

DECODING  
VISUAL LANGUAGE  
ELEMENTS IN  
NEWS CONTENT

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NEWS CONTENT

**Leah Katherine Hathaway Brigham**

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

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Thesis Advisor: Jen Hall

Massachusetts College of Art  
621 Huntington Avenue  
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

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website:

[www.katebrigham.com/thesis](http://www.katebrigham.com/thesis)

*for Mom, Dad and John*



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## **Abstract**

News delivery in this country is increasingly comprised of carefully crafted displays of visual information. As consumers of information, however, most of us have never been taught to critically read or decode images and other graphic displays of information in the same ways that we have been taught to analyze verbal communication. We are taught reading comprehension and writing skills throughout most of our educational experience, but not visual language comprehension. Yet, if we wish to remain critical viewers of the news media in the midst of this image-driven, converging media landscape, we must develop equally sophisticated visual literacy skills. I believe that bringing together the work of multiple disciplines including communications, media studies and communication design is key to addressing this problem. At the intersection of those fields, there is a rich body of work that seeks to understand and analyze the power, the practices, and the techniques employed by the news media in presenting visual information. By taking advantage of work done in these related discourses, new methods of promoting visual literacy can be derived. This thesis builds on elements from each of those disciplines in order to create a prototype for the critical analysis of visual news content utilizing the tools of interactive visual design.



# Introduction



## **The reality you observe depends on how you look at it.**

John Hartley  
Understanding News

What is news? According to Walter Lippmann, one of the most influential journalists of the 20th Century, the news is a picture of reality upon which the public can act. News is not a static picture, however. It is a dynamic and fluid frame that provides a view out into the larger world around us; it is a social and cultural institution that has developed over hundreds of years as a method for disseminating information about current events. Increasingly, we have also come to rely on news sources to put those events into context, to explain them, and to order them in terms of importance and relevance.

Without the news, our access to information about current events would be limited to what we could experience personally, or what we learn through social interactions with the people and institutions that surround us. Thus, our understanding of the world outside the realm of our own experiences and social interactions is largely constructed through the information presented to us by the media, of which the news media is an important component. Because of this fact, we are all dependent on news sources for accurate, credible, timely, trustworthy and relevant information in order to develop an educated and more nuanced understanding of the larger world around us. Being a well-informed consumer of the news is, however, no easy task.

The United States does not require its citizens to be well-informed news consumers. News consumption is driven by individual choice and personal preferences. News production is no longer mandated either. Instead, news production is a competitive business subject to market forces much like any other commercial enterprise. While it does benefit from constitutional guarantees like freedom of the

press, it is not a governmentally required enterprise. As a result, news organizations and news providers must compete with one another for potential viewers' attention, loyalty, time and money. They must offer unique products that fit the needs and desires of potential consumers in a crowded marketplace. Because of this, market forces and consumer demand plays a major role in determining what information is considered newsworthy and also how that information is presented to the public in this country. For those who wish to be critical consumers of news content, these forces, and the effects they have on news delivery, must be recognized and understood. As John Hartley wrote in his book, Understanding News, "If we can find out how the news works, what interests it serves, and analyze its meanings, we can use that understanding every time we see or read the news: our critical understanding of news-discourse and of the world constructed within it can change even if the news doesn't."(p.9)

To develop an in-depth understanding of how the news works, what interests it serves, and what its content means is an enormous task. It is a task that must be and has been undertaken by many experts from a wide variety of fields, among them: economics, journalism, media studies, cultural studies, linguistics, political science, sociology, psychology and cognitive science to name a few. One field that seems to have been historically absent from that list, however, is design.

I would propose that because so much of our news content is image dependent and visual in nature, the role of design in the process of news production is actually quite significant. Designers are responsible for knitting together the text, images, and also many of the audio and video components that form the bulk of the visual and interactive news content that is consumed by the public. While it is clear that designers cannot claim to be responsible for all aspects of visual news presentations, (editors, publishers, photographers, journalists, photojournalists, producers, reporters, camera people and many other interested parties also play vital roles in shaping visual news content) the importance of design in that process should not be underestimated. Because designers are responsible for creating the graphics that populate our television screens, the layouts we see in our news magazines and newspapers, and the web pages and information graphics that make up our online news sources, I believe that creating new methods for analyzing content from a design and visual language perspective could help to provide important new insights into understanding some of the many layers of meaning that are present in visual news content. This thesis sets out to develop a prototype for a visual language analysis of news content that, in particular, draws on prior work done in the fields of communications, communication design and media studies.



Figure 1: Screen capture of Peter Jennings aired on Boston's Channel 5, 9/11/01



Figure 2: Screen capture of overlapping titles aired on Boston's Channel 7, 9/11/01

Because I am a graphic designer, however, and not a media studies scholar or a journalist, this work is firmly grounded in the methods, practices and problem solving processes of design. It was conceived from the point of view of a designer, and I have used the tools of interactive visual design to create the case study which forms a major segment of this thesis inquiry.

### Case Study Origination

The events of September 11, 2001 had a profound impact on the direction of my thesis investigation. Like many people, I dropped everything and sat glued to my television set in the days that followed September 11th. I looked to the web and to newspapers and news magazines for additional information, explanation and insight. I relied on the media to provide me with the information I sought, because my understanding of those events could not be gained through personal experience or social interactions alone. During that marathon media blitz, I noticed, as did many others, that the coverage of the events of September 11th was not quite business as usual in the world of news production; it was a distinct anomaly. The continuous coverage of events of a previously unprecedented magnitude in this country allowed viewers to peer into the process of news delivery in ways that are not typically possible. We saw exhausted, emotional news anchors in their shirt sleeves who had been on air for hours on end (Figure 1). Commercials were suspended. TV screens were full of overlapping graphics as stations picked up one another's footage in order to provide viewers with the latest developments (Figure 2). News sites like CNN.com dramatically scaled

back the content on their web pages in the wake of record hits (Figure 3). News magazines came out with special issues that were nearly devoid of text, and instead were full of images from the preceding days. The veil between the news media and the viewing audience was lowered briefly, and in that time, my desire to gain insight into how the media covered those events began. Additional inspiration also came from a web site called “re:constructions” <http://web.mit.edu/cms/reconstructions/> that was created by the Comparative Media Studies Department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and launched on 17 September 2001 in response to the events of September 11th (Figure 4). The “re:constructions” site is, in the words of its creators, “an on-line resource and study guide, designed to spark discussions and reflections about the media’s role in covering the events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath.” I was struck by the power of the information and insight contained in the site, by the wide variety of perspectives that were presented, and also by the in-depth textual analysis that runs throughout “re:constructions.” What I did not find, however, was a visual analysis of the news coverage. Because most of us learned about the events of September 11th by watching them unfold on screen, or by looking at images on web sites, in newspapers, and in news magazines, our experience of those events was largely shaped by mediated, visual presentations of information. This led me to think that adding another parallel course of inquiry that focused on the visual dimensions of news content could help to provide some additional insight into how that story was reported and presented by the news media. Thus, the focus of my case study and my area of inquiry has been centered on the media’s coverage of the events of September 11, 2001.



Figure 3: Screen capture of CNN.com’s homepage from 11:20am on 9/11/01



Figure 4: Screen capture from MIT’s re:constructions web site







Context



**You can analyze any  
visual work from  
many points of view;  
one of the most  
revealing is to  
break it down  
into its constituent  
elements to better  
understand the whole.**

Donis A. Dondis  
A Primer of Visual Literacy

This thesis builds upon an existing body of work from the fields of communications, media studies and communication design. From the field of communications, work done in the areas of visual language, visual literacy and visual intelligence have been key. Media studies writings on news discourse, especially textual and semiotic analysis of news content, have provided a crucial introduction to existing strategies for the analysis of news mediums. Critical commentary on the role of communication design in the development of visual culture, and also on the role of design in presenting and packaging news content, has been an important component. To begin to undertake a visual language analysis of news content, the weaving together of strands from each of those fields is required. In the sections that follow, relevant concepts, terminology and important contributions from communications, media studies and communication design are discussed to provide a context for this thesis investigation.

## **Communications**

In the field of communications, research done in the areas of visual language, visual literacy and visual intelligence explore and define some of the basic elements and techniques that are used to craft visual messages. This research also provides insights into the perceptual processes that viewers use to construct meaning from those messages. Two influential contributors to this dialogue include Donis A. Dondis who published A Primer of Visual Literacy in 1973 and Ann Marie Seward Barry, whose work builds on Donis A. Dondis' work, and who published the book Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication in 1997.

