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Abstract

This article proposes an inter-active approach to the analysis of compositional elements of still visuals. This approach stems from the argument that the rhetorical efficiency of images is related less to their content per se than to how this content is displayed and organised. As such, we start from the premise that images are 'active', performing the visual equivalent of speech-acts (i.e. 'image-acts') through which they construct the world and impact upon their viewers. In their turn, the audiences of an image participate in interpreting its meaning and responding to its particular 'action'. This leads us to formulate a method based on the active engagement of researchers with the image at hand. We suggest a classification of compositional elements and identify ways in such elements can be analyzed and interpreted, casting light thus on the range of rhetorical and ideological effects that images so often achieve.

Keywords: image analysis, image-acts, inter-active method, compositional elements

Image analysis: An inter-active approach to compositional elements

An analytical engagement with images - be they family photos, political campaign posters or contemporary advertisements - often pivots on the question: 'what is in the image?'. This intuitive question seems misleading or, at the very least, incomplete. Content here is supposed to hold the key to meaning. The question, moreover, betrays a static approach to visual materials: meaning resides in the image, waiting to be discovered. A more dynamic perspective on images would perhaps encourage us to interrogate what they 'do' instead of focussing on what they contain. Furthermore, as is the case for most 'what' questions, one is invited to give a descriptive account by way of response, to provide a naturalistic depiction that grasps the image more as a window on the world than a reconstruction of it. Once we approach images as types of doing, as *actions* – and here we clearly draw inspiration from speech-act theory and discourse analysis – one's analytical attentions are drawn more to the question of *how it is* that they do what they do. One approach which would move us beyond a fixation on contents ('the what') and force us to focus on images-as-acts, is one which attends to the relations between formal or compositional elements ('the how') considered in respect of how they impact upon their audiences.

This is a article about viewers - and indeed researchers - *making sense of* images. The focus in much of what follows is on the formal aspects of images, on compositional elements, but always, importantly, with a view to how they exert a persuasive hold on an audience. We are concerned with the *rhetorical efficacy* of images, an aspect which is typically couched in form and implication and which works tacitly, surreptitiously, and, we would argue, that by far outstrips in influence the role of an image's most obvious or literal given contents (Williamson,

1978). In viewing images as acts, 'doings', as possessed of implications and force, we are reminded that images do not exist in a vacuum, but instead entail an audience upon whom they exert effects - hence our attention to the role viewers play in making sense of images. To be clear, by 'form' we refer to the rhetorical force of the image taken in conjunction with the technical considerations of how it is constructed. Part of our argument is that form is ultimately what dictates the efficacy of the image in performing a particular function (selling, seducing, convincing, titillating, etc.). We wish to stress, furthermore, that even when serving the same function, images do their respective work in a multitude of different and nuanced ways. A question of over-arching importance in directing our analysis – one which speaks also to our general aims in deconstructing images – is thus: *what is the particular function this image has, what does it want its audience to do, and how felicitous is it in achieving this end?* Mass produced commercial images are not successful unless they 'perform' in a certain manner, and it is our task as analysts to repeatedly ask what a given image is effectively doing, and what means it utilizes to this end. It is in this way that researchers can play a role in apprehending the rhetorical and ideological force of images which are most certainly crucial in the consolidation of various forms of influence and power.

Before continuing we wish to make a series of clarifications and point to a number of possible shortcomings. It is important, firstly, to acknowledge images as both meaningful (representational) and active (intentional). In turning our attentions predominantly to the latter we are not hoping to contribute to a dichotomy between form and content; ultimately these two must be seen as dynamically related. As we might put it: a 'how' question makes sense only when one understands the 'what' of the matter. Secondly, focusing primarily on the image itself

should not occur at the expense of understanding its production and relation to an audience (see Rose's, 2001, notions of 'site of production' and 'site of audiencing'). On the contrary, by focusing on the image as 'doing' rather than 'representing', we are forced to understand its production and the intentionality behind it, as well as the impact it has on its audience. It is in respect of the later that this paper hopes to make an original contribution, in proposing an analytical method for 'deconstructing' images that requires an active engagement of the researcher with the image. Conceptualised as an 'inter-active' method, the analytical suggestions that follow hope to increase the sensitivity of the viewer to the various ways in which images construct meaning whilst simultaneously advancing a set of critical skills for reading and dismantling images.

