

# Reading a documentary photograph: Visual information literacy

By Debbie Abilock

Visual information literacy is the ability to understand, evaluate and use visual information. Like a printed text, an architectural blueprint, a mathematical equation, or a musical score, a visual image communicates using language. A literate 'reader' is able to decipher the basic code and syntax, interpret the signs and symbols, comprehend the specialised references from an academic discipline or field of study and understand how things fit together in order to do appropriate work. In other words, visual literacy has three components: learning, thinking and communicating (Randhawa & Coffman, 1978).

Just as reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) conceptualises textual literacy in terms of an interaction between the text and the reader, a theory of visual literacy ought to take into account the transaction of the viewer with the image: the subject, medium, photographer, and context. To represent that relationship in visual literacy, I modified the classical rhetorical stance to model the reading of a photograph. When I am doing visual information literacy workshops, I refer to this diagram so that participants learn to conceptualise visual rhetoric.

I prefer to teach with documentary photographs because they span many disciplines and rest on the implicit premise that they faithfully depict a subject. I choose questions:

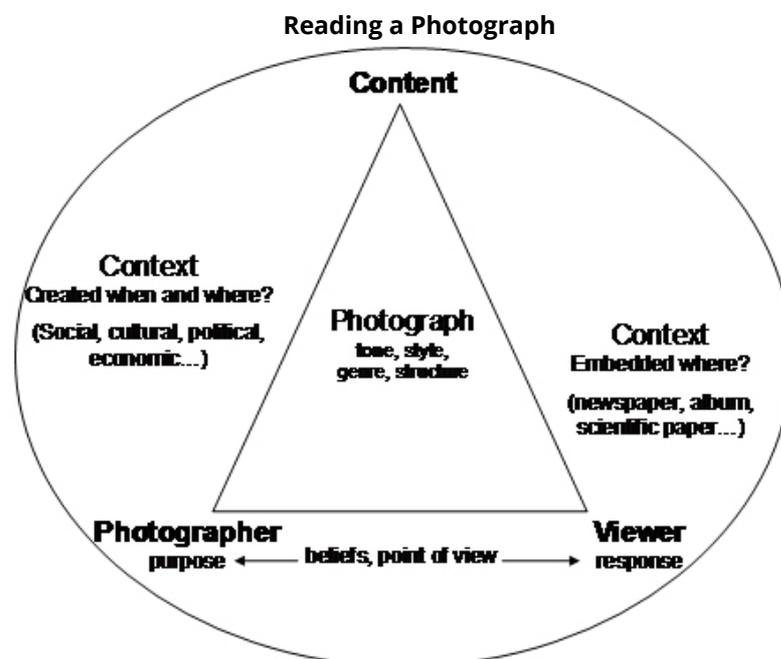
1. What do I see?

2. What does it mean to me?

3. What in the photograph leads me to say this?

(Alfano and O'Brien (2005, pp. 89-90; Center for Media Literacy, 2005; Koechlin & Zwaan, p. 90) based on the learning goals.

Since close reading and personal connections build a reader's interest and confidence, we practise interpretation: decoding the composition of a photograph; responding to its aesthetic elements; identifying our beliefs; and calling up prior knowledge. Eventually I add background information, including the photographer's statement if one exists, not to suggest that the creator's perspective and purpose is the 'correct answer', but rather to enrich the discussion.





*Slab Man and Robert, Cantor Arts Center,  
Stanford, 2007 © Debbie Abilock*



*Glanum, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 2007.  
© Debbie Abilock*

Our first response to a photograph is unvoiced – we look. We value sensory experience and close observation by providing time to scrutinise the image without discussion for three minutes (it's a long time!).

To prompt students or faculty to share their thoughts, provide a worksheet with questions <<http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/newsmidia/polphoto.pdf>> or use one of the photograph analysis worksheets at the American Memory site <<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/media.html>>. After describing what they see in words, learners can add inferences based on the visual evidence. For example, notice the subtle cues from body language and facial expressions that help us distinguish between a human and a sculpture (Slab Man, Duane Hanson, 1976).