## Donis A. Dondis

In *A Primer of Visual Literacy*, Donis A. Dondis provides readers with an introduction to the basic elements of visual communication. She begins this process by explaining what visual language is. Her analogy introduces the idea that visual language, like written language, contains basic compositional elements. Unlike written language in which the main forms are letters, words and punctuation, she suggests that the basic elements of visual language include such things as: color, tone, line, texture, shape, scale, proportion and motion. Just as we must learn the grammar and syntax of written language in order to read and write, she proposes that we must also study those same elements in visual language in order to become visually literate. She further suggests that because our modern media has become so dominated by the visual instead of the verbal, the need for developing visual literacy skills are now, “the same as those that motivated the development of written language: to construct a basic system for learning, recognizing, making and understanding visual messages that are negotiable by all people, not just those specifically trained [to create them].” (p.x) This idea—that learning to improve our visual literacy skills will enable us to become more active, critical participants in an increasingly visual culture—has been an important part of the theoretical framework that I have built my own thesis investigation upon.

To make the process of developing visual literacy skills more accessible to her readers, Dondis begins by breaking down the components of visual communication. She suggests that three components make up the basic characteristics of visual messages. They are: symbol



Figure 5: symbol systems



Figure 6: representational visual materials



Figure 7: abstract understructure

systems (Figure 5), representational visual materials (Figure 6), and the abstract understructure or form of what we see (Figure 7). She defines symbol systems as representational symbols (pictographs) and also abstract symbols (letters, numbers, icons). Representational visual materials are defined as including images created from things we recognized or can see in our physical environment (photographs, video, film, realistic illustrations). Abstract understructure or form refers to the most basic or pure visual message, the skeletal visual force present in everything that we see or design.

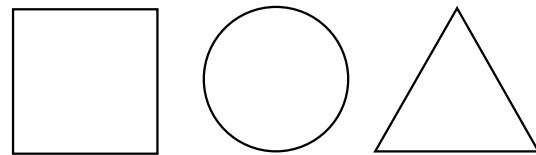
Next, Dondis details a “tool box” of the basic design elements that she describes as being the raw materials used in all visual communication (Figure 8). Although I have not highlighted all of these elements in my own work, I found Dondis’ list to be an important starting point for thinking about how to construct a basic vocabulary of visual language elements. Her explanation of the basic techniques of composition also proved to be an equally important starting point for my own efforts.

Figure 8: basic design elements



**the dot** - the minimal visual unit, pointer, marker of space

**the line** - the fluid articulator of form



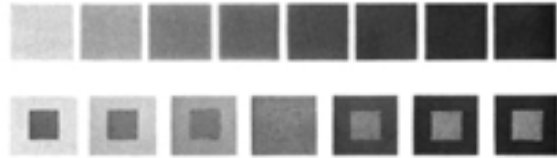
**shape** - the basic shapes being the circle, square and triangle which allow for various combinations and permutations, both planar and dimensional



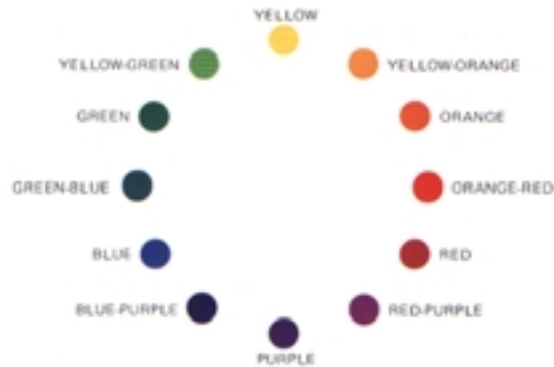
**direction** - the thrust of movement that incorporates and reflects the character of the basic shapes including circular, diagonal and perpendicular

Figure 8: basic design elements cont.

**tone** - the presence or absence of light; values between black and white

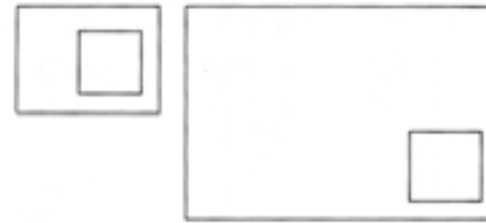


**color** - The coordinate of tone with the added component of chroma; the most emotional and expressive visual element

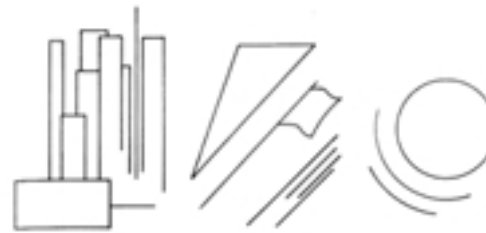


To explain the basic elements and techniques of composition, what she calls, “the most crucial step in visual problem solving,” Dondis explains that:

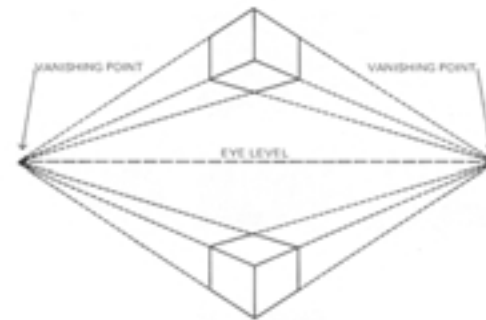
“The results of the compositional decisions set the purpose and meaning of the visual statement and carry strong implications for what the viewer receives. It is at this vital stage in the creative process that the visual communicator has the strongest control of the work and the greatest opportunity to express the total mood the work is intended to convey.” (p.20)



**scale/proportion** - the relative size and measurement of objects



**motion** - a dynamic visual component that suggests movement



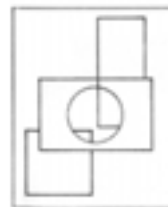
**dimension** - a property of space that implies flatness or depth (linear perspective is a technique often used to imply depth on flat surface)



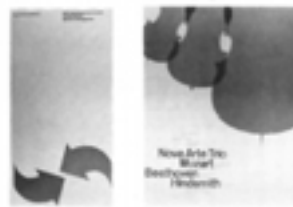
Connecting the basic elements of design to their role in composition, she says, “we create a design out of many colors and shapes and textures and tones and relative proportions; we relate these elements interactively; we intend meaning. The result is the composition, the artist’s or photographer’s or designer’s intention.” (p.20)

As she did with the basic elements of visual messages, Dondis also breaks down the basic elements of composition. She places them into the categories of: balance, stress, leveling and sharpening, attraction and grouping, positive and negative, and contrast, with contrast being presented as the most crucial of all the elements, “the basic definer of ideas...[the] vital pathway to clarity of content in art and communication.” (p.96) She goes on to highlight the specific techniques of composition much as she detailed a “tool box” of basic visual elements. The techniques of composition are all described as opposite ends of a continuum along which visual messages can exist. The pairs of opposing forces which Dondis suggests comprise some, but, by her own admission, not all of the possible techniques of composition. The ones which she does choose to highlight include the following (*Figure 9*):

*Figure 9: basic compositional elements*



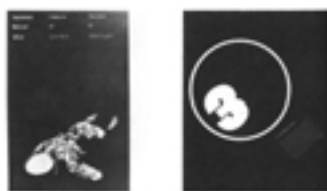
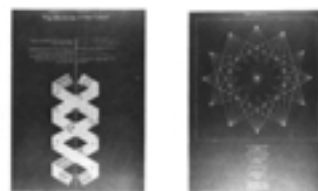
**balance**



**instability**



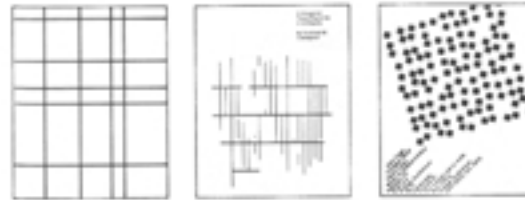
**symmetry**



**asymmetry**



*regularity*



*irregularity*



*unity*



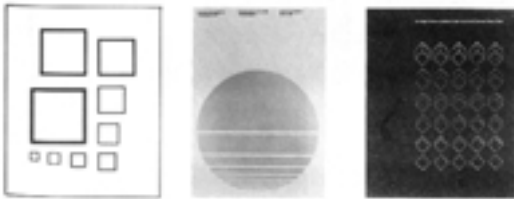
*fragmentation*



*understatement*



*exaggeration*



*predictability*



*spontaneity*

*Figure 9: basic  
compositional  
elements cont.*

Figure 9: basic  
compositional  
elements cont.



