

## VISUAL LITERACY: REVOLUTION, ARTS, & MIRRORS

(From Chapter 28 – *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*)



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### Visual Literacy

You've arrived at an interesting point in the book. This paper beast is now significantly larger than my last two books but there are still a lot of things I'm interested in talking with you about... specifically the definition of visual literacy, the education of young artists with head-strong dreams, and where alternative processes and the integration of photography with all of the other mediums, will fit in the grand puzzle of this rapidly changing medium. The inclusion of this essay may initially seem out of context for a book dealing with alternative processes but it actually couldn't be more relevant. With digital imaging hosting the new "*mushy democracy*" of photographic expression; one in which the equipment finds the faces, exposes for neutral feeling, and

then makes the perfect print, there is literally a *hunger* for the accident and the imperfect raw artifacts of life. The genre of alt pro satiates this need in spades and celebrates, with every attempt, success, and failure, the love of the hand-made image and its process.

Photography is the one universal form of expression in which people in many cultures happily participate. I will assume you realize I am making a point and not ignoring the popularity of singing, dancing, and making love. When questioned about the order that things are rescued when fleeing a burning house, most respondents will say children, pets, and family photographs. That might now be altered to children, pets, and electronic device. I remember sitting in a theater and watching *Schindler's List*. In the scene where the audience gets its first visual sense of the horror to be realized in the concentration camps, and of the people being stripped of their possessions, the camera pans from one pile of belongings to the next ... shoes, glasses, suitcases. The audience was still and silent until the camera's eye paused on a pile of family photographs... and then I remember a collective inhalation and gasp taking the air from the room. Alas, things change quickly and the treasured family album has been replaced with whatever has been saved on your telephone.

My students' generation is the most visually sophisticated in history. They arrive from high school with a visual vocabulary that dwarfs that of their parent's generation. They may not know all of the buzz-words and political *art-speak* yet... but the ease, and facility, of their visual expression is stunning. So many times I've finished running a critique seminar and thought how amazing it would have been to have possessed the operant visual-conditioning they have grown up with when I earned my degrees at Massachusetts College of Art and the Rhode Island School of Design. That's when I begin to think about *how* they see, versus *what* they see. With machines and popular media defining what the seemingly easy to explain words *good* and *art* mean, the best place to begin the conversation is to tell you what I believe.

For me, visual literacy is not simply the ability to see and identify what is seen. More to the point, it is the capacity to interpret, associate, and contextualize and to cognitively communicate with signs, symbols, codes, marks, signals, and metaphors. A

visually literate person draws upon a knowledge base that includes cultural and art history, criticism, and semiotics... the academic vessel that sails the sea of meaning and how that meaning is established and understood. Don't get fidgety and impatient here. I won't be going on an academic romp through the incomprehensible and political minefields of semiotic and post-structuralist theory, and I promise not to beat on you with important life issues such as modalities, representation, paradigms and syntagmatic analysis. However, what I will do is offer you a simple and short trip into Critical Theoryland so that you can impress your friends at dinner. What was the joke in Daniel Chandler's, *Semiotics for Beginners*? ... "What do you get if you cross a semiotician with a member of the Mafia? An offer you can't understand."

### **A Short Trip Into Critical Theoryland**

I'm not a great fan of critical theory discussions because, like most committee meetings in academia, they eventually distill into endless hours of intelligent people playing with themselves. But since you asked...

This short trip begins with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's observations that when considering image or language, one will usually find a *signifier*, or the form that a sign takes, and the *signified*, the concept it represents. Read that again. A common example of what this means is apple vs. Apple... a simple fruit popular in biblical dialogues, or the company that made the computer I'm working on... or in an entirely different context, a tattoo of either of these *apples* inked into someone's flesh for life... quite a commitment to the signified. You can see where I'm heading.