Importantly, our approach here does not consider in depth any one theoretical perspective. While the subsequent discussion is far from a-theoretical – it borrows from discourse analysis (hence the understanding of images as active and intentional) and traditional art history (hence the focus on compositional elements) – it does not fully represent any particular school of thought. This article is therefore *more about the questions* that we can ask when approaching images and less about the answers we give them. This is both a strength and a limitation. While the set of procedures discussed here can certainly offer a good practical guide for readers on how to start thinking about image analysis, they do not, by themselves, amount to a full methodology. This is why it is recommended for researchers to 'complement' and 'personalise' the present guidelines with the interests and tools offered by more established forms of image analysis. Our hope is that by systematising a series of questions we keep the exploration open-ended, able to stimulate the creativity of the researcher.

Images as active

One of the immediate problems one confronts in approaching image analysis is the sheer diversity and proliferation of images around us. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) note this state of affairs and point to the enormous variety of contemporary image culture comprised of, amongst others: painting, printmaking, photography, film, television/video, digital imaging and virtual reality. This heterogeneity makes images very hard to define and classify. Taking on this task, Mitchell (1986, p. 10) discussed images as a mixed 'family' including various elements: graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, 'species', appearances), mental (dreams, memories, fantasies) and verbal (metaphors, descriptions). It is no wonder then that social scientists can feel quite lost when it comes to engaging with images, and to a large degree have preferred not to. What is qualified as 'visual neglect' is precisely the scientific drive of prioritising words over images (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine & Newbold, 1998, p. 191; Bakewell, 1998). Under these circumstances image-based research has been seriously lagging behind spoken/written language studies. Prosser notes: "methodological textbooks all too often treat images with scant regard if at all" (1996, p. 26). Rose (2001) has likewise lamented the scarcity of guides focused on image interpretation.

This relative neglect of adequate methodological instruments to analyse images means that we run the risk of misconstruing their rhetorical value. To be sure, a traditional (positivist) reading of images saw them in 'static' terms, a mere copy of the 'real' to be used as 'evidence' when and if necessary. This is particularly relevant it the case of photography that, for the most part of the nineteenth century, was considered in purely reflective terms and so:

"(...) photographic image acquired truth-value. A photograph was seen as *inherently*

objective… The camera produced *visual facts* or *documents*. Thus, the very practice of

photography could be said to offer a *documentary objectivity* to the images which it

created" (Hamilton, 1997, p. 83).

This is how even today photography used in the media tends to have a "powerful

authenticating role" (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 201) and the veracity of news-media accounts is

increased by utilizing images alongside texts, images which perform the function not merely of

illustrating written text, but of indexing the events themselves. The working consensus that 'the

camera can't lie' has nevertheless been thoroughly criticised in recent decades, resulting in the

current *paradox of photography*, the photograph being at once subjective and objective,

natural and cultural (Barthes, 1977). With the modern-day possibilities of digital image

manipulation and the increasing acknowledgement that photographs are the 'contrived' result

of a series of technical, aesthetic and subjective choices of their author (Goldstein, 2007), "the

illusion of evidence is ending" (Winston, 1998, p. 60). Crucially, images no less than written

texts are *ideologically active* through the work of their creators and publishers. One way of

linking an attention to the ideological objectives of image to their more localized functionality is

by identifying their particular intention. In what follows we adopt Banks' (2001) position,

namely that all images may be assigned a specific intentionality, an intentionality which makes

them active in particular ways for particular audiences.

It helps here to refer to Berger's famous claim that "every image embodies a way of

seeing" (1972, p. 10). This statement asserts simultaneously that an image is a sight –

something that is looked at and proposed for others to look at as well – and that looking is a social practice in itself, "an activity that involves a greater sense of purpose and direction" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 10). Such a way of seeing is never inconsequential as Berger makes clear in respect of advertisements. Ads are an interesting illustration for our thesis that 'images are active' since the way of seeing they propose (that of the brand, the buyers and, ultimately, ourselves) is undoubtedly intentional (Barthes, 1977). What does one find in an ad? "An image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell" (Berger, 1972, p. 132). Advertisements, according to Berger, are all about the 'future buyer', the state the buyer will get to once the product is acquired: that of becoming the envy of others.

The way of seeing embodied in the image is therefore fabricated by the advertiser and yet proposed to the viewer as personal and also as the result of a freedom of choice. However, as noted by Williamson (1978), advertisements depend on symbols and referent systems that precisely delimit our interpretive freedom. Carefully designed images conform to certain codes of depiction, to the 'rules' of a given 'genre of looking'. Advertised images are therefore active in terms of their audience since they themselves construct a place for an "idealised viewer" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). This invites a series of questions regarding: the particular position a given image confers upon its viewers; the type of relation it hopes to engender to the content on display; the type of 'subjectivity-effects' it hopes to generate. Stuart Hall's reflections on the subject-positions allocated in this way is apposite. We become the subjects of an image by 'subjecting' ourselves to its meaning and regulation, adopting the position from which it makes most sense. The notion of subject-positions provides an interesting explanations for why and how images 'work':

"[P]ornography produced for men will only 'work' for women… [if] women put themselves in the position of the 'desiring male voyeur' – which is the ideal subject-position which the discourse of male pornography constructs – and look at the models from this 'masculine' discursive position" (Hall, 1997b, p. 56).