Inferences also come from the composition: the angle from which the subject is shot, what is illuminated or in shadow, how objects are arranged and the tension among these elements. For example, the Glanum columns, photographed from below and framed vertically, feel imposing, especially since the sun's rays illuminate the lintel from behind. Yet, the oddly-balanced top and the unequal lengths of the converging columns seem unsteady. The tension between grandeur and instability encourages longer scrutiny as the 'reader' explores the disequilibrium. As we teach students to read and create in multiple media we will want to use the vocabulary of photo composition and learn concepts like *leading lines*, *Rule of Thirds* and *framing* (<<http://photoinf.com/>>).

#### 4. What do I bring to this?

Identifying similarities and differences is one of the nine instructional strategies that correlate strongly with student learning (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001, pp. 13-28). For a visual literacy lesson, select a pair of documentary photographs of similar subjects, composition and purpose, created at different times. If you are designing a collaborative project, co-teach this lesson with your faculty partner to 'set the table' for a long-term research investigation (Abilock & Kosut, 2000). If you are teaching visual literacy alone, select images that relate to topics that are being studied or that are important to your students. In either situation you'll want to meet with the subject area teacher to explain the visual literacy activity and get suggestions for possible photograph pairings. For a faculty workshop, I choose pairs from various subject areas such as these sets about global warming and child labour.

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After comparing the photographs and sharing what is observed and already known, the next activity is to research additional information. For example, the two child labour images were taken 80 years apart, one by an investigative photographer <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos/>> and the other by an occupational health physician from Harvard <<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/gallery/intro.html>>.

	
<p><i>Location: Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services</i></p> <p><i>Part of: Series: National Child Labor Committee Photographs taken by Lewis Hine, ca. 1912</i></p> <p><i>Title: Photograph of a Young Shrimp Picker Named Manuel</i></p> <p><i>Original caption: Manuel the young shrimp picker, 5 years old and a mountain of child labour oyster shells behind him. He worked last year. Understands not a word of English. Biloxi, Miss.</i></p> <p><a href="http://media.nara.gov/media/images/3/6/03-0563a.gif">http://media.nara.gov/media/images/3/6/03-0563a.gif</a></p>	<p><a href="http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/gallery/gallery19.html">http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/gallery/gallery19.html</a></p>

Or by examining receding glaciers in Central New Guinea in 1936, 1972 and 2010 <<http://www.summitpost.org/mountain/rock/634409/sumantri.html>> to begin to investigate the effects of global warming.

<b>Perspectives Chart:</b>	
<b>The lens I look through changes my perspective</b>	
<b>When I look through my . . .</b>	<b>What I see is framed by my . . .</b>
Personal lens	Intuition, subjective responses
Moral, ethical lens	Belief system, code of behaviour
Historical, political, economic, social lens	Knowledge of a time, place, government, society
Cultural	Knowledge of a group's shared way of life
Aesthetic	Appreciation and critical analysis of beauty, art
Critical	Analysis of society and human nature
Metaphoric	Understanding of icons, symbols
<i>Credit: An adaptation based on Lester's six perspectives for analysing any image (2000, pp.94-96)</i>	

Allow 10-15 minutes for individual or small group investigation, then invite everyone to share what they've learned – facts, feelings, opinions and questions.

**Our values, emotions, and knowledge shape our responses to a photograph, just as they colour our reactions to our everyday experiences.**

Our values, emotions, and knowledge shape our responses to a photograph, just as they colour our reactions to our everyday experiences. Using the Perspectives Chart, ask for elaboration and add questions to prompt thinking. Does the visual evidence of glacial retreat impact you personally? What is the effect of the sharply-lit oyster shells or the unending stacks of bricks? Some may share their

qualms about climate change or work hazards (personal lens) or become outraged about child labour or global warming (moral, ethical lens). Intellectually, while people may recognise that child labour or global warming are continuing problems, they may wonder what options poor families or third-world countries really have (historical, political, economic, cultural). They may question what role countries and humanitarian organisations have taken about issues of social justice (critical, metaphoric). The purpose of this open-ended discussion is to become conscious of the perspectives we bring to a visual image.