Saussure referred to this as a *dyadic*, or a 2-part model that defined a *sign*. In this case, each element in the conversation, whether it was the fruit apple or the business Apple, required an explanation. As the explanation was being offered, the discussion and meanings became increasingly complicated because each component required still more interpretations due to its contextual association.

Saussure believed that all languages have their own concepts (*the signifieds*) and sound images, (*the signifiers*). He believed that languages have a relationship within the comparison of their elements, and that their words and accepted meanings only become

clarified by comparing and distinguishing the difference in their meaning to one another.

Again, this exercise becomes even more obtuse as the person explaining the words works harder to make meaning of the signs and signifiers... ignoring the truth that what something means always changes with each individual listener's life experience or in what social or cultural context it was seen or experienced in. Think of the apple / Apple tattoo etched into someone's flesh forever and then complicate this meaning by adding the context of where that person chose to place the tattoo on their body. This would mean that the original meaning of the apple tattoo would *always be altered by context*, whether personal, cultural, political, or in this case, anatomical.

Here's another simple example. Margaret Bourke White's photograph of people standing in a relief line after the great Louisville Flood in 1937... beneath a sign boasting that we lived in a country with the "World's Highest Standard of Living."



*Fig 28- 11 here, Margaret Bourke White, The Louisville Flood, 1937*

The American subscribers of Life magazine saw this image as an example of Christian charity and benevolence personified; where the hungry and displaced people of Louisville could be cared for by those who were unaffected by the floods... the perfect 2-dimensional family that hovered above them like gods driving down from Olympus.

America's political and social critics at the time used this identical image in a different way; to signify the oppression of the poor, non-white people in America by those above them made up of white dad, white mom, two white kids, perched like angel wings on the mother's shoulders, and a white dog... all smiling, chubby, and out for a drive. This cartoon of America, floating above the people in the relief line, depicted the signifiers and the signified simultaneously... simply because the medium of photography allowed that confluence to happen.

French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, proverbial "Papa Bear" of the Post-Structuralists, argued that meaning was simply an endless chain of deferments (remember the apple / Apple tattoo) of meaning and that the difference between what is signified, and the signifier, was the forever-unexplained space in between the two words. And what this means, again, is that context is everything.

A photograph, because of its specific relationship to reality and time, constantly shifts from one meaning to another based upon our personal, cultural, or political perspective and knowledge. A photograph of an airplane flying low over a crowded urban environment meant one thing before September 11th... and quite another on September 12th.

Thus endeth the short trip to Theoryland.

## **Creativity and Language**

Visual Literacy means different things to different people. Following the merger of The Art Institute of Boston with Lesley University in 1998, now the College of Art and Design where I am the Director of the MFA in Photography and Integrated Media, some important points came to light about culture and context. Here's the proverbial rub... the issues relating to visual literacy, and those that are relevant to programs in a professional college of art, are not always in harmony with those in other programs at a parent institution, such as a university. If you dissected our respective paradigms (a favorite academic word that means settling for safe answers and solutions to complex questions) with the same academic scalpel, we would bleed the same color blood, but our blood types would differ, as would our methods of assessment and how we would define *learning*

*outcomes*. But if you put aside the specifics, and internal political agendas, you will begin to recognize that what we do as educators coalesces into a mission with the same goals... to allay the fears of imagination, especially of those young artists that often possess a great one, and to inspire individual explorations on the edges of the creative process.

Creativity, to me, is as important to me as language. It's difficult to be creative if you are afraid to fail... just as it's impossible to sing if you are afraid to hum. Nurturing creativity is one of the very few gifts that a parent or teacher can give a child that will continue to evolve over the child's lifetime. The mentors whose influences remain in me are the ones who bestowed the unexplainable gift of how I could teach myself to see. Read that sentence again.