Hall's approach does not of course deny the active role of viewers in the making of images. Although highly-produced popular image-culture aims to both delimit and stimulate a stable set of 'looking (subject) positions' it is nonetheless true that there is no one look, no determined single 'way of seeing' produced by an image. Images need their viewers to complete them; it is only via the imaginative investment of an audience that an effective circuit of understanding is achieved. This poses an obvious qualification for image analysis: our interpretative engagement must remain open-ended; an image has no single destination. Let us conclude this section by reiterating that images can be assigned an intentionality and that, in addition, they 'do something' (Rose, 2001, p. 10), they are acts, 'doings' which serve diverse and strategic ends. The literature is not lacking when it comes to the question of what exactly it is that images do. For Mitchell (1986, p. 2), images "speak for themselves by persuading, telling stories, or describing". Hansen and colleagues (1998, p. 199) affirm the "power of an image to appeal to, mobilise, or engage with deep-seated feelings, hopes and fears". In respect of the 'significant power' images possess, Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p. 10) refer to "the power to conjure an absent person, the power to calm or incite to action, the power to persuade or mystify". Not only do images betray the mark of an active author, they also incur active engagement on the

part of the viewers. Given the performative force of the image we are arguing for, it makes sense to draw on Austin's (1962) well-known notion of the 'speech-act', and to posit the role of an '*image-act*' (see also Bakewell, 1998). Just as words do, images act on us by informing, ordering, warning, inspiring, persuading, or deterring. In relation to 'image-acts' we thus need to inquire about: a) the particular rhetorical accomplishment an image is trying to produce (conditioned of course by institutional agendas underwriting its publication); b) the formal means through which these accomplishments are pursued; and c) the field of subjectivity-effects activated by its reception.

Image analysis as inter-active

Image analysis is a heterogeneous and growing field in which a variety of visual materials are considered in relation to an unwieldy variety of topics. Unsurprisingly, visual material is approached from equally varied theoretical and methodological positions. Content analysis, for example, focuses on breaking down and categorizing image contents, quantifying and grouping visual components (Bell, 2001). Such an approach has the advantage of offering ready-to-hand (often quantitative) information, generally about large datasets. Semiotics, by contrast, remains preoccupied with uncovering multiple layers of meaning within every image, with tracing the overlapping registers of denotation (what is depicted) and connotation (what is expressed through what is being depicted) (see Penn, 2000; Rose, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2001). Critical discourse analysis emphasizes the dimension of power and ideological influence, it aims to capture the political nature of 'visual texts' (Keats, 2009) which it views as aspects of broader representational systems (Hall, 1997a). What is sometimes lacking in practical applications of the above ideas is the question – a perennial challenge for qualitative research – of how one

effectively moves from *descriptive* to a *properly analytical* or *adequately interpretative* engagement with images. This is the gap between *what the image contains* and *what it effectively does*, between image *as presented* and its broader *ideological efficacy*.

The literature contains some evocative suggestions as to how this gap might be traversed. Collier (2001, p. 39) outlines four stages as a basic model of analysis: 1) observing the data, 'listening' to its overtones and subtleties, attending to contrasting patterns; 2) making an inventory or log of all images; 3) structuring the analysis by means of applying specific questions to the evidence; and 4) returning to the data to locate the results of analysis 'in context'. For Collier, first reactions to an image are important; they provide clues for deciphering latent messages. Goldstein (2007, p. 79) likewise emphasizes this receptive attitude: "When looking at an image, first and foremost, I note my emotional response: disgust, envy, heat, sensuality – my first eye-brain impressions". What is thus advocated is a 'to-and-fro' process of analysis that attends both to the formal features of the image and the subjective effects they have on viewers, two registers of analysis that must be considered in tandem. This poses the question of methodological rigour in analysis. It highlights indeed the need to marry the brainstorming initial phases of one's analysis, where associations, speculative hypotheses and creative ideas are generated, with the task of identifying the formal features that might be at work in engendering such effects. The analysis of any representational form, be it text of image, is "a constructive process", where "meaning is generated in the interaction of the reader with the material" (Penn, 2000, p. 231). Given that both meanings and speech- (or image-) acts are produced within an relationship, we cannot assume we have grasped the rhetorical or

ideological import of an image by considering the exclusive contribution of either the image or the reader alone.