*activeness*



*stasis*



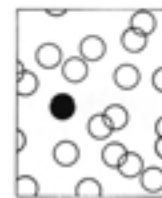
*subtlety*



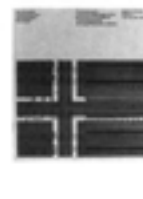
*boldness*



*neutrality*



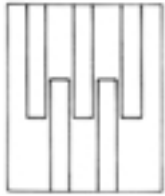
*accent*



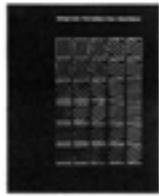
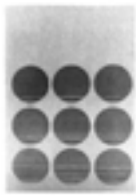
*transparency*



*opacity*



*consistency*



*variation*



*Figure 9: basic  
compositional  
elements cont.*



*accuracy*



*distortion*



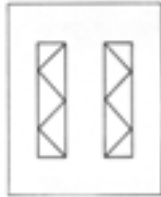
*flatness*



*depth*



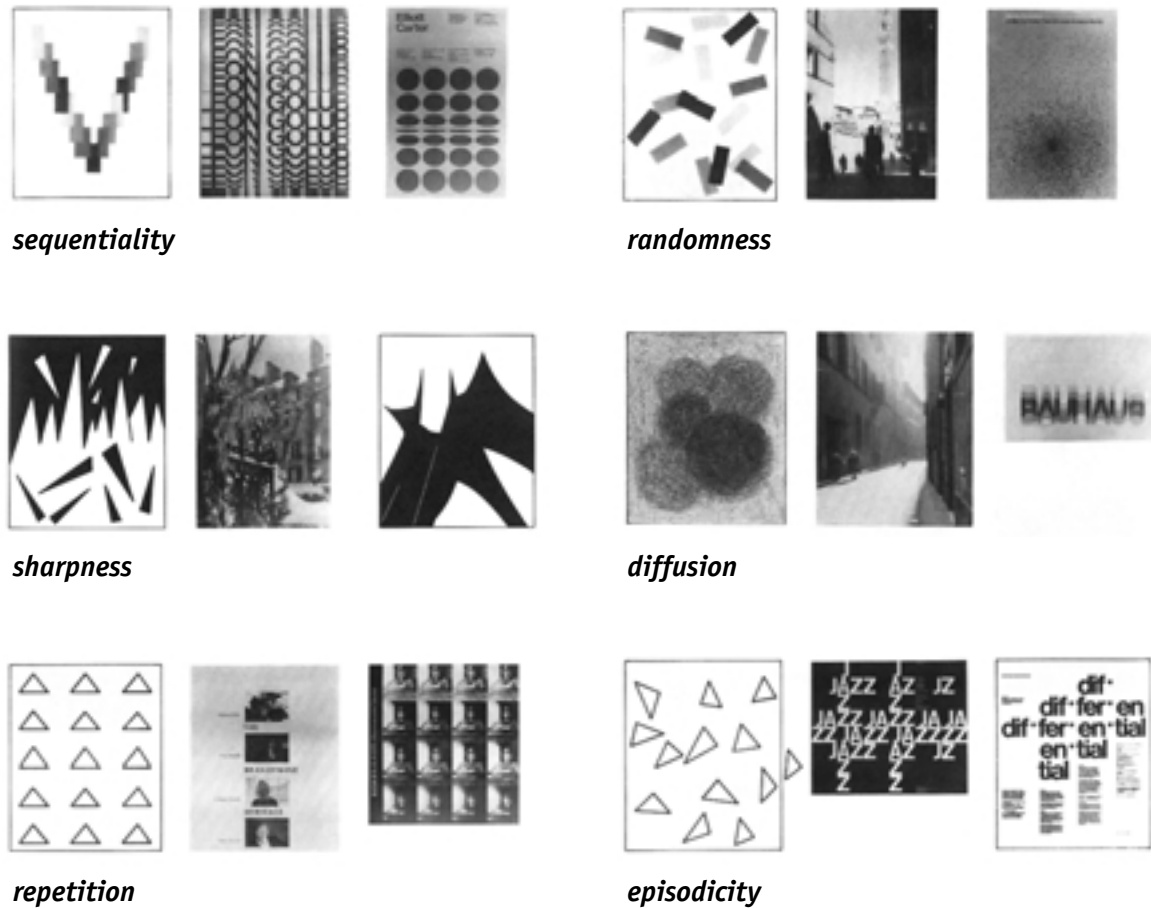
*singularity*



*juxtaposition*



Figure 9: basic compositional elements cont.



In addition to arguing for the need to improve visual literacy skills and her subsequent descriptions of the basic elements of visual messages and the techniques of visual composition, Dondis also touches briefly upon the processes of visual perception. She begins the discussion with a definition of the act of seeing as, “the process of absorbing information into the nervous system through the eyes, the sense of sight.” (p.20) She positions this act of perception on one side of the process of deriving meaning in which, “the two separate steps, seeing and

designing and/or making are interdependent for both meaning in a general sense and message in the case of attempting to respond to a specific communication.” (p.20) On the other side of the process, she states that, “composition is primarily influenced by the diversity of forces implicit in the psychophysiological factors of human perception. They are the givens on which the visual communicator can depend.” (p.183) To provide a context for understanding the complex process of human perception, Dondis suggests that, “some of the most meaningful work...[done in] exploring how and what...the visual arts ‘communicate’...has been done by ‘Gestalt’ psychologists, whose major interest has been in the principles of perceptual organization, the process of making wholes out of parts.” (p.15) Among the Gestalt psychologists, she calls special attention to Rudolf Arnheim whose work she paraphrases as follows:

“In all visual stimuli, on all levels of visual intelligence, meaning may lie not only in the representational data, the environmental information, in the symbols including language, but also in the compositional forces that exist or coexist with the factual, visual statement. Any visual event is a form with content, but the content is highly influenced by the significance of the constituent parts, such as color, tone, texture, dimension, proportion, and their compositional relationships to meaning.” (p.16)

While Dondis’ writing about the contributions of the Gestalt psychologist and the role of perception in visual communication are limited, those findings are taken up in greater detail in the work of Ann Marie Seward Barry in her book, Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication.

Donis A. Dondis’ work towards developing a vocabulary and a framework for looking more deeply and critically at the structure of visual messages provided me with an important starting point in my own efforts towards developing a vocabulary of visual language elements for use in decoding news content. From that starting point, Ann Marie Seward Barry’s research about the interrelationship between perception and vision provided additional insights into how we process, create and react to mediated visual messages.

## Ann Marie Seward Barry

Ann Marie Seward Barry argues, along the same lines that Donis A. Dondis did over two decades before her, that we live in a culture in which, “visual communication dominates every area of our lives...[yet] increasingly, we are a nation of watchers rather than discriminating readers, of instant believers rather than reflective, visually aware critics.” (p.2-3) She goes on to write that, “because received images impact us on a level below our conscious awareness, we must also exercise our critical function to detect how we can be moved—that is, driven to thought or action through our emotions—through a deliberate manipulation of images for commercial, social, or political purposes.” (p.9) To combat this trend, Barry further argues that we must promote the development of visual literacy and visual intelligence so that we might become more critically aware, discriminating viewers.

Barry’s writing is important not only for the viewer who wishes to improve their visual literacy skills, however. It is equally, if not more important for designers and others involved in the creative process of visual design to recognize the impact that their decisions and their actions can and do have on the public’s understanding of events, products, situations, politics, people and beyond. Because the creation of visual messages is as inextricably linked to our innate, sub-conscious perceptual processes as the reading of them, Barry’s writing about the relationship between perception and image is an extremely important discourse for both the creators and the receivers of those mediated visual messages.