I'm reminded of a story I heard from a grade school teacher recently that makes the point about how confidence and imagination are nurtured. In a first-grade classroom, a teacher passed out a piece of paper to each of his students and told them to draw a picture... this being the 15-minute portion of the day that the school's standardized curriculum model had set aside for creativity. A 6-year old in the class begins to draw and the teacher comes by her desk and asks what the picture represents. The girl replies that she is drawing a picture of God. The teacher then asks, "Well, you can't draw a picture of God because no one knows what God looks like." There is a stand-off.

The girl thinks about this for a heartbeat and then, looking up from her drawing, replies, "Well, they will in a minute."

### **Bauhaus... is a Very, Very, Very, Fine House ... Fine House**

Walter Gropius, one of the founders of the Bauhaus (1918), admired the medieval guilds, The *Bauhatten*, that had created the great cathedrals in his native Germany. Gropius sought to emulate that model while creating a cultural synthesis and reconciliation between the atelier, modern art, and the goals of the industrial revolution. His goal was to develop a curriculum that was essentially a *foundation* program, in which students were expected to become visually literate through the study of drawing, design, color, and form. Essentially, this model's approach to learning was to create a marriage

between art, craft, and technology. This is, as you know if you have experienced it, the traditional structure in most art schools today and has been for nearly a century.

The paradox that arises within this Bauhausian model is that “good” art programs are dedicated to promoting *individualism* while simultaneously graduating students who have been forced to learn their required subject matter in a repetitive, cookie-cutter, curriculum that is evaluated through one form or another of standardized assessment. This is a significant disconnect and not at all dissimilar to the way public education is designed and assessed through mass testing standardization and assessment.

### **The Industrial Revolution and Arts Education**

Our present educational system for teaching the arts is predicated on assessment models and values established during the Industrial Revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing defined that revolution more than the assembly line... and the method of assessing a line’s success was predicated and dependent upon reaching specific levels of performance, volume, and generic consistency from one object to the next as the object rolled through the process to the consumer. There was nothing subjective about it. If there were no inconsistencies, if the workers adhered to their specific tasks and performed them in the prescribed manner, the line could go faster. Without change, increasing the efficiency of the line meant greater production and this equated to greater profit for the machine. The concept was so successful that it was totally logical to deduce that what worked so well in the factories could be directly applied to other areas of society. And no area of society was as ripe for this model as public education.

Education was presented as a standardized package and the guaranteed path to employment, success, and a better life... as long as the line kept moving. The school was the factory, the children were the products, and they were assessed by assigning grades indicating success, failure, or an average in-between, at defined intervals. If the child-product failed, it meant a failure to meet the defined standard and a return to the beginning of that line, where the child could be re-made.

It was a fairly simple task to assess and quantify success in mathematics, science, English, and the like, where learning through repetition, by rote, was the norm. However, when it came to subjects involving imagination, and the creative process, there was a problem applying the assembly line paradigm to success. Grades had to be given but because it was absolutely impossible to successfully mandate competency in creativity and imagination, a significant disconnect occurred. The standards for creative competency were based on assessment ideals that a school could not possibly define or influence... that of an individual child's imagination.

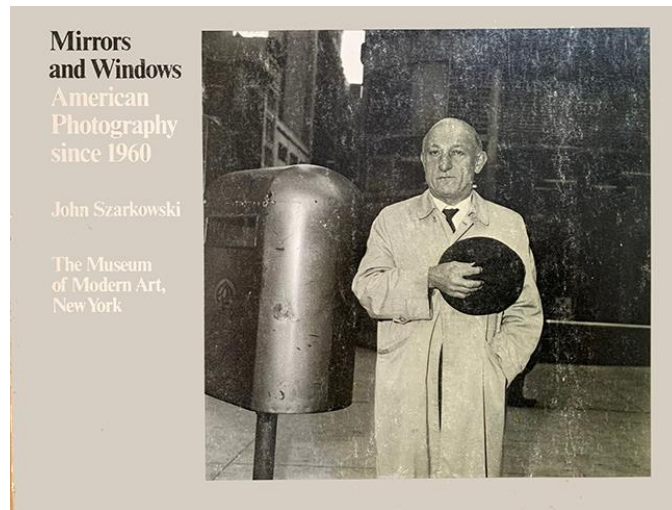
One additional glitch in the system was that the industrial model mandated a connection between the education of the child and that child's eventual ability to be employable. I assume this is where the Guidance Counselor job was born. The theory was that a literate and productive work force would make the line move faster and better and that all in society would benefit. Unfortunately, it was clear that not a lot of artists, musicians, writers, or dancers were making a living in art factories or aspiring to become vice-president of art. That led to an institutional perspective that asked the question... "If immediate employment and success could not be guaranteed, like a car from an assembly line, then what exactly was the point of including it in a curriculum?" As Henry Ford said in 1909, when talking about the Model T options for his customers, "you can have any color you want as long as it is black."

