

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Outside the Frame: An Image Analysis

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# Outside the Frame: An Image Analysis

Stephen Paur

## Overview

This assignment invites students to critically analyze the rhetorical and emotional effects of images. The project is basically an exercise in contextualizing a news photo. It would work well as the culminating assignment for a unit on visual rhetoric, digital literacy, multimodality, mass media, or the public sphere.

The type of photographic imagery this research project emphasizes is *photojournalism*, or *documentary photography*. Students analyze an emotionally charged photo that was circulated recently by a credible news organization. They conduct secondary research to determine the image's possible meanings and messages, analyzing not only what the image *shows*, but also what the image *says* (and doesn't say), *how* the image says it, and *why* the image's context (real or perceived) shapes its meanings and messages. "Unless [a photograph] is supported with extraphotographic evidence, it will be mired in platitudes . . . truths for which no photographic argument is required," writes Teju Cole ("What Does It Mean").

In the process of supplying contextual, "extraphotographic" evidence, students adapt claims and lens concepts from assigned readings by Cole, Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, Édouard Glissant, and others as they compose a compelling interpretation of their image. (See Appendix A and Appendix B for lists of questions meant to generate ideas and provoke discussion.)

Instead of offering a laundry list of all possible details related to their image, students should focus on what they think is the most significant set of circumstances — cultural, political, economic, ecological, geographic, *or* historical — to which their image is

somehow tied. The goal, ultimately, is to spark thought and discussion about photography's moral, emotional, and ideological effects, including the complex ways that "photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe" (Sontag 1). As Cole writes, "taking photos, looking at photos, and being the subject of photos are mutually reinforcing activities in which the participants are interdependent and complicit" ("What Does It Mean"). Students who complete this assignment will come to see photography as a powerful, even perilous rhetorical tool, practice, and medium — one that can "condense events into icons" (Linfield), reveal "unconscious optics" (Benjamin 237), and much more.

### Time Commitment

4-5 weeks.

### Materials

Students should have access to a word processor, a web browser, an internet connection, a library database, and a phone, tablet, digital camera, or other device that can record still images (for the activities described in Appendix C).

### Assignment Process

- Students begin by reading and digitally annotating Lindquist's "Literacy," Yancey's "Writing in the 21st Century," and the Big Spaceship blog post. They should upload their annotations to a class discussion board, then choose two of their peers' annotations to reply to. Their replies might share a reaction, pose a follow-up question, and/or identify a similarity or difference between their own annotation method and their peer's method. (For student-facing annotation resources, see UNC's Learning Center

pages on “Annotating Texts,” “Reading Comprehension Tips,” and “Highlighting.”)

- To kick off discussion of the assigned readings, ask how many students take photos regularly. Talk about why they take photos, what kinds of photos they take, whether or not they share their photos, how they share them, and with whom. (For discussions of subsequent readings, consider assigning groups of 3-4 students to lead the day’s discussion. See also Peter Frederick’s suggestions in “The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start.”)
- Design and share your Image Analysis assignment prompt, clarifying the project’s guidelines, expectations, and rationale. (Recommended length: 800-1,000 words.) Emphasize the ways that visual literacy is an increasingly valuable, high-stakes skill set for readers and writers in a range of situations: at school, at work, on the street, and on the web. Explain that the most basic principle of photographic literacy is the fact that all photographic images have been separated from their contexts, isolated from the complex realities *outside the frame*, from the events *before* and *after* the single captured moment. Students’ job for this assignment, then, is to restore context to a news photo, using secondary research to partially reconstruct the rhetorical “ecology” from which the image was extracted (Downs 466-7).
- At this point, students should locate 3-4 image candidates — photos they might want to use to anchor their analysis. Image candidates should (1) be “emotionally charged” (tell students they should decide for themselves how to define “emotionally charged”), and (2) have appeared on a credible news platform, print or online, within the last five years (a constraint that makes it less likely that students will choose an iconic historical photograph whose context has already

been written about extensively). Encourage students to dig around until they find images related to events that might not be on everyone's radar already — a news item from another country, perhaps — and to ignore, for the time being, the articles that accompany their images. The point, after all, is for students to analyze an image whose context is unfamiliar, using secondary research to restore some of that context. It's also important for students to be aware that the written captions and stories that an image is paired with never provide *definitive* context; rather, they provide only *one possible, always partial* context — in both senses of “partial”: biased, and incomplete (Cole, “Against”). Instructors should provide a list of local, national, and international news sources for students to consult. Annual “Year in Pictures” lists from outlets like *National Geographic* and *The New York Times* will be useful, too.