## 5. Why was this photograph created?

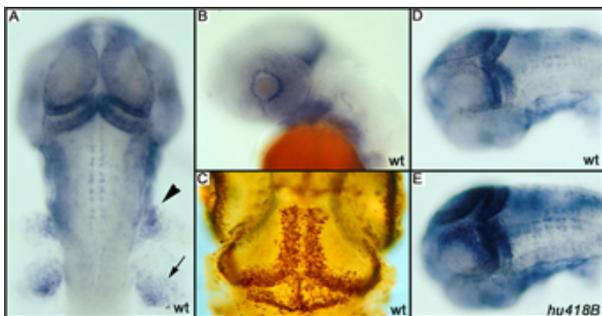


The Wedding Party © Damon and Maria Abilock



[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/pin:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(ppmsc+02928\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/pin:@field(NUMBER+@band(ppmsc+02928)))

Gardner, Alexander, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Speech from 'I Do Solemnly Swear...':  
 Presidential Inaugurations. American Memory, Library of Congress  
 Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.  
 Created between 1910 and 1920, from a photograph taken in 1865





PCNA and Proliferation Patterns in zebrafish mutant embryo

From: [The Zebrafish Mutants \*dre\*, \*uki\*, and \*lep\* Encode Negative Regulators of the Hedgehog Signaling Pathway](#)  
 Koudijs MJ, den Broeder MJ, Keijsers A, Wienholds E, Houwing S, et al. *PLoS Genetics* Vol. 1, No. 2, e19

<http://english.dvb.no/photo4.php?cat=6&curlIdx=15>

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A documentary photograph may have been created to represent an event or reality, but it is also a vehicle for conveying a particular idea and a medium for personal expression. Indeed, early photographs were treated as scientific evidence. Although Eadweard Muybridge called himself an artist, his photographs of horses and people were trusted as reliable studies of movement and were even published in *Scientific American*. Today there is evidence that he assembled and manipulated them for artistic effect (Freeze Frame, n.d.).

The premise of a documentary photograph, whether of a wedding, an inauguration, a mutation, or a news event, is that it is a truthful mirror of reality. Arnheim says of them: "We are on vacation from artifice" (as quoted in Steiner, 1995, p. 40). Indeed, the events did happen: we were there to see this couple get married; Lincoln was inaugurated on the steps of the Capitol; the scientific paper provides experimental evidence of the mutations in zebrafish embryo; and Buddhist monks were severely injured in demonstrations in Burma. Just as anthropologists and sociologists used photographs as visual inventories of artefacts, institutions, individuals, and social groups to support anthropological field studies or sociological interviews (Harper, 2002, p. 13), academic librarians at the University of Rochester used photo-elicitation interviews to determine what undergraduates really do in the dorms and library when they research and write an academic paper in order to improve facilities and services (Briden, 2007).

But, even if these are raw, unretouched photographs, there is an eye behind the lens, a finger on the camera's button. Social critic Lewis Hine, although he never altered the photographs he took for the National Child Labour Committee, was concerned that his own perspectives inevitably influenced his choice of subject, what angle to use, etc. To add veracity to his documentation, he made notes about the time, place and surreptitious interviews he conducted with his subjects. He calls his photographs a "reproduction of impressions made upon the photographer which he desires to repeat to others" <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos/>. The documentary photograph is a *mediated* communication of evidence.

Subhankar Banerjee's photography is organised into a project to persuade us of the connection between destruction of the Arctic and global issues such as resource wars, global warming and human rights <http://www.subhankarbanerjee.org/projects.html>. His premise is that oil development at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will "forever unravel the delicate pattern of nature" (Kammen, 2006, p. 287). When aggregated into exhibits or published photo essays, photographs become an argument with evidence for a claim:

The purpose of **argument** is to discover some version of the truth, using evidence and reasons. Argument of this sort leads audiences toward conviction, an agreement that a claim is true or reasonable, or that a course of action is desirable. The aim of **persuasion** is to change a point of view or to move others from conviction to action. In other words, writers or speakers argue to find some truth; they persuade when they think they already know it (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 2001, p. 6).

