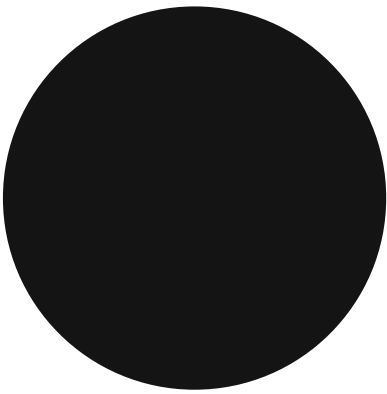


Visual Analysis of a Photograph



Visual analysis – sometimes also referred to as ‘formal analysis’ – is a process used to articulate the significance, context, conceptual features, and/or ‘meaning’ of an image.

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A visual analysis is used to communicate how the aesthetic or formal qualities of an image relate to seemingly relevant ideas, histories, narratives, politics, cultures, affects, and/or experiences. In other words, visual analyses are used to show how particular visuals create specific effects and/or affects.

What is it?

Visual analyses often involve a combination of writing styles. This can include observant, technical, emotive, critical, reflective, and/or speculative modes of writing about images. Visual analyses can vary in length from a few sentences, to a paragraph, to an entire essay.

Where do you use it?

Visual analysis is usually employed whenever an image is introduced into a discussion as an example or case study. It is recommended that you conduct a visual analysis whenever an image is used in a manner that exceeds that of a passing reference.

What do you need?

To create a coherent and clear interpretation of an image, it is recommended that you do three things: describe, analyse, and interpret.

How should you structure a visual analysis of a photograph?

01 / Describe the subject matter and formal qualities of the photograph.

Using appropriate medium-specific visual, descriptive, and technical language, tell the reader what the image looks like. It is sometimes helpful to pretend that your reader has never seen the image that you have selected before; you must provide enough detail for your reader to imagine a version of the photograph using your description. Here, ensure that you tell the reader what can be seen in the image (the subject matter) and how it has been composed. Detail the formal and structural qualities of the image (such as the tonal, linear, and textural characteristics of the image). You may also wish to describe how the image has been made and exhibited. Try to be as accurate, evocative, and specific as possible.

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02 / Analyse the context and conceptual qualities of the photograph.

Consider the significance of the subject matter and formal qualities that you described in step one in relation to the image's context and seemingly associated concepts. To help you develop a solid analysis, you might wish to research any historical, political, cultural, social, economic, and artistic shifts that seem to have informed or been impacted by the image that you are discussing. You can also refer to the analyses of other practitioners and researchers to help you develop an informed understanding of the image.

Also consider the affective and experiential qualities of the work; ask yourself, how does this image make you feel? You may wish to also consider the intentions of the maker of the image. However, keep in mind that this is something that you might only be able to approximate or guess and does not necessarily need to be included in an engaging exploration of a given image.

If you are approaching your analysis from a specific theoretical framework – such as, a feminist, queer, postcolonial, or Marxist framework – you may need to ask yourself questions that are specific to the concerns of that particular approach to reading and understanding imagery. For example, if approaching from a feminist position, you may ask yourself: how does this image subvert or solidify limiting gender expectations? Ensure that you clearly articulate which visual features of the work reveal the association, reference, conceptual link, or contextual information that you are discussing.

03 / Provide an interpretation of the photograph.

To complete your visual analysis, provide the reader with a concluding remark (or paragraph for longer pieces of writing that take the image as their focus) that clearly articulates the overall impact – or, perhaps, 'meaning' – of your selected image. Sometimes you may arrive at multiple, even conflicting, interpretations of a work.

References

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