But you can't argue with "success" and you can never stop the line. Getting everyone into higher education became so efficient that we determined, in the same way that Susan Sontag reasoned that photographs had become meaningless due to their sheer numbers, that the homogenized, and standardized, high school diploma, had lost its value... simply because everyone had one.

I'm going to try and close this circle now.



## Mirrors and Windows



Many years ago I was sitting in a lecture hall at Wellesley College listening to John Szarkowski, then curator and photography tsar of The Museum of Modern Art delivering a lecture. I suppose most of us were there to see if we could figure out how to get him to recognize our genius and give us a ticket to the club where you could get a show at MOMA or a Guggenheim Grant. Szarkowski spoke of the valueless-ness of photographs and how there were now more of them in the world than bricks. This lecture also served to reinforce Szarkowski's primary curatorial argument that there were two types of photographers (or artists) in the world and they were represented by the metaphors of *windows* and *mirrors*.

The "mirrors" photographers made images that were, for better or worse, describing their personal sensibilities and this was the primary meaning and intent of their photographs and the engine that drove their individual process. They were their own unique context.

The "windows" photographers made pictures that described information. Their images documented facts as well as commenting on the "system" of making photographs. Often their subject was the medium itself and its very scientific, informational, and observational essence. It was clear that Szarkowski had the majority of his curatorial

weight in the windows camp (he was transfixed by Atget) but it wasn't perfectly clear that he was ready to announce that the discussion had come to an end.

This hesitation can partially be described by the landmark MOMA exhibition, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* that he curated in 1978. I was included in that exhibition, attended the opening courtesy of the Phillip Morris Corporation, but for some curatorial reason, several artists, including myself, Betty Hahn, Nathan Lyons and others, who were stretching the contemporary definition of photography, were not included in the accompanying exhibition catalogue or in its index. I've always considered that omission decision a legacy choice on the part of Szarkowski. And for the record, I carried his seminal book, *Looking At Photographs* (MOMA, 1976), around until the cover fell off.

The late Robert Hughes, (try and read everything by him you can find), wrote in a 1978 Time essay, "Everything that happened, one might suppose, happened before a camera; there has never been anything like the sheer bulk of visual documentation left as the residue of a popular-photography culture. People and events seem ghostly unless they have been verified by a camera. Wars, elections, riots, disasters, communal ecstasies, the speeches of politicians and their deaths... all are eaten up by the omnivorous lens, as photography (through journalism) defines the terms of our fictitious intimacy with the world. This intimacy means a ravenous consumption, rather than contemplation, of images." I mean, seriously, how prescient and appropriate is that observation?

In 1978, Szarkowski cynically insisted that most issues of importance couldn't be photographed. This may be compatible with Salman Rushdie's sentiment from *Midnight's Children*, "Most of what matters in your life takes place in your absence." From Szarkowski's *window* view, that perception was not a surprise.