A photographer who is out to persuade you of something makes choices which support his truth rather than reveal the truthfulness of the moment. While a single documentary photograph might not convince you to oppose the Burmese government or to buy a hybrid car, at some point the preponderance of visual evidence may convince you that these are faithful representations of a repressive government's actions or massive climatic changes. These 'picture stories' <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3251645/>> and 'photo essays' <<http://www.unicef.org/photoessays/index-pe.html>> are visual rhetorical arguments.

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Conversations about rhetoric and veracity are at the heart of some of the most interesting aspects of visual information literacy: credibility and verification; point of view, reality and truth; journalistic ethics and aesthetics; visual plagiarism, homage or parody; privacy vs. the public's right to know.

## 6. What does it mean?



Newborn Tobias 5/31/05 ©Debbie Abilock



Adolf Hitler in Paris, 06/23/1940

Creator: General Services Administration. National Archives and Records Service.

Office of the National Archives. (ca. 1949 - 1985)

<http://www.archives.gov/research/ww2/photos/images/ww2-82.jpg>

**A visually literate person responds to the icons and symbols, alone and together, to interpret them and create narratives, within the context of culture and society.**

Semiotics is the study of how our reading of these visual signs and symbols communicates complicated ideas in the form of codes (Lester, 2000). A visually literate person responds to the icons and symbols, alone and together, to interpret them and create narratives, within the context of culture and society. In Lincoln's inauguration photograph, the United States flag and the Capitol behind him are symbols of the

authority being conveyed on a President who had not believed he would get this second chance. Dorothea Lange's iconic mother and child, 'The Migrant Mother,' came to represent all families struggling to survive during the Great Depression (Lester, 2000).

The David and Goliath narrative of the powerful vs. the weak is a classical theme in documentary photography. In Sebastião Salgado's photograph it is played out as a confrontation between one of the muscular but poorly-clothed Brazilian gold mine workers and a lone military policeman <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/14979580@N02/1569145310/>>. The photograph represents the workers' endurance and solidarity amid the squalor of the Serra Pelada mines. A Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph by Oded Balilty (Associated Press) shows a lone Jewish woman defying Israeli security forces as they remove illegal settlers from the West Bank.



There is always a temptation to arrange a scene for symbolic, aesthetic or dramatic effect. In this personal photograph, a viewer senses the great value of a newborn infant coloured by a rainbow – but, was the child moved to that spot? (Not moved but steadied – see the hand?) But wouldn't it have been more visually interesting if the baby had been crying? (Yes, but that's a manipulation we weren't willing to perform.)

Public figures are notorious for scripting the camera's eye to their advantage (Muir, 2005). Conscious of the propaganda value of defeating France, Hitler staged his conquest in front of the Eiffel Tower after Paris fell. After events have been shot, a photographer might be tempted to substitute a similar photograph taken at another time because it was 'better' – truer to the story, a more satisfying composition, sharper, etc. Subjects have been moved, and negatives cropped and retouched, for every imaginable purpose from enlightening to misleading the viewer.

Access to cheap, powerful editing software now provides every grassroots reporter and amateur photographer with sophisticated tools for photo manipulation. Computational photography automates thousands of microlenses, smart flashes, three-dimensional apertures, multiple exposures, and cameras stacked in arrays to allow a photographer to take multiple shots of a scene and mathematically combine them to choose the lighting, the camera position, the focus point, and even the expressions on people's faces (Barry, 2007).