Beginning with a definition attributed to R. A. Braden and J. A. Horten, Barry suggests that visual literacy is, “the ability to understand and to use images, including the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images.”<sup>1</sup> She goes on to extend this definition in her own writing, saying that visual literacy, “implies two basic skills: awareness of the logic, emotion and attitudes suggested in visual messages; and the ability to produce meaningful images for communication with others.” Building on these explanations of visual literacy, she defines visual intelligence as, “a quality of mind developed to the point of critical perceptual awareness in visual communication. It implies not only the skilled use of visual reasoning to read and to communicate, but also a holistic integration of skilled verbal and visual reasoning, from an understanding of how the elements that compose meaning in images can be manipulated to distort reality, to the utilization of the visual in abstract thought.” (p.6)

With a focus on visual literacy and visual intelligence that is very much tied in to the process of perception, Barry explores how perception affects the ways in which we process information. Early on, she clarifies that although the process of perception is not fully understood at present, “we do know...that what we see is at least partially what we expect to see and is as much the product of inner-derived meaning as it is a reflection of what’s ‘out there.’”(p.65) From this starting point, Barry’s writing focuses in on a few major themes within the realm of perceptual scholarship. These include the role of emotion, memory and repetition on perception, as well as the tendency for humans to believe what they see and hear to be true.

In writing about the impact of emotion and emotional responses on the process of perception, Barry cites research which shows that, “the brain’s amygdala, the seat of our emotions dates back to the reptilian era and still plays a primary and dominant role in all our perception.” (p.16) As a result, “without our realizing it, emotional response can...influence attitudes, thinking, and behavior, allowing us to cognitively congratulate ourselves on our perceptive thinking, while all the while we are in fact being guided by emotionally laden perceptual judgements beneath the level of our awareness.” (p.19) In seeking to clarify the role of emotion in perception, Barry cites the work of the Gestalt psychologists and other perceptual theorists whose work suggests that:

“while perceptual process is efficient in the extreme, it nevertheless is a process that reduces reality to its simplest shapes and that fills empty space with something that isn’t really there. Under ordinary circumstances, perception and judgment are highly susceptible to illusion, especially in intensely pressurized and emotional situations...They further agree that perception is continually affected and often substantially altered by memory and emotion.” (p.65)

Thus, our responses are “highly susceptible to emotional manipulation on an unconscious level, which in turn affects our conscious thinking.” (p.66)

Some specific elements in visual and audio-visual presentations of information which can be altered or manipulated to provoke an emotional responses include lighting and color, and also the way movement is handled.

According to her research, Barry writes that “the perceptual processing of color and movement appear to be neurologically programmed and therefore particularly susceptible to subliminal effect.” (p.21) “Lighting, shadow, and color can [also] be changed to produce a more positive or negative emotional impact [and] context can be subtly



suggestive enough to alter our conscious opinion of a subject within it. All of this can happen before we consciously form a judgement that we believe to be informed, objective, and unbiased—in other words, ‘intelligent.’” (p.66)

As noted earlier in a citation about the work of the Gestalt psychologists, there seems to be a link between memory and perception. In terms of the impact of memory on perception, Barry writes:

“if it is true as hypothesized that media-induced vicarious experiences may later mix with actual occurrences in memory and render them indistinguishable from one another, then media fare may play a substantial role in developing mental maps that blend media and reality together as a single mental experience, which in turn directs our interpretation of the present, further revises memory, and affects the direction of our thoughts and actions.” (p.67)

Another factor which seems to have a noticeable affect on perception is repetition. In describing our response to repetition, Barry cites research showing that it has, “major...implications for large advertising budgets [and] the larger the budget...the more often the message can be sent. The more familiar it becomes, the more likeable the product becomes.” (p.23) I would suggest that the same could potentially be said of our response to explanations presented by the news media. For example, the more we hear particular arguments or points of view expressed and reinforced, the more likely we are to come to think of them as acceptable, appropriate and accurate.

One of the other important themes that Barry highlights in her discussion about perception and the perceptual process focuses on the fact that we tend to believe what we see and hear. She cites the work of communication researcher Daniel Gilbert whose work has shown that we have “an evolutionary cognitive bias toward initially accepting what we see or hear as real...[and] only subsequently and with conscious effort do we rationally counteract initial acceptance of ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, deciding that something is not true, or deciding that our first impressions are incorrect is not a response that comes naturally, but instead “is secondary and must be deliberately invoked.” (p.24) The result, according to Barry, is that, “even though we can and often do correct misperceptions cognitively if we become aware of inconsistencies, we must actively *choose* to do so. Otherwise, we just cruise along perceptually without critical examination.” (p.25) The danger of this is that the process of perception is, as Barry puts it, “inherently heir to a number of distortions” (p.26) which we must learn to recognize and identify if

we hope to become more critical viewers and consumers of media messages. Again, I would also suggest that as makers of such messages, designers and other creatives must be even more aware of this tendency.

An interesting example of this phenomenon of believing what we see and hear, and also of the power of emotion on perception that Barry cites, is the public reaction to Orson Welles' broadcast in 1938 of H.G. Wells' radio play, "War of the World's." The broadcast was a dramatization of H. G. Wells' science-fiction tale about Martians invading New Jersey which was aired over WABC and the Columbia Broadcasting System's coast-to-coast network between 8-9pm at night. It was presented to simulate a regular radio program with news bulletin style 'break-ins' that focused on details about the fictitious invasion. It seems that many of the listeners missed the introduction to the program which acknowledged that the broadcast was a radio play and instead mistook the dramatization to be a factual news broadcast. The result was an ensuing panic among many of the radio listeners who thought that the earth had actually been invaded by Martians. Terrified listeners called the radio station and local newspapers and police stations to verify what they had heard, causing both the New York and New Jersey police stations to send out messages that the broadcast was just a dramatization of a play and none of the events were real. Nevertheless, thousands of listeners were ready to believe that the earth was actually under attack (Figure 10). In studying how such a large scale panic over a fictitious event could have happened, Barry cites an investigation



Figure 10

conducted by H. Cantril who looked into the affect of this illusion on people's judgement and found that, "those only minimally affected were well founded in dramatic tradition and therefore were not fooled by the format. They picked up on the large number of time and distance cues that would have been impossible if the situation were real. Those most convinced by the radio drama were fooled by the format and dramatic content and made no attempts to check its reality."<sup>3</sup> The fact that those less likely to buy into the hype of the radio broadcast were those who understood the conventions and structure of the medium is a strong argument for the need for increased media and visual literacy among people who wish to become more critical, analytical consumers of mediated messages. It is also a testament to the power held by those who create such messages.

It can be concluded from Barry's research on perception that it is possible, perhaps even easy, to be misled by what we see and hear. We are susceptible to illusion, our judgement can be swayed by our emotions, and our memories of events are likely populated by a complicated mix of mediated and experienced realities. To combat this, not only must we become more visually literate, but we must also become more aware of our innate perceptual responses to the world around us. For those who craft visual messages, there is an even greater need to become aware of how our understanding and objectivity can be swayed as well as how that power can be harnessed and used in turn to impact an audience of viewers. By enhancing all of these skills, we can begin to develop what Barry defines as, "visual intelligence," and which she goes on to say, "implies not only recognizing that what we see may not be reality, but also breaking through the merely apparent to understand that we see may have been engineered as well." (p.68)

Another major topic that Barry addresses in her writing is the, "nature and power of images." She writes that images are a more powerful mode of communication than words and that, "what visual images express can only be approximated by words, but never fully captured by them." (p.75) This line of reasoning has strong ties to some of her research on perception and can be attributed in part, to the process we must go through in translating language from abstract symbols into meaning whereas images can be understood and processed directly. Thus, as Barry writes, "the image is...capable of reaching the emotions before it is cognitively understood." (p.78)

Regarding the power of images, Barry also highlights the primacy of images over words when the two are presented in combination. She cites a quote from a video produced by Bill Moyers in 1989 titled "The Public Mind: Illusions of News" in which Leslie Stahl, a former White House correspondent said of a news segment she did on

the Reagan campaign:

“We just didn’t get the enormity of the visual impact over the verbal...It was a White House official who finally told me...I did a piece where I was quite negative about Reagan—yet the pictures were terrific—and I thought they’d be mad at me. But they weren’t. They loved it and the official outright said to me, ‘They didn’t hear you. They didn’t hear what you said. They only saw those pictures.’ And what he really meant was it’s the visual impact that overrides the verbal.” (p.78)

To provide some insight into how we create and process images, Barry discusses the concept of *image affordance* which she defines as the, “attributes of things within the environment that assert themselves into our consciousness by their potential utility or danger.” (p.79) As a result of the importance of such attributes, Barry writes that, “created images [tend to] amplify what is of significance to humans by pairing down superfluous detail and by focusing on what is meaningful in experience. Readers of images in turn derive meaning by drawing on their own experience...This is why hungry people are prone to overestimate the size of a steak and victims of violent crimes may overestimate the size of their attackers.” (p.79) This becomes important when we think about mediated images that are created, or that we create, to convey specific information or to intentionally exaggerate something for emphasis. Another area for concern that Barry touches upon is the way mediated messages play to our anxieties. As she put it:

“the stress that incompleteness places on the psyche is noticeable from the most elementary Gestalt principle of perceiving basic shapes out of incomplete forms to the psychological strategies of advertisers who create tension by deliberate omission and then supply their product as the solution. Because their ready-made answers reduce anxiety, media images can provide the lowest common denominator of taste and sensibility, values and attitudes. This is where the power of media images ultimately resides.” (p.103)

If we extend her analogy of advertising images to news coverage, we might begin to wonder if news providers don’t operate in a similar fashion, providing us with over-simplified explanations of complex situations presented as having easy, black and white solutions in order to reduce viewer anxiety while keeping those same viewer/consumers, happy, satisfied customers.