This is a point worth expanding upon: the activity of the image leaves a 'mark' on the viewer; it is this reception, its quality and value, that we would encourage researchers to be aware of, to strive to capture in their analysis. A reception is, of course, a re-construction, the effects of which can invaluably inform interpretative engagement. The active engagement that we endorse in what follows is achieved by approaching the image with a set of analytical procedures and manipulations that help deconstruct its rhetorical and performative properties. Hence our description of this method as 'inter-active': *the researcher here acts on the image just as the image acts on him/her*. Our hope is that by changing the image through a given set of procedures we effectively produce a new image, which, through its altered effects, can tell us a lot about the original.

How then might we go about 'acting upon', manipulating, formal facets of an image? It helps here to distinguish four types of formal intervention one can make in relation to an image. One can: a) remove elements (i.e. how might we affect the given 'way of seeing' by means of select subtractions?); b) replace or substitute elements, as in Hansen et al's (1998) 'commutation test' (i.e. affect the image by displacing various objects or components with others); c) amplify and/or reduce particular elements (formal manipulations of size, colour, intensity, etc.); d) emphasize and schematize elements (through drawing on the picture, showing up relations of symmetry, tracing contour and segmentation lines, etc.).

An inter-active approach to compositional elements

Much qualitative analysis can be said to be largely descriptive in nature, failing, that is, to offer interpretations as to what the given data effectively *means* and *does*. One of our key objectives in presenting a series of analytical procedures is precisely to stimulate such interpretative engagements. This leads to several important qualifications. Firstly, the analytic methods offered below are suggestions that can, and indeed *should,* be complemented with others. These procedures are offered in the service of making sense of images; they are not in and of themselves adequate for interpretative analysis. To make such a mistake would be to remain at the level of descriptive engagement. As already intimated: there is no one way to read a set of compositional elements. The procedures we outline below should not be followed prescriptively; they provide the researcher with a matrix of sorts with which to begin their own explorative analysis of images. The colour within an image, for example, may work to set up resonances across the picture plane (playing off, emphasising one area against another); or it may serve chiefly to modulate form, to give shapeliness; or to contrast a sense of warmth with that of coldness. This implies that it will often suffice to be selective in the compositional elements we choose to address. In many instances only certain of the compositional elements discussed below can be fruitfully analyzed; not all such elements contribute to the 'constructions' of an image at any one time. One should note here also that the actual context of the image – as billboard, magazine advertisement, snap-shot photo, etc. – proves an obvious and vital consideration in ascertaining the rhetorical and performative impact of the image. Such factors should certainly feature in an analysis (see recommendations by Rose, 2001), although here we intend to focus on the inter-active field of the compositional elements of the

image as impacting upon and effected by the researcher.

In beginning an image-analysis, it is important to have an idea of the kinds of compositional or formal elements one can look for in an image. For still visuals these could be classified as:

1) Sensory elements: colour, lighting and texture;

2) Structural elements: axes, perspective and depth;

3) Dynamic elements: orientation of figure, gaze and point of tension;

4) Emerging elements: directionality and focal point.

This is not of course an exhaustive list; it serves as an initial orientation, a means of outlining the main components in each of these rudimentary categories. Sensory here, to elaborate briefly, refers to how an image engages the senses directly. Structural relates to the organisation of the image (vectors within the image, upward, sideward, forward, the angling of the picture, its recessional space). Dynamic elements connect to action and movement, and therefore to any figure (human or not) in the image. Finally, emerging aspects are resulting properties of the formal and content elements working together to generate 'direction' and points of interest within the image. Our approach, as we hope is by now evident, never simply lists contents, but always insists on discussiing how contents are rendered, equipped thus with rhetorical competence and intentionality.

Sensory elements: colour and texture

Colour is an essential element in the visual economy of an image. Colours are useful in drawing attention to certain aspects of the image, and as a means of prioritising contents or setting up relations (harmonious or disjunctive) between them. When we encounter a coloured picture it

is thus useful to note how colour is used to create links, associations between different objects, to observe how relations of dissonance and/or harmony are set up. The colours of an appealing natural landscape for example – blues, greens – might echo the use of similar colours in the design of a desirable product, in the logo of a brand, as might pairings of complementary colours do. One might consider in this respect the role colour plays in linking text and other visual components.