- Assign the readings by James and Mitchell. Have students share their image candidates in small groups. Direct their attention to the emotional responses their images elicit from their peers, especially if different students report different responses. Students should try to explain what might account for the varied emotional effects of a single image. They should also try to figure out what actions, if any, the images might be likely to prompt — including whether or not there's any danger that the *feeling* associated with looking at a photo (especially photos of cruelty or suffering) becomes an end in itself, a substitute for ameliorative action or structural analysis.
- Assign three short essays by Cole: “What Does It Mean to Look at This?,” “Against Neutrality,” and “Object Lesson.” Ask students to identify a key concept or major claim in each essay that could be applied to an analysis of images besides the ones discussed by Cole. Using the concepts and claims

singled out by students, demonstrate several different techniques that students might use to integrate such material into their own writing. Discuss not only summary, quotation, and paraphrase, but also the various kinds of rhetorical work that outside sources can do: as examples or evidence; as background material; as credibility-enhancers; as expert testimonies; as alternative perspectives; as heuristics, lens concepts, or analytical tools; as claims that writers endorse, extend, qualify, or critique; and so on. After demonstrating these options to the whole class, have students practice each technique, either by themselves or in small groups, using other claims and concepts from Cole's essays.

- At this point, students should *choose one* of their image candidates to be the focal point of their analysis and explain why they chose that image, briefly comparing/contrasting it with their other candidates.
- Assign the readings by Glissant and Downs. Ask students to reflect on the various ways that “narrative,” as a rhetorical strategy, can move audiences in powerful (if unpredictable) ways by “making present” — that is, by making something that is usually vague, distant, or abstract feel urgent, concrete, and immediate (Downs 469).
- After choosing a focus image, students search for useful secondary sources and draft preliminary material for their analysis. They should also revisit Cole's essay, “What Does It Mean to Look at This?” Ask them to notice how Cole devotes an entire paragraph to *describing* Susan Meiselas's 1979 photo of concerned onlookers in Nicaragua. He paints a word-picture so that readers will know which visual details, exactly, he finds significant and compelling. And he lists examples of the kinds of investigations the photo might trigger (about the history of Nicaragua, the sense of smell,

etc.). Cole's list is a model of the sorts of directions students might take their own inquiries. If Cole were doing his own Image Analysis, he would *choose one* of those topics as a way to focus his research. Since this analysis is only 3-4 pages, students should narrow their scope as much as possible. For this project, depth and specificity are more important than breadth and generality.

- After revisiting Cole, students should practice using vivid, descriptive language to craft a one-paragraph description of their image, highlighting the details that strike them as most significant. (Refer them to Jenae Cohn's "Understanding Visual Rhetoric" for an introduction to the basic *visual design elements*, such as line, color, shape, size, space, value, lighting, angle, and framing. For a glossary of *visual design principles*, such as contrast, closure, gestalt, and hierarchy, see Krause and Fessenden.) Have students generate two or three different descriptive paragraphs, which others can then rank in terms of effectiveness, sharing reasons for their rankings. Students should also locate one scholarly, peer-reviewed source that can shed light on the larger context around their image. (*Communication and Mass Media Complete* is one good database for this assignment.)
- Finally, students participate in peer review of one another's full-length Image Analysis drafts. They make revisions based on the feedback they received, then submit their assignment. Submissions should include a short reflection memo in which students describe the process of completing the assignment: what went well; what they struggled with; what they wish they had done differently; what they learned; and how they expect to apply what they learned to future tasks, assignments, and situations.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Examine the rhetorical interactions between words and images
- Practice questioning the presumed neutrality, objectivity, and transparency of photojournalism
- Gain a critical understanding of key terms such as literacy, rhetoric, image, emotion, representation, identification, publicity, opacity, fact, interpretation, bias, filter, fauxtography, metadata, deepfake, empathy, authenticity, voyeurism, empiricism, and atrocity porn
- Consider the implications of the fact that image-making almost always involves conscious and unconscious choices about the selection, exclusion, layering, emphasis, and arrangement of real-world visual data
- Develop a greater sensitivity to the complex ways that news photos shape (and are shaped by) the perceptions, theories, attitudes, and preferences of viewers, subjects, photographers, writers, and editors