Another major theme in Barry’s writing, through which she provides additional insight into how the visual ele-

ments of mediated messages can be skewed or manipulated to convey specific meaning, is an in-depth introduction to the “language of images” as she terms it. She writes that “the language of images, grounded in the stuff of perceptual experience, affects us directly and involves instinct and emotion, before the linear logic derived from language can be imposed on it.” (p.117) In order to understand some of the specific ways that we are affected by and react to images, she explores work done in the field of semiotics, research done on color and perception. She also writes about the role of photography and photographic techniques as they relate to issues of perception.

Barry’s position that messages can be skewed and manipulated by their creators, or by designers later on in the process, implies that such practices are always intentional, premeditated process. While I agree that in some cases they might well be, I would also suggest that those creating visual messages are as susceptible to the subconscious processes of perception as are viewers. As a result, such manipulations might actually be unintentional responses that are emotionally driven, or otherwise affected by inherent perceptual processes that are as poorly understood by the creators of messages as they are by most viewers. Because of this, I would again suggest that it is as important, if not more so for the creators of visual messages to improve their understanding of how perception affects both the process of creation and also the act of reception.

Although, as noted earlier, we can think of images as having a more direct impact on our psyches than words, we still often use our system of language to understand and to translate images into iconic symbols when we communicate with one another. As a result, one area that Barry touches upon is work done in the field of semiotics which she sees as providing a framework for beginning to understand some of the underlying meanings present in images.

Semiotics, the scientific study of signs within social psychology, was developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the turn of the century. Saussure divided signs into two parts, the “signified” and the “signifier.” He defined the signifier as being a sound or an object, and the signified as being the concept that that sign represents. Saussure, however, was not alone in pioneering in the field of semiotics. Charles Sander Peirce, an American, working at the same time as Saussure on the theory of semiotics, is also discussed in Barry’s writing. Peirce divided signs into three categories: iconic, indexical and symbolic. He defined icons, (“iconic signs”) as things that look like what they are. He further divided icons into two subcategories, images and diagrams. For

example, an image could be something such as a portrait, and a diagram could be something like a map and both are dependent on their resemblance to the sign. He defined indexical signs as depending on existential relationships, meaning that they are directly related to a sign, but do not resemble it. For example, fingerprints are something that relate to a person, but they don't resemble that person. Finally, he defined symbols as things that have abstract associations to, as opposed to existential relationships with signs. For example, the peace sign is a symbol of peace, but it is neither directly related to, nor does it visually resemble peace except on an abstract, learned level. Building on these definitions from the field of semiotics, we can see that they relate closely to the realm of images and can provide a useful framework for describing the components of visual messages, not only in terms of photographic images, but also in relation to the graphic imagery that is used throughout visual design. As Barry wrote:

“On the most literal level...images may be seen as icons that suggest resemblance, implying a one-to-one relationship between what we see and what is represented. Or they may have associationist ties to reflect larger, more abstract ideas. This is where the power of images...becomes clearest and most profound—not because their power derived necessarily from linguistic analogy, but because it arises from experiential paradigms derived from perception...[Furthermore,] because visual images speak with a holistic logic, it is important to recognize that they are particularly susceptible to manipulation by political and commercial structures.” (pp.119-120)

Because we read, create and use images within a social structure of assigned meanings and associations, it is important to realize that visual symbols can be actively used to affect the underlying meaning of mediated messages.

To further explore the components of visual language, Barry also discusses the power of color and its function within the language of images. She writes that, “like movement, depth, and form perception, color perception...appears to be not only innate, but a perception so meaningful that it is core to our entire being.” (p.127) An interesting point that Barry clarifies early on is that color should not be treated as a static property of an object, but instead should be read as a subjective phenomenon that can only be perceived in context, as part of a dynamic interaction with other elements.

In talking about the importance human beings place on color, Barry quotes the writing of neurologist Oliver Sacks who said, "color vision in real life is part and parcel of our total experience, [it] is linked with our categorizations and values, and becomes for each of us a part of our life-world, of us...color fuses with memories, expectations, associations, and desires to make a world with resonance and meaning for each of us."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in studying human development, scientists have found that infants learn to distinguish between different colors before they begin to use language.<sup>5</sup> In addition, they also use color as a way to identify and remember objects.<sup>6</sup> Preferences for colors show a tendency towards being age and sex dependent so that children aged 5-9 years old, for example, tend to prefer red, green, orange and yellow in that order. Those perceptual preferences even relate directly to kid's food choices!<sup>7</sup> As we begin to acquire and develop language skills, we also begin to attribute distinctions such as "wet," "dry," "dark," and "light" to specific colors.<sup>8</sup> Another change that occurs as we age and which also seems to be sex dependent, is that attraction to the color red tends to increase. Women tend to prefer bluish-reds while men, in contrast, tend to prefer orange-reds.<sup>9</sup> That our relationship to color could be so strongly influenced by perception, age, and sex is probably not something most of us typically ponder, but understanding that long history is one part of the process towards improving our visual intelligence.

An interesting distinction that Barry addresses in her writing is the difference in how we perceive color versus black and white images. She notes that because we live in a full-colored world, color images tend to more directly reflect reality, and they turn our attention to the outside world which then "come[s] alive with detail and texture." (p.131) In contrast, black and white imagery tends to turn our attention to an inner world that focuses more on abstract, introspective, intellectual and dramatic qualities suggestive of "inner thoughts and character." (p.131) Thus, a photographers or designer's choice to make or use a color versus a black and white photograph can have implications beyond mere stylistic preference.

The relationship of color to attributes associated with touch and temperature are areas that Barry also touches upon. She writes that, "perhaps because of its sensual nature, color...tends to take on attributes...such as softness and smoothness, and even solidity. Thus pink may seem soft, and the richer the color the more solid the object will appear." (p.131) In terms of their relationship to temperature, Barry notes that red, orange and yellow are perceived to be warm colors while green, blue and violet tend to be perceived as having a cool dimension. She cites experiments that test body temperature within different color environments. The results show that peo-

ple actually become warmer in red rooms and become cooler in blue rooms. In her writing, Barry also notes findings that show we tend to have physical reactions to colored light as well, which seem to have, “pronounced emotional effects on how we perceive situations, objects, and people.” (p.133) For example, according to findings published in the *Journal of General Psychology* that Barry cites, orange light has been found to reduce muscle tone, red light has been found to act as a stimulant, and blue and green light have been found to have a soothing, relaxing effect on people.<sup>10</sup>

In relation to my interest in creating a prototype for the critical analysis of visual news content, Barry’s discussion about photographic characteristics and techniques as they relate to the language of images is especially relevant. Beginning with the characteristics of lighting, camera angle and relative size, Barry discusses some of the perceptual effects of these factors on photographic images. She then goes on to talk about how photographic images can be manipulated depending on how those techniques are employed by the photographer or image producer.