It is likewise helpful to ask what the dominant or 'framing' colour is in a given image, to query its role in 'setting the scene', in unifying the picture, in linking the contents of an image to a series of associative implications and values. The genre of travel advertisements and postcard imagery makes for a useful example: natural colours (typically the blues of sea or sky) often predominate here, playing a key role in building the chromatic harmony of the image. Rhythms, patterns, associations set up by repeated use of colours are often a crucial rhetorical feature of the image itself. Williamson (1978) makes mention of how such resonances come to imbue essentially uninteresting consumer products with types of identity. Glossy-page fashion advertising excels at this, setting up a field of visual associations in the colour-pairings of models and their backgrounds, such that attributions we make of a romantic setting infuse the persona of both the model and the advertised product. Similarly, powerful jarring and separating effects can be emphasized in this way, through 'disconnects' of colour often used alongside strategic geometrical and spatial devices to play up such effects. Importantly also, the very lack of colour, as in the deliberate use of black and white, has a particular function, connoting sometimes the effect of history being made, exudes in others a sense of the classic, the timeless. We have given only the briefest evocation here of how colour might be used. Its

functionality in images is virtually endless: colour can be a means of creating a sense of substantiality; a device that heightens the feel of realism, actuality; that accentuates or highlights aspects of an image; used to engender effects of distance or proximity, naturalness or artificiality. It falls on the researcher to develop such observations in relation to the particular images analysed.

Colour is typically complemented by other sensory qualities such as *texture*. Often images lend themselves to 'tactility' through different combinations of visual textures, which thus add to their evocative nature. As in the case of colour, it helps to briefly focus on this dimension, to question how such tactile qualities are put to work in the image, to what ends. Are we dealing with effects of smoothness, friction, slipperiness, etc., and how are these effects repeated and contrasted within the image itself? Are central figures or products within an image given a tactile grounding? This was an old trick of renaissance portraiture that worked to show off the artist's skill and create effects of exaggerated realism. Holbien's 'Ambassadors' is a case in point in which the 'touchable' quality of various desirable features within the painting (the jewelled hilt of a sword, the furs worn by the protagonists, even the shiny marble floor) is heighten by the consummate skill of the artist. The seductions of this compositional dimension are clearly evident in fashion photography of expensive luxury products. Brand-label clothes, jewellery and watches are displayed not only in high-definition colour – such that their tactile qualities are heightened – but in such a way that sympathetic effects are generated: one can imagine what such goods would feel like under one's fingers, their weight, etc. One might think also here of the shiny surface of new electronic products – cell-phones, iPods, cameras – the pure newness and untouched perfection thus signalled. A last example may be drawn from the

glamour photography of men's magazines: the titillating effect of such images has much to do with the 'touchability' of the body in question which has been amplified through effects of lighting, modelling, the interplay of different surfaces, the utilization of stark contrasts.

All of the above considerations will inform an interpretation of how formal compositional elements extend the rhetorical or speech-act functions of a given image. One might experiment – in line with our inter-active approach – by altering such compositional elements, gaining thus a sense of how the image might be made more or less effective at its instrumental objective. Here the role of the researcher starts to feel more like that of the producer of images in much the same way that toward the end of a discourse analysis the analyst becomes attuned to how one might write 'in the voice' of the discourse in question.

For the purposes of the analysis one might take on the role of the editor of the image, a task aided by the use of software such as Photoshop that enables one to manipulate digital imagery. How then might the function of the image be amplified or subverted? For example, what reversals and/or substitutions of colour might amplify or subvert the function of the image? How, furthermore, would rhetorical effects of the image be affected by turning black and white into colour and vice versa? Do changes in the lightness and darkness of tonality produce a different set of subjective responses? In short: how might the same content be differently 'figured' by making such changes?

Structural elements: axes and perspective

Every image can be said to possess a structure or organisation of elements that can be thought of in terms of spatial relations: vertical and horizontal axes; up, down, leftward and rightward trajectories; anglings of the content; recessional depth and perspective all play their part here.