Szarkowski's world of "more photos than bricks" has been superseded by what Robert Hughes saw coming like a train. We are presently swimming in the limitless sea of digital photography, where everyone makes, from a 19<sup>th</sup> century critical perspective, "good" pictures. I suspect that now, where every camera has a telephone attached, there

are more photographs made every day than in the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. If Hughes was concerned about volume leading to ravenous consumption rather than contemplation, and Szarkowski was cynically insisting that issues of importance in life cannot be photographed, then the sheer volume of digitally made images defined by a social networking aesthetic, and stored in increasingly humongous archiving systems, is a debate destined to grow more animated in the future. It seems to me that the choices are more clarified now than ever.

The long running show of silver-based gelatin films and paper is coming to an inevitable end. This particular image making system will probably be designated as an official alternative process in the next few years but since it is not yet on life-support I have refrained from including it as a separate chapter. The people who loved photography for its accidents, expression, and unpredictability are moving in droves to alternative process image making or investigating how photographs can be integrated into all mediums. This transition is not at all unlike the painting and printmaking tsunami that swept through the contemporary art world in the late 50's and early 60's and it is healthy for the genre. I am not saddened by the change... it is a great opportunity.

### **The Future of Photography is in its Past**

Several pages ago, I wrote that visual literacy is the capacity to interpret, associate, and communicate signs, symbols, codes, and marks, and that for a contemporary digital photographer, being immersed in the history, criticism and semiotics of the medium could lead to being in perfect harmony with the new “windows” definition ushered into our language by Szarkowski back in the 70's. In fact, they seem made for one another. Digital photography might well be a marriage of Jef Raskin and Donald Norman's “information appliance,” and Szarkowski's “windows,” where an image is as much about the information recorded as it is about the system of archiving and delivering that information. Think social networking and the traditional family album and apply the last sentence to those systems of image delivery.

In his 1936 essay, “*The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*”, Walter Benjamin wrote about a shift in the perception of works of art as a result of the

ease of reproduction of that art through the medium of photography and film. He referred to the *aura* of an original work of art, its unique authority to inspire a sense of wonder, and of the loss of that aura through mechanical reproduction of that art. While Benjamin acknowledged that artistic reproduction, such as acolytes of a master painter painting canvases and frescos in the style of the master, had existed throughout history, mechanical reproduction completely altered the experience and authenticity of a work of art. John Berger echoed this sentiment a few decades later in his seminal 1972 text, *Ways of Seeing*, when he wrote, "For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free." This hike through the jungles of critical theory continued in the writing of others such as Susan Sontag and Barthes but it was Benjamin who carried the machete.

From the mirror's perspective, visual literacy emphasizes and celebrates the light markings as well as the maker of the image. In alternative and integrated process printmaking, the hand and eye are equal partners in the crafting of the image. The print itself is a sign, a symbol, a mark... each artifact in the image a reflection of the process of making a print by hand... thus bestowing a degree of *aura*. Obviously, there are no absolutes in this conversation and valid creative issues arise in every form of expression. I know many digital artists who are deeply involved in their art and the very relevant issues of visual literacy that can be explored quite well within their discipline. In fact, the addition of digital technology to the Bauhaus menu would be an ingredient of which Gropius would have greatly approved.



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I believe the future of photographic, and photographically integrated, image making will find its nutrients in its past and in the philosophical foundations that ground the physical act of making art. Contemporary alternative process artists are, as Lyle Rexer coined so well, members of the *antiquarian avant-garde*... a movement defined by individual humanistic sensibilities, cultural and critical perspectives and influences, and skilled hands in harmony an equally refined conceptual vision. Alternative process image making is not about the technique employed, the camera, or the use of digital or film capture. Nor is it about the “artifact” or accident within the image that represents a contemporary artistic gesture that miraculously makes an image artistic and expressive. Alternative process image making has its heartbeat strongly allied to a tradition of making images by hand, using light and chemistry. It is driven by a curiosity to see where a process will lead the artist and her imagination and that living philosophy is the soul of this book. It is, in my mind, a representation of the *new photography*.

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