In relation to lighting, we are naturally sensitive to light and darkness. Light often conveys a sense of security, while darkness on the other hand can induce fear. Manipulating those elements in photographs can therefore be used to illicit the very same emotions. As Barry writes:

“in the black-and-white photograph, darkness and shadow can easily be deliberately manipulated to produce desired emotional response. First, of course, the choice of indoor or outdoor and time of day when the picture is taken can either strengthen shadows or eliminate them almost entirely. Because people naturally have shadows and lines on their faces that must be flooded out by light to make them disappear, if a photo is taken indoors with a single directed light source, strong shadows will be evoked and lines emphasized. In natural sunlight, where ambient light gives a softer look and light from above creates a ‘halo’ effect, the whole character of the face changes, and therefore our reading of the inner character of the person as well. Flattering portraiture will reveal fine details while at the same time softening the face with light; in contrast, police mug shots are deliberately unforgiving in order to bring out the lines and features.” (p.134)

Regarding the perceptual impact of the choice of camera angles, Barry writes that;

“the language of camera angles is also highly manipulative emotionally and is perhaps one of the simplest and easiest to understand examples of visual language grounded in perceptual experience. In camera angle,



the literal is united with the symbolic, bridging the two worlds of logical and creative thinking within the psychology of the image...action recorded at eye level at a comfortable distance suggests natural vision and equality of status or importance, but when the angle shifts to slightly higher or lower than eye level, a subtle attitude creeps into the image, which sometimes comments directly, sometimes ironically, on the subject and action included in the frame...If the angle is extreme the attitude becomes emphatic." (pp.135-6)

I found this information about the impact of photographic techniques to be a critical component of Barry's work. In order to develop an understanding of how visual elements affect the presentation of information, insights into the process of photographic composition are key.

Barry goes into additional detail about the attitudes conveyed by specific camera angles, beginning with an explanation of the effect of low camera angles. She points out that low camera angles, (in which the camera is looking up at the subject from below) lend the subject an air of importance, power, or respect while the viewer, (whose perspective is the same as the camera's) is placed in a position of diminished importance, as if they were a small child looking up at an adult. While low camera angle conveys a sense of power, when it is combined with back-lighting, (lit from behind so the subject at least partially obscures the light source) or bottom-lighting, (lit from below) the effect can turn menacing, a technique often used in horror films. In contrast, when a figure is photographed from a very low angle and is shown against the sky, however, the effect on the subject is one in which they are "ethereally enhanced, and the powerful symbolism of the sky imbues the figure with a visionary quality by association." (p.136) The use of a high camera angle has the opposite effect of a low camera angle. High camera angles (shot from above the eye level of the subject) tends to make subjects look small, helpless and insignificant. If distance is added to either a low or high camera angle shot, the effect is multiplied. Barry cites an example of a city photographed from an airplane which, "makes people look like ants, and their individuality and significance is proportionally diminished." (p.136) If distance is removed, and the subject is seen close-up, then the individual becomes more significant and important. In close-up shots, facial features are visible in greater detail, and a person's expression can often be interpreted to give the viewer some insight into the subject's thoughts or emotional state. This ability to see a person's expression makes it possible for a viewer to identify or empathize with the subject in the photograph. If the close-up is very tight, however, it can seem like an invasion of the subject's personal space and can become threatening instead of inviting. Something that Barry talks about in relation to close-up shots that is very interesting is the impact and importance of the subject's eyes when seen at close

range. She writes that;

“eyes become very important, and even a point of view shot takes on menacing features if the person is staring directly into our eyes as if to challenge or defy us. This is why faces appearing on wanted posters naturally look more hostile than separate features might warrant, and why close-up models in advertisements so rarely look directly into the camera. The effect of a direct stare is at best uncomfortable and at worst inflammatory.” (p.137)

Another photographic element that Barry touches upon is relative size, or the size of the elements in a photograph in relation to one another. The relative size that elements take on in a photograph is closely related to how far apart they are from another and also from the camera, but it may not accurately reflect their size in reality. Looking at the photograph of George Bush and his dog (Figure 11), we can see how actual size can be distorted so that the relative sizes of things appear to be much different than they actually are due to camera angle and the relative distance of the subjects from the camera/photographer. Barry comments that relative size:

“had enormous psychological impact on perception because it, too, has implications of importance as well as impact on our sense of personal space. Larger things are seen as having more importance, and large open spaces often seem to trivialize the presence of people...in interpersonal relations, space is an especially important dimension and is both personally and culturally derived. Extreme close-ups, for example, intimidate and may therefore antagonize.” (p.137)



Figure 11: Photograph from the January 14, 2001 issue of *People* magazine which illustrates how camera angle and distance can be used to affect the relative size of elements within a photograph. The caption that went along with the image read: “Displaying extraordinary poise under pressure, President George W. Bush (backed by Army Gen. Tommy Franks) reasoned calmly with an unexplained 40-ft-tall springer spaniel at his Texas ranch. (Okay, it’s just a photographer’s optical illusion. The president is actually much, much taller—and that’s his pup, Spot.”

Building on her explanation of the impact of lighting, camera angle and relative size on our perception of photographic images, Barry next goes on to detail some of the ways in which photographs can be manipulated. She writes that, “traditional photographs may be altered in four basic ways: in the set-up of [the] model, camera and lighting before the photograph is taken; in the processing of the film; or by the addition or deletion of elements to the processed photograph, followed by rephotographing the whole.” (p.144) In expanding upon how the set-up of the model can alter an image, Barry describes how subjects shot in profile tend to appear more remote than if they’re shot straight on or at a slight angle because profile shots tend to place more emphasis on the shapes and form of the face than on the person’s facial expression. Thus, profile shots tend to evoke less empathy from viewers, but can engender admiration for the subject who will tend to look, “as if they belonged to a more abstract or distant world of ideas.” (p.144) In terms of the context that a subject is photographed in, an office filled with books will tend to suggest intellect, stature and seriousness for example, while a jail cell, in contrast, will have more negative connotations that will be reflected back on the subject. Further manipulations can be achieved, in part, through the choice of soft or sharp focus. The use of soft focus tends to romanticize a subject while a sharper focus, in contrast, tends to harden them. Some additional techniques that Barry also talks about include the use of:

“different focal lengths [that] can bring the background into clarity, such as a wide angle lens, so that the field takes on equal importance to the subject or even comments on the foreground figure; or they can flatter or blur the background into insignificance, as with a telephoto lens that has a very shallow depth of field. [Additional choices like the choice of a] full color [image] can make festive what black and white would make depressing; angle and distance have powerful connotations for emotional involvement and attitude toward the subject; what is included within or excluded from the frame can profoundly alter the contextual interpretation and connotative meaning...That is why it is often said that there is no such thing as an objective photograph, since attitude and tone is already ‘built into’ the image by the photographer.” (p.145)

Within her discussion of the language of images, another issue that Barry talks about is something she calls the “narrative factor.” She describes it as follows: “When still images go beyond the literal level of simply reflecting a neutral reality, that is, when they begin to encompass metaphoric and symbolic meanings, they also take on narrative significance as well, implying action immediately preceding and immediately following the frame...photographs capture a moment that implies a situation...so photographers seek to record the critical moment that

implies a larger reality.” (p.148) Barry takes her definition a bit further when talking about the role of the photojournalist. She writes that they seek to capture the “critical moment...one that can act as the climax of a story or capture its essence in such a way that it becomes an objective correlative for a profoundly shared national emotion, a metaphor of social or political significance, or a symbol summarizing some form of transcendent human struggle.” (p.148) The importance of the photojournalist’s role in capturing the essence of critical moments in our lives was certainly evident after the 11th of September. It was through their powerful and moving images of destruction, horror, grief and heroism that many of us have come to remember September 11th and the days that followed. As a result, those images form an important and powerful part of our nation’s, and of the world’s memory of those events. It is important to remember, however, that those types of images are typically removed from the sequence of events that surrounded their making, so that when we see them, we see the ones that were deliberately selected and then placed into new contexts such as into newspapers, magazines, or other mediated forums. Because of this, it is important to consider the impact of their new surroundings, including how those new surroundings affect our perception of the image or images. As Barry writes, “embedded in each image [and I think also in each design] created for a public audience is an implicit storyline that a viewer participates in and completes according to what is suggested by the [stylistic themes] of the image [and design], the perceptual principles of good continuation and closure, and his or her own values, attitudes, and experience.” (p.149) One place where we can see this happening clearly is on magazine covers which, Barry writes, “try to capture the crux of major news stories or personalities, and



Figure 12: U.S. News & World Report magazine cover from 11/26/01



Figure 13: *Time* and *Newsweek* magazine covers featuring O.J. Simpson from July 1997

to convey in their cover images something of their editorial attitude toward the subject.” (p.149) (Figure 12)

An important and often cited example, also used in Barry’s book, of the tendency of magazine cover designs to try to capture the essence of a story and overlay it with some element of editorial judgement are the *Time* and *Newsweek* covers featuring O.J. Simpson after his arrest for the murder of his wife and Ron Goldman in June of 1997 (Figure 13). The treatment of the photograph on the *Time* cover stirred up a great deal of controversy and called into question the credibility of *Time* magazine in particular, and the credibility of news magazines in general, in terms of their use of photographic imagery. *Time* magazine’s cover featured an enhanced “photo-illustration” of O.J. Simpson’s mug shot in which the color of his skin was noticeably darkened, as were his eyes. The shadows on his face were emphasized, the background lighting was altered considerably from its original appearance, and a black shadowy border was also added to the image. In terms of explaining how the altered lighting could affect our perception of that enhanced image, Barry cites research which indicates that, “warm-white low-level lighting

seems to encourage feelings of calm and cooperation, so conversely, too-bright, unforgiving lighting [as we see in the image used by *Time*] induces negativity and irritation.' (p.152) In contrast, *Newsweek* ran the original L.A. Police photograph without altering it, resulting in a considerably less dramatic cover.