These elements provide a view, an 'arrangement of sight', that incurs subjective effects. Vertical and horizontal axes, like the portrait or landscape format, provide a general orientation in reference to the image-content. The perspective in the image, the angling of the subject-matter across foreground, middle-ground and background, gives us important clues as to the movement in and out of the picture, to the movement within it, and regards our relationship to what it contains.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) consider the left-hand side of the picture to depict the 'given'; the right to contain the 'new'; the upper aspect is typically associated with the 'ideal'; the lower with the 'actual'. They likewise maintain that close-ups (head and shoulders) usually denote an intimate or personal relationship, whereas a medium shot (cutting the figure from the waist) is said to indicate a social relationship; long shots (where the figure is more distanced) suggest an impersonal relationship. Clearly, such observations remain tied to the particular pictorial conventions and codes of a given genre; we hope nonetheless that they prompt questioning as to the particular uses of these aspects of the image within researchers' own chosen images. The contingency of such spatial codes is worth emphasizing. Rather than assuming the universality of the top-to-bottom, left-to-right directionality of US and Eurocentric reading patterns, one should note the example of different cultural situations, where books are read 'back to front' (as in Japan), or bottom-to-top, right-to-left.

In terms of the inter-active component of analysis: what is the effect of rotating the image to the left or the right, of flipping it over, tracing left-to-right or right-to-left diagonals or bisecting it (on either horizontal or vertical axes)? What are the subjective effects of this change to the image's orientation; a different sense of momentum, directionality, perhaps? We might

ask: does the picture make use of either strong horizontal or strong vertical lines of arrangement? What does this verticality or horizontality imply for the figures or objects within the image? Furthermore, is there is a horizon-line in the image, a strong vertical that divides up the picture plan, and, if so, what does such a division imply; what relationships does it imply regarding both the contents within the image and between viewer and picture itself? The glamour photography of men's magazines often emphasizes a horizontal orientation in the codes depicting women; the implied passive stance – as opposed to the more active associations of verticality – no doubt play their part in a patriarchal gendering of the image, in emphasizing the supine submissiveness of the subject. Spatial divisions also play their role in the sexualisation of the image: women are often posed on a threshold dividing inside and outside; the intimation here, in the linking of external and intimate space, is seemingly one of invitation, sexual availability.

Noting the contents of the foreground, 'middle ground' and background of the image, and the effects of the interplay between these spatial components, likewise proves useful. Here it pays to ask whether the image effectively utilizes recessional space, a sense of depth and distance; or is it flat, starkly two-dimensional? Provocative sexual imagery – to continue the above example – often uses foreground/background tensions to create the impression that the body of the model is sliding forward, out of the image, toward the viewer. How, we might ask, do spatial arrangements engender effects of the viewer being *pulled into*, or certain object being *pushed out of* the image. A useful analytical exercise in this respect would be to imagine viewing the portrayed image 'side on' (at a 90 degree angle), plotting the distance and proximity of its contents to the dividing-line of the 'surface' of the image: what items are made

to extrude, what others to recede, and to what overall effect? To these considerations we may add another: is there a 'vanishing-point' within the image, a point where all the lines of the picture seem to converge? The earlier example of travel photography is again helpful: consider postcard images of uninhabited landscapes where a central rhetorical feature of the image is its evocation of an empty, unfolding, recessional space arranged around the pull of a distant horizon that draws the viewer in.

The question of *perspective* provides a further line of enquiry: what view, perspective on the given subject-matter does an image present? If the image were to 'come alive' with our eyes occupying the position of the camera lens, then what relationship would be implied between viewer and subject? A relationship of intimacy perhaps, or of distance, intimidation, subordination, possibly even of power, prerogative, ownership?

Dynamic elements: orientation of figure, gaze and point of tension

Although dynamism may be conveyed by an image that contains no human figures, the role of figures is a particularly effective way of creating effects of dynamism. Put simply, the human or (more generally considered) anthropomorphic figure, typically constitutes a focus of attention in our subjective engagements with images. What we are concerned with here is not so much the projective attribution of an identity or persona, or the 'inter-subjectivity effect' of the posited relationship between viewer and subject (although the latter is worth considering). We are more concerned here with the dynamic arrangement of the human body and how it relates to the picture plane. This attention to how the body is placed obviously includes the issue – touched on under the topic of perspective – of our vantage-point on the figure, i.e. from above, below, behind, at eye-level, etc. each of which brings with it an associative implication (of,

potentially, superiority, subservience, control, equality, respectively). We may draw on Kress and van Leuven (1996) to extend this suggestion: a person directly facing the viewer indicates engagement, a figure represented in profile implies greater detachment.