Concerned about photo ethics have prompted a variety of responses. The Australian government has proposed a government code of conduct for the fashion industry out of concern for body image issues among young women. It would require Australian magazines to carry a disclaimer if their photographs of models are retouched. Professional guidelines for visual journalism have also been created to clarify the ethical issues of documentary photography. The German Press Council <[http://www.presserat.de/uploads/media/Press\\_Code.pdf](http://www.presserat.de/uploads/media/Press_Code.pdf)> makes a distinction based on the viewer's assumptions:

#### *Guideline 2.2 - Symbolic Photographs*

If an illustration, especially a photograph, can be taken to be a documentary picture by the casual reader, although it is a symbolic photograph, this must be clarified. For this reason:

- substitute or auxiliary illustrations (i.e., a similar subject at a different time, or a different subject at the same time, etc.),

- symbolic illustrations (reconstructed scenes, artificially visualised (sic) events to accompany text, etc.),
- photomontages or other changes must be clearly marked as such either in the caption or in the accompanying text. (Deutscher Presserat 2007, p. 10)

A Code of Ethics (2008) from The National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) promotes 'accurate and comprehensive representation', and cautions against active involvement in events that are being photographed and vigilance to avoid influence or coercion by others. As in good journalistic writing, the NPPA's assumption is that the documentary photographer should maintain a neutral point of view. When we look over the exhaustive list of permissible and impermissible procedures enumerated in their document 'To Protect The Integrity of Journalistic Photographs in Digital Editing' <<http://digitalcustom.com/howto/mediaguidelines.asp>>, we come to appreciate the ethical complexity facing news photographers. It distinguishes between 'true-to-life' enhancing procedures (e.g., removing red-eye, correcting colour, eliminating glare and repairing a deteriorating historical image) and impermissible alterations (e.g., doctoring a news photo to increase the impression of war damage; adding another animal to a nature scene to make it more picturesque; and falsifying photomicroscopical evidence for scientific profit or recognition). Egregious alteration procedures are easy to acknowledge but, just as there is a fascinating gray area between argument and persuasion, ethically ambiguous situations complicate the jobs of news, travel or nature editors. Indeed, the editor's challenge is to select from a series of similar photographs on the same subject, each of which conveys something slightly different. A photograph chosen to 'sell' the front page might conceivably be more compelling, but less 'true-to-life.' Each editorial choice is but one version of the reality.

One way for viewers to appreciate an editor's dilemma is to study images of the same event, selected from the front pages of multiple daily newspapers around the world. On the Newseum's Web site <http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/>, front pages can be examined by state, country or region, and then compared side-by-side using a tabbed browser. If the publications are in a language that you can't read, the image can be considered initially apart from the verbal, political and social context. If it is an English language publication, then the interplay between image, typography, layout, and knowledge of a particular time and place will contribute to the 'reading'. Whether it is a newspaper's front page, a scientific paper or a family album, the context in which the image is embedded is inevitably part of the communication. In another article, I show how one might use a news photograph to teach within an information literacy context (Abilock, 2003).

The International Visual Literacy Association's taxonomy and bibliography makes clear that visual communication is multidisciplinary. It includes:

*mass communication (including photography, advertising, and news editorial areas), film and cinema studies, education, art and aesthetics, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, architecture and even archaeology* (Moriarty and Kenney, n.d.).

Therefore, visual literacy can become an opportunity for the school librarian to collaborate with any subject area teacher.

When you first use rhetorical analysis to frame your visual information literacy teaching, you may feel, as I did, that the lesson was contrived. Yet the more I practised using the worksheet, the model and the perspectives, the more comfortable I felt applying the terms and the framework. The deconstruction of visual images is a powerful tool that learners can use to understand, evaluate and use information.

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#### **Web enrichment available at the following sites:**

[http://www.stanford.edu/~steener/f03/PWR1/research/visarg\\_samples.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/~steener/f03/PWR1/research/visarg_samples.htm)

<http://www.stanford.edu/~steener/f03/PWR1/research/visarg.htm>

[http://docs.google.com/View?docid=dg384q3w\\_36sxnwk&pli=1](http://docs.google.com/View?docid=dg384q3w_36sxnwk&pli=1)

<http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/>

<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/guides/pwrimages.html>

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**Debbie Abilock** is an educator with over 25 years experience as a Curriculum Coordinator, Director of a unified Library and Technology Department, and a school administrator. As founding editor of *Knowledge Quest*, the print journal of the American Association of School Librarians, she applies extensive knowledge of educational research to the practical issues and tasks of teaching and learning.