Beyond the treatment of the photograph, the design of each cover is also notable. By placing the image of O.J. Simpson behind the magazine's masthead on the *Time* cover, the viewer is given the illusion of seeing him partially obscured, almost as if were seeing part of him behind bars. It also serves to further distance him emotionally from readers, making him seem more remote and less empathetic. *Newsweek's* cover does the opposite. By placing the title behind his head, and by using the original photograph, O.J.'s expression appears more open and he is presented as a more sympathetic figure. An additional comment made by Barry about the choice of imagery more generally, provides further insight:

"although the Simpson covers for *Newsweek* and *Time* on the surface seem to show a similar kind of true context versus distortion situation...they also offer an additional consideration: although the *Newsweek* cover was ignored in the indignation over the *Time* cover, the effect of both nevertheless hinged on the emotionally loaded use of a mug shot as an appropriate image. It is probably fair to say that most people associate such images with someone who has already been determined to be guilty of a crime, so strong is the valence of the jailhouse context." (p.154)

This example of the *Time* and *Newsweek* covers clearly shows how images can be manipulated to achieve a desired dramatic effect. It shows how formal elements such as lighting and color can be used to elicit an emotional reaction from viewers. It speaks to the role of design in further shaping a visual message, and it alludes to some of the subtler ways that our perception of the veracity of information can be influenced by graphic and visual elements that we see, but might not think critically or analytically about, either as a viewer or as a creator of visual messages. As a result, it is an important case study in regards to the power of images, and the role of perception in making sense of visual presentations of information.

In writing about the medium of television, and the power of images within that medium, one of the major elements that Barry focuses on is the re-creation of reality that inherently takes place in any television news broadcast. As she writes, "television, like the photograph, carries with it a sense of authenticity and immediacy that no

other media can match. Yet no electronic transmission can occur without prior conscious manipulation of the image by staging, framing, and cutting; and the relative rarity of live, spontaneous broadcasting implies further manipulation in planning, editing and dubbing.” (p.174) Because the ‘reality’ of any televised event is almost never a straightforward, neutral presentation of information, it is important for viewers to understand how televised versions of reality can be manipulated, sometimes intentionally, and sometimes unconsciously, to alter the ways that a situation, or the people involved in an event, are perceived. Some of the methods that Barry highlights in her writing include the choice of imagery or video clips, the techniques used to establish the credibility of the newscast, the fleetingness of visual images, the choice of accompanying graphical elements and also technical issues such as the choice of camera angles.

Decisions about what images or video footage are selected for use in any given news broadcast is one of the fundamental ways that news content can be skewed. Some of the examples that Barry cites include ones in which, “teenage victims will be shown in graduation pictures with bright smiles, while alleged or convicted felons will be shown in rumpled casual clothing, while frowning, hiding their faces, slouching, or looking down or away.” (p.175) A more specific example she cites is that, “at the high point of his involvement in a sex scandal, newscasters often included taped footage of Michael Jackson in concert, grabbing his genitals.” Yet another example, “in the media coverage surrounding the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan scandal...[from] the 1994 Winter Olympics, Harding was depicted as unsmiling, tough, aggressive, or unfeminine in press photographs, while Kerrigan was always shown smiling and attractively ‘feminine.’” (p.175) Clearly, in the latter two examples, images and video footage were chosen that lent visual support to the narrative texts of both of those stories. Michael Jackson was portrayed as potentially deviant, thus clips of him grabbing his genitals could be used to lend credibility to that allegation. In the case of Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan, Nancy was consistently portrayed as an innocent victim and Tonya as a jealous aggressor, and the images used in the mainstream press supported those stereotypes. In each of these cases, one way to think more analytically about the choice of imagery used is to consider what types of images or footage were excluded. For example, how might our understanding of a situation change if the victims are shown in an unflattering light, while the aggressors are shown in a more positive light? Yet another way to delve more deeply into this issue is to think about the use of visuals that do not support the verbal narrative of a story. An interesting example cited previously that is also worth considering in relation to this point, is the comment made by Leslie Stahl regarding a story she put together about the Reagan administration when she was a

White House correspondent. She said, "I did a piece where I was quite negative about Reagan—yet the pictures were terrific—and I thought they'd be mad at me. But they weren't. They loved it and the official outright said to me, 'They didn't hear you. They didn't hear what you said. They only saw those pictures.'" (p.78) In her case, it was quite clear that what was important were the images selected to accompany the story. Regardless of whether they support a given story line or seem to contradict it, the power of image selection can be seen an important component that affects how we perceive the information being presented in a news broadcast.

The credibility of the presentation of information in news broadcasts is another important factor that affects viewer's willingness to believe in the accuracy of news content. As Barry writes:

"television news programs...are concerned to a great extent with both likability and credibility factors in the images presented, and as a result, they continually juggle small talk, friendly close-ups, action footage, and frequent camera changes with more subtle credibility techniques such as directly addressing viewers in a kind of social-personal-professional exchange, and devices such as engaging full screen location backgrounds for news stories." (p.176)

In terms of the impact of full screen location backgrounds, Barry cites research done by G.O. Coldevin which indicates that, "a full screen location background can result in the speaker being rated as more credible, clear, interesting, relaxed, and professional; as well as in the report being seen as more complete and important."<sup>11</sup> Since establishing credibility is a critical component of news delivery, it is important to understand some of the techniques that are used to try to establish credibility with viewers, especially since some of these techniques have little to do with the quality or depth of the actual information being presented.

One important factor that differentiates television images from printed images is the way we interact with them. While printed images can be studied, analyzed and reflected upon at the viewer's convenience, television images generally rush past us too quickly for that sort of in-depth attention and observation. In talking about how this affects the way we perceive televised images, Barry writes;

"because the on-the-screen images change rapidly, and because the size of the television screen allows us to view it centrally without searching the parts to create the whole as with a film-screen, TV images tend to be read as a whole impression. This means that television...is seldom analyzed for the emotional valence of the



images shown...[However,] engineering of the image is most impactful when the complex of positive, negative, or neutral emotional valences derived from image content, editing context, and the viewer's own attitudes and ideas can be structured to a single purposeful end, and the image is so subtly altered that it still seems natural...[So things like] soft lighting and make-up will give a friendly appearance; hard lighting a mistrustful one, and as we absorb the impression, we begin to use that impression as information in the formation of ideas." (p.176)

Essentially, Barry is saying that because images rush past us so quickly and because they seem to be truthful representations of reality, we tend to accept their veracity more easily than we might with a printed image we could study more closely. As a result, we are more likely to accept that what we have seen is true or accurate, which in turn has an affect on how we construct our larger understanding of an event and the people involved in it. Due to the dynamic nature of the presentation, our ability to question and reflect on specific visual elements and what they represent becomes more difficult because we typically can't look at the images more closely, or reflect on them for a long period of time.

In terms of the use of graphical imagery to support a news narrative, Barry comments that, "in this media-induced reality...[when] projected images are combined with effective cultural symbols like the American flag or Arlington National Cemetery, and powerful emotional icons like the image of Abraham Lincoln or Marilyn Monroe, the positive valence increases and the emotional effect becomes even more powerful." (p.177) We have seen this played out in the coverage of the events of September 11th and their aftermath in which the extensive use of red, white and blue patriotic imagery has surrounded the coverage. That imagery has been used to present U.S. citizens as victims, and also as righteous defenders of freedom. In contrast, more pugilist imagery such as the use of radar circles has often been employed when presenting images of those held responsible for the attack.