Hands and eyes – whose expressive fluency has often been noticed – are worth remarking on. The gestures, indications and expressions of hands have great symbolic value, but are useful also as compositional vehicles that reinforce lines and shapes within the composition. They are likewise useful in directing the viewer's eyes to and away from the focal-point of the image. It is not for nothing, we might say, that television presenters need to know 'what to do with their hands', a comment which emphasizes the potential of hands as gestural markers to detract from other points of interest. Eyes, similarly expressive of mood and state of mind, are also a useful means of gauging the relationship set up between viewer and subject, be this one of confrontation, desire, deference, etc. Any depicted person whose gaze meets ours, remarks Cross, engages us "by way of a vector, an imaginary line connecting the subject to the reader/viewer" (2006, p. 179). Similarly relevant, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) distinguish between 'demand' pictures, where figures in the picture look at us, 'symbolically demanding something from the viewer', and 'offer' pictures, in which viewers look at the character without being 'seen' and an 'offer of information' is therefore made. How then, we might ask, do the eyes of the subject meet the gaze of the viewer; do they draw us in, or, alternatively, do they look away; is the subject aware of the presence of a viewer; is the viewer a trusted presence or are they a voyeur; how might this relationship of gazes (in and out of the picture) best be described? Attempts to assess the subjectivity-effects of images here might involve tilting the picture upside down, an exercise which can have the effect of desubjectifying the subject of the

image, diminishing as it does one's engagement with the character, reducing our capacity to 'read' the subjective expression. Interestingly also, covering the gaze or expression of the subject often profoundly alters one's response to the image and its imagined meaning calling into attention what our subjective relationship to it had been. For some, comments regarding the nature of the inter-subjectivity of the imaged gaze poses the problem of gratuitous interpretative latitude. We would suggest that such speculative analytical remarks need remain hypothetical, and can most usefully be developed – or cast aside – by linking them to emerging patterns within a set of interpretative observations.

Interventions in the image here may include tracing a grid of equal-sized squares onto the contents of the image. This would enable one – content-analysis style – to quantify the proportion of the image allocated to certain objects, and to consider how the intentionality and meaning of the image might be effected by changes at this level. Such a grid would likewise enable one to measure the subject-to-background ratio which is often a crucial indication of the function of the image (think, for example, of the proportion of the pornographic image devoted to flesh), important also in creating effects of disproportion, scale and size. One may generate a variety of ratios in response to a wide variety of images – an example would be the ratio of picture-area dedicated to products or brands in advertising imagery. Our wish is not to prescribe what rations may be generated in this way, or how they might be used, but simply to suggest that they can be used to telling effect in image-analysis.

A further intervention concerns experimenting with the size of the image (blowing it up, decreasing it), asking then in effect how the scale of the image impacts on its message. This is a useful exercise in the era of billboard and mobile-phone advertising in which a sense of what

'works big' (a product with pretensions to grandiosity?) or, alternatively, small (a more modest or discrete type of product?), can be crucial to the success of a campaign. A further ratio can be utilized here: the size and scale of what is depicted in a given image relative to the 'real-life' size and scale of the viewer outside of the image.

Viewing a (static) image as a paused moment, a proverbial 'slice of time', draws our attention to another variable of pictorial dynamism: the tension of successive moments. It helps here to imagine the sequence of which a given image may be a part, to ask what soon *will* happen or *has just* happened. This helps to pinpoint the narrative tension of an image, and, very often, to indicate its focal-point, that is, the epi-center of the image's claim on the viewer's attention. More than this, it helps to emphasize the efficacy of the static medium: what is the effect of selecting *this* as opposed to other moments; what is achieved by freezing time at this point? The answers are as varied as the field of images: to perpetuate an experience perhaps, to create a sense of anticipation, to highlight an emotion, to indicate the making of history, etc. Approaching the image as a single shot in a film that we could fast-forward or rewind sometimes emphasizes the posed and hence contrived nature of certain images, breaking the magic of the imagined reality of the pictured scene.

Emerging elements: directionality and focal point

All the compositional elements described thus far verge on the terrain of what we call 'emergent properties'. Directionality in this context refers to the general 'movement' within the picture, effects of movement or momentum (left-to-right, top-to-bottom, etc.) This is particularly important for understanding what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) called the 'reading paths' within the image, that is, the issue of how one's eye is lead around the image,

be it due to the arrangement of geometrical forms, the influence of given 'lines of direction', or considerations of perspective, spatial orientation, etc. Some reflections for analysis follow. Does the image imply a sense of movement; what compositional elements (lines, shapes, colours) contribute to such an effect; and what might this suggest in terms of the inter-relationships of components of the image, and for the relationship of the viewer to the image? Does the picture feel weighted on one side, 'heavier' in foreground or background; is there a 'gravity' to the image, a 'pulling' of either the viewer or its own contents toward a section of the image (or, alternatively, *away from it*); what, furthermore, are the rhetorical effects of such weightings and movements?

