograph, Lisa Lyon, 1980; and Sue Coe, *The Money Temple*, 1986.

reading a text or looking at an image, the deconstructionist draws out conflicting logics of sense and implication with the intent of showing that the text or image never exactly means what it says, or says what it means. They have shown us that we have no visual experience—whether of a visual statement generally agreed upon to be a work of art, a visual statement such as an advertisement or instructional video with specific content to be communicated, or the visible world in which we live—that we have no visual experience that won't have been, to some extent, programmed by those ideas of form, content, meaning, value, etc., that are the legacy of a combination of our personal and collective history. For most of us that is a Western esthetic. Others who may have been born and raised in a non-western culture, may add to that. Women bring a perspective that some insist is radically different from that which our forefathers assumed. Gays and lesbians too look askance at the pervasive heterosexual sell in the images shown earlier. But all of us, being the sum total of our personal and acculturated experience, view and experience visual statements, in all media, through the lenses of our life-long program as it has evolved.

Thus, to a deconstructionist, there is no esthetic truth about visual statements, either inward or outward, that can validate one set of codes and conventions above another. There is no esthetic truth to serve as the ultimate reference point for a history of any genre conceived in terms of some grand outcome or teleology. All we have are various fictive devices to make sense of an otherwise unknowable reality.

If the reality of meaning in visual statements, as the deconstructionists purport, is essentially unknowable, why try to interpret them at all? Isn't it a waste of time?

Visual Literacy to the Rescue

Let us grant that our collective realities are singularly different. When we encounter a visual statement—whether a work of art that has just overwhelmed us with its power; an instructional video that in some way has left us with a vague, but as yet undiscerned sense of unease; or an advertisement that rankles with its ribald appeal—as visual literates we can look at it from a variety of perspectives. When we identify the symbols and understand their meaning and function, when we analyze the structure and understand its power, when we articulate the meaning as (and whatever) it communicates to us within our social context, and we appreciate that we won't arrive at a definitive interpretation, we know the visual statement much, much better. We have taken it more fully into our consciousness and thereby have made it a part of ourselves. The process and its product enrich us for deeper understanding and appreciation of a broader range of visual statements henceforth.

Of necessity, this paper is merely an introduction to the issues, and a brief rallying cry to address interpretation as an integral part of experiencing visual statements in all media. Several members of IVLA, with papers herein, are doing just that, offering varying perspectives. As we seek meaning in the visual statements we view and make, especially in this digital age, we add to, and find, meaning in our lives.

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