### Learning Accommodations

- Campus libraries sometimes have digital cameras available to borrow without charge to students who don't have access to cameras of their own.
- To accommodate students who are blind or visually impaired, this assignment can be modified so that instead of analyzing photos, students analyze the Alt Text captions that often accompany online photos.



- The phrase “emotionally charged” is not meant to limit students to imagery that is tragic, shocking, violent, or disturbing. Images can be moving or affecting for a variety of reasons, and students should be encouraged to consider the full range of possible emotional effects, from horror, despair, and outrage to irritation, nostalgia, pity, sympathy, apathy, nausea, elation, and everything in between.

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## Appendix A

Questions to ask about your image:

- What information does the image convey on its own?

- What relevant information does the image fail to convey — what is “outside the frame”?
- What message(s) is the image sending? What argument(s) is it making?
- To whom might these messages or arguments be addressed?
- Are these messages/arguments likely to reinforce popular, commonsense beliefs and attitudes, or to somehow challenge or complicate such beliefs and attitudes?
- What is the emotional mood or tone of the image?
- Which visual elements, composition strategies, and technical choices (such as framing, contrast, angle, color scheme, and depth of field) contribute to the image’s emotional effects?
- How do your own values, preconceptions, and prior knowledge influence your emotional response to the image? Why might someone else respond differently to the same image?
- Imagine the image as a still frame from a movie. How does your static image fit into a larger sequence — a narrative composed of dynamic events? What might have happened just before, and just after, the photo was made?
- What can you assume, if anything, about the photographer’s motives?
- Are these possible motives consistent with the way the photo has been circulated? Why or why not?

- Is the image an effective way to get viewers to care about what they're looking at? Why or why not?
- Does this image belong to a certain genre or family of images? What associations does it trigger?
- Has the image been parodied, edited, or re-appropriated for non-news purposes? (Google's "reverse image search" function might be helpful here)
- What kind of camera equipment and camera settings did the photographer use? (consult the photo's metadata for clues)
- Where was this camera equipment made, by whom, and under what conditions? (If answers to such questions are elusive, why might that be?)
- What conclusions is it fair — and unfair — to draw about this image?
- What actions, if any, might the image catalyze or inhibit?
- What, ultimately, does it mean to look at your image? And what, specifically, does responsible, critical visual literacy require viewers, subjects, and photographers to know or to do?

## Appendix B

More general questions to consider as you develop your thesis:

- When, why, and how do photojournalistic accounts of conflict or suffering in distant places help "make present" the



needs and struggles of others (Downs 469)? When are such accounts exploitative, voyeuristic, or sensational? When do they desensitize viewers or commodify hardship? And when do they prick consciences and/or produce a sense of solidarity, or what Kenneth Burke calls “a body of identifications” (26; Downs 475-6)?

- When, why, and how do image-making technologies provide the means by which “the masses are brought face to face with themselves” (Benjamin 26)? When do such tools bring people together, and when do they create rifts or tensions?
- What does it mean for photographs to facilitate belonging to — or exclusion from — an “imaginative republic” (Cole) or a rhetorically constituted “people” (McGee)? Why does it matter that visual rhetoric can be a “means of articulating common identity and belief” (Peters 17)? What is at stake in struggles over group identity, collective consciousness, collective memory, and ways of defining shared interests?
- Michael McGee argues that all political ideologies are responses “not only to discomfort in the environment, but also to the failure of previous [ideologies] to cope with such discomfort” (245). What is photojournalism’s connection to politics and ideology? When is it a salve or a coping mechanism, and when is it a source of discomfort?
- Linfield laments the fact that, in her eyes, “inhabitants of the wealthy, presumably educated world look more and more to the quick [emotional] hit of images (both still and televised) for their political information.” She argues that “photographs, and especially photographs of suffering, are the ideal medium for people who wish to appear well-informed, educated, and cosmopolitan — civilized, in short