The focal-point is the 'centre of looking' within the picture, that point (or those point*s*) to which the eye is most quickly drawn, and that is most able to hold its interest. The focal-point traditionally makes for the 'fulcrum' of the image. Typically reserved for what is most important within a picture, the focal-point enables us to isolate a set of relations within the form and content of the image, relations pertaining to subsidiary and primary elements, to hierarchies of importance within the picture. Of course, not all images have an evident focal-point – this depends on how carefully the picture has been designed – and in many instances it is difficult to ascertain with certainty what the focal-point might be. It is nonetheless a useful analytical exercise to search for one. It heightens one's attention not only to what the image seeks to foreground, but to the intentionality of the 'image-act' of the given picture.

To establish a possible focal-point it helps to attend to the gestures of figures within the image (i.e. what they point to, indicate towards, or gaze at; to consider what holds *their* attention). Likewise useful – another intervention in the image – is the act of bisecting the

picture with diagonal and horizontal/vertical lines. Doing so conveys our attention to the centre of the image – which typically maintains its own 'gravitational force' as an area of prioritization and importance – and to those objects or facets of the image that are offset by being placed adjacent to it. (Such an exercise is likewise an instructive means of isolating the geometrical forms and lines of direction that structure and balance the image.) One might furthermore look to the most well-lit areas of the image, focussing on particularly illuminated sections of the picture plane, questioning how effects of lighting are used to prioritize and foreground aspects within the image.

Concluding thoughts

The approach to image-analysis developed above prioritizes not only an attention to compositional elements but also an inter-active orientation in the interpretations it hopes to stimulate. With regards to each of the compositional elements discussed earlier, we hope to encourage the questions: 'how does this aspect contribute to the overall strategic intention of the image?', and 'what types of intervention within the image might enable us to pin-point or disrupt its particular rhetorical efficacy?' Given the constraints of space we have mentioned only a few of the great many lines of speculation and interpretation that could be developed in view of such an agenda. Importantly also, the suggestions we have made are best utilized in conjunction, engaged within the context of multiple observations made of various dimensions of a picture's diverse compositional elements. If we take seriously the thesis that the efficacy of an image is over-determined by various compositional aspects which, furthermore, have the ability to short-circuit our more critical sensibilities, then reading for the subjectivity-effects of formal aspects is a crucial aspect of image-analysis.

We should stress also the importance of analysing not just one but a number of images within a given series. Doing so enables one to test emerging hypotheses and speculations across a 'population' of similar images. It is likewise helpful to query whether assertions made of the rhetorical role of certain compositional elements hold also for others (i.e. that they aim at a similar subjective effect in audience). One is able in this respect to build a stronger, and more unified interpretation. It is worthwhile qualifying here that there is only so much one can do *within* the image. It will often be necessary to tie the analysis of an image to a theoretical framework or critical perspective. Analysing an image of pornography from a feminist perspective, for example, gives one the opportunity to employ a wide range of theories and concepts as to the workings of patriarchy that may help cast light on the intentionality of the image and its rhetoric of form. This being said, one should nonetheless bear in mind that a good empirical analysis needs to be able to move beyond the theories it may draw on; it should stretch and develop them, otherwise the analysis in question risks merely duplicating the theory.

Let us end by responding to a criticism that is often aimed at image-analysis, an objection nicely paraphrased by Penn (2000, p. 239) apropos semiology, namely the idea that such forms of analysis are "only capable of offering impressionistic insights into the construction of meaning…that there is no guarantee that different analysts will produce similar accounts". It is worth quoting Stuart Hall's response to this dilemma:

"[T]here is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?'… Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one, true meaning', or

that meanings won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative –

a debate between, not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but between equally plausible,

though sometimes competing and contested, meanings and interpretations. The best

way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try

to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of

signification used, and what meanings they seem… to be producing" (Hall, 1997a, p. 9).

Not only do we endorse this view, we take it as an invitation to innovation and experimentation

within image-analysis. Flexibility and interpretative openness, that is to say, should be seen not

as a failing, but as a great potential asset in the analysis of images. As Collier (2001, p. 59)

asserts, interpretative "conclusions lie beyond information and description… they entail

creative and artistic processes". The interpretative analysis of images amounts neither to a

prescriptive set of guidelines, nor to a mechanistic series of procedures; our notion of inter-

active analysis illustrates exactly this. It requires, by contrast, that the researcher "respond

artistically or intuitively to visual images in research" (Collier, 2001, p. 59). In view of the scope

and open-endedness of analytical techniques discussed above we hope to have shown just this,

that the work of image-analysis requires virtually the same level of creativity as is required for

the initial creation of images.

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