— while maintaining their political illiteracy.” What does Linfield mean by this? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- Photojournalist Peter van Agtmael argues that documentary photography is “the opposite of surveillance photography, because it has so many variables, so many choices . . . [I]t isn’t indiscriminate. It’s not just a constant feed of information. It’s one where you’re being calculated and thoughtful, hopefully with a broader vision in mind” (“Magnum Quarantine”). Do you agree or disagree? What, to you, are the biggest similarities and differences between surveillance and photojournalism?
- Should the subjects of photojournalism have a right *not* to have their picture taken, a “right to opacity” (Glissant)? Why or why not?
- In what situations might passive spectatorship be preferable to active participation or intervention? And in what situations might active participation/intervention be preferable to spectatorship?
- In your opinion, what are the most important principles of critical visual literacy? How, in our current historical moment, can viewers effectively, humanely navigate the gaps between what a photo *shows*, what it *says*, and what it *fails* to say?

## Appendix C

Suggested in-class activities (1-2 days each):

*Unspoken Backstory*

Send students outside to take pictures using their phones, tablets, or cameras. Tell them to seek out images that seem to have a story behind them — which could be anything, of course: a stray dog, an Uber Eats delivery robot, a shoe in the middle of the street, two students in a hammock, someone repairing a golf cart. When they return, each student chooses one photo to upload to a shared folder online. As their images are projected onto a large screen, students suggest the possible backstories for each of their images.

### *Editorial*

### *Ethics*

Assign Kirby's "Time's Crying Girl Photo Controversy, Explained." Ask students to think about whether or not they agree with *Time Magazine's* justifications for its use of the image of the crying girl on its cover. Structure the discussion as a debate: students who agree on one side of the room, students who disagree on the other. Each group's members talk among themselves about why they chose their side. Then, members of each side try to convince members of the other group to switch sides.

### *How It Looks vs. How It Works*

Begin by discussing the paragraph from Sontag's "In Plato's Cave" that begins, "Photography implies . . ." (17-18). Next, divide the class into small groups, and send the groups outside to act out a scene of their own creation: a game, a fight, a wedding, a car crash, a court hearing, a therapy session, or anything else they might come up with. One member of each group should record sequential still images of the scene as it unfolds. When they're done, each group uploads its sequence to an online folder, enabling the instructor to make 4x6-inch printed copies. At the next class meeting, distribute printouts of each group's sequence to another group, who must try to arrange the photos in the order in which they were originally recorded. Each group then makes corrections to the other group's sequence as needed. Have students consider whether, and to what extent, the complete sequence of photos helps them understand the scene better than a single photo from the scene.

*Visual Moves as Rhetorical Moves*

Ask students to identify a point of confusion in one of the readings: either an unfamiliar word or an obscure reference. After they find one, students should try to find out what the word means (how it's being used in that context), or what the reference is alluding to (what prior knowledge is required to make sense of the reference). They should explain why they think the writer used that word or made that reference. How might the author's background, purpose, audience, context, or genre have led them to think that that rhetorical "move" would be effective or appropriate (Jacobson et al.)? Invite students to draw parallels between the choices writers make and the choices photographers and photo editors make. Ask them to unpack Sontag's observation that, "even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience" (4).

*Guess the Caption*

Create a slideshow of captionless news images. For each image, give students three possible captions to choose from: the original caption that accompanied the image, a second caption that is false but plausible, and a third caption that is false and humorously implausible. Ask students to guess which caption is the "real" one. Once they know which caption is true, ask students to generate different captions that could also be considered true. For example, an image of a polar bear with muddy feet walking down a congested city street:

- "A polar bear disrupted traffic, prompting collisions" (original caption; true)
- "A polar bear escaped from the zoo, prompting panic" (plausible caption; false)
- "A polar bear is on the run after breaking into a chocolate factory" (implausible caption; false)

- “Climate change continues to disrupt polar bear habitat, prompting many animals to seek food elsewhere” (alternative caption; true)