Barry also considers some of the ways in which camera techniques are used to construct news narratives. She introduces the idea that the audio-visual language of television is intentionally designed to be straightforward and easily and quickly accessible by a large and diverse audience. Within those constraints, that is, the need for quick understanding on the part of viewers, the main elements that Barry highlights as being used for "manipulating this communication" are the choice of camera lens, the choice of camera angle, and also the camera's distance from the subject or event being recorded. In explaining how these factors can be utilized, Barry writes that;

“some of these derive their meaning from our own ‘common-sense’ experience with body language and personal comfort zones—such as looking someone in the eye as a sign of honesty and openness, or not bringing the camera in too close if the circumstance calls for reserve and intellectual reasoning, some derive meaning from conventions associated with the medium as it has developed, such as the use of the close-up in reaction shots when we expect an emotional response to a verbal exchange or particularly tense situation, or black-and-white footage to signal a ‘you-are-there’ type documentary realism. In addition, certain techniques, such as cutting in midsentence or not cutting an overly long pause create a sense of uneasiness in the viewer and make the person treated seem either inarticulate, reticent to talk, or even dishonest.” (p.178)

Regarding the use of this audio-visual language in the development of television content, Barry also talks about the fact that unlike written dialogue which is routinely edited, reviewed, and at times even censored, the visual language of television news is generally not analyzed as closely. Thus, “visual language...can be used freely to editorialize or to create another message altogether.” (p.179) This assertion certainly lends credence to the argument that improved visual literacy is important not only for viewers, but also for those creating and selecting content for the news, since its visual presentation so clearly has an affect on how the audience will likely build their understanding of the information and issues presented.

In talking about the television coverage of the Gulf War, a particularly arresting example of the use of television techniques to manipulate viewers’ understanding of events and issues, Barry makes the point that, “in war, images are particularly crucial in defining the reasons for becoming involved, for rallying the support of the nation and maintaining morale, and for motivating soldiers to kill or die.” (p.281) Because, as noted earlier, most viewers have such a strong tendency towards believing what they see, the need for critical viewing becomes increasingly more important during war time. As we are now in the midst of another war against a group of people most Americans know very little about, within a country as remote and unknown for most of us as Kuwait was at the beginning of the Gulf War, the need to look critically at the information presented by the news media is again crucial. For most of us, mediated images and explanations of what is happening are all that are available to us, since we have no personal experience or knowledge of the situation to use as a yardstick by which to judge the accuracy of the information we are receiving. The danger of misinformation is quite real, however. During the Gulf War, CNN began continuous coverage of the war, leaving many viewers with the impression that they were seeing what



Figure 14: view from a smart bomb, from a CNN.com article, "Hit smarter, not harder? Gulf War strikes marked a sea change in air tactics."

was actually happening and were well informed about the situation in the Gulf. As Barry cited, what researchers came to find out was that;

"the more people watched...the less they understood about what they were seeing or even about the basic issues that caused the war in the first place. Although heavy viewers were likely to know the names of the chief players and the weapons in the war...they were also more likely to mistakenly believe that Kuwait was a democracy before the war. They were also less likely to know that the United States had sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, or that the United States had told Iraq before the invasion that there would be no ramifications if it invaded Kuwait."<sup>12</sup>

Another important factor that led to misunderstandings about the reality of the situation during the Gulf War had to do with the fact that actual combat was never shown and thus images of death and suffering were minimal. What people watched instead was footage of precisely targeted smart bombs (Figure 14). In seeking to explain why the coverage was structured this way, Barry cites two major reasons. One was the very tight control over information exerted by the American military who wanted to avoid the sort of war coverage that happened during Vietnam and which led to huge public outcries. The second was due to pressure from advertisers who worried that their products wouldn't sell if they were shown "surrounded by images of death, pain and destruction."<sup>13</sup> Thus, as Barry writes, "newscasters [were left] with the prospect of making violence positive, even entertaining, of treating only soft stories, or of losing their financial support." (p.285) In addition to the very serious ethical issues that the Gulf War coverage raised, it also speaks to the

one of the main problems that both Dondis and Barry write about, and which I also support—the need for improved visual literacy among viewers who think that they are receiving an accurate account of reality that has instead been distorted by the lens of news coverage. In order to understand these distortions, viewers must become motivated to ask critical questions about the content they are receiving, and they must also understand how the techniques and conventions of news coverage are used to construct a mediated version of reality that is almost always a poor substitute for actuality. As Barry writes:

“this sense of immediacy and truthfulness which is the result of watching a steady stream of images interpreted with authority is what George Gerbner warned about as ‘instant history’—that is, history constructed by technology which ‘concentrates power, shrinks time, and speeds action to the point where reporting, making and writing history merge.’”<sup>14</sup> This alteration of history is made possible by an ambiguous image such as the dim blips of missiles seen in the night sky on relatively low resolution TV screens, and the verbal context that interprets it. Such images are responded to immediately and emotionally, without introspection or recognition of complexity...[And] when image and voice-over conflict, people will believe the image and ignore the voice-over. Control of the image, therefore, implies perceptual control as well, because as Gerbner states. “Images of actuality appear to be spontaneous and to reveal what really happens. They do not need logic to build their case.”<sup>15</sup>

Although, in my own research, I do not deal in depth with the coverage of the war in Afghanistan, I think that this explanation of some of the issues raised by the coverage of the Gulf War provides an important context for considering the power of visual imagery in news coverage. It is also an important reminder of how news coverage can be manipulated and skewed, in part through the choice and presentation of images and other visual materials.

The work done by Ann Marie Seward Barry is critical to my own attempt to create a prototype for a visual language analysis of news content. She introduces extremely important concepts and methods for a critical analysis of visual materials across multiple mediums, and her focus on the role of perception provides powerful insight into how images affect us, emotionally, cognitively and also sub-consciously. Her interest in promoting visual literacy and visual intelligence as a way for viewers—and I would argue for creators as well—to understand the power and impact of visual messages is extremely empowering. Her work, and the work of Donis A. Dondis before her, provides an important foundation for my attempt to develop a method for analyzing the impact of visual language elements on news content.

## Media Studies

One of the important ongoing debates in the field of media studies is based on the conflicting positions of “agency” vs. “structure.” Agency assumes a bottom-up perspective in which consumers have the power to negotiate or create their own sets of meaning or understanding from media products. In contrast, a structuralist approach implies a top-down state in which meaning is defined by the institutions and existing ideologies that produce cultural artifacts. As a result, a structuralist point of view assumes that the meanings of cultural products remains fixed and cannot be transformed by individual action or negotiation. In striving to create a platform for a visual language analysis of news content, I am taking up the agency side of the debate and assuming that viewers can analyze the meaning of news content and negotiate their own critical understanding of the messages they contain. One media studies scholar who considers news discourse from this perspective, and whose writing has been instrumental in helping to provide me with a basis and also some important strategies for the analysis of news content is John Hartley.

John Hartley

In his book Understanding News, published in 1982, John Hartley presents an in-depth explanation and analysis of the conventions of news discourse with a particular focus on a textual and semiotic analysis of news content. Rather than writing solely for a scholarly audience, however, Hartley produced a text that was instead targeted at individual consumers of news. In his first chapter, he writes that, “this critical activity [of decoding the news] is something we can all perform...Armed with a little knowledge and a lot of suspicion, we can ‘negotiate’ with the apparently unarguable meanings of news-discourse on slightly more equal terms.” (p.10) As a result of this combination of factors—the assumption that anyone can learn to look more critically and knowledgeably at news content, and his thorough presentation of an explanation of the conventions of news production—Hartley’s text provides a critically important context and conceptual basis for my own attempt to prototype a method for a visual language analysis of news content.

To provide a starting point for looking more critically at the conventions of news production, Hartley establishes news-discourse at its simplest as a combination of words and pictures that are put together to form an account of an event, a report that is then made into a meaningful narrative for an audience. He goes on to write, much like Dondis and Barry did about visual literacy, that, “as we get used to its codes and conventions, we will become ‘news-literate’ – not only able to follow the news and recognize its familiar cast of characters and events, but also spontaneously able to interpret the world at large in terms of the codes we have learnt from the news.” (p.5) From that starting point, he introduces the framework of semiotics as a way to provide a language for understanding what the basic elements are that make up news-discourse. He begins with a linguistic definition of signs and sign systems using the terminology of Ferdinand de Saussure which was discussed in more depth in the section on Ann Marie Seward Barry’s work (*see p. 17 for more information*), but essentially defines the two sides of a sign as the *signified* (concept) and *signifier* (the sound-image). He also talks about the relationship between language (a *sign system*) and news-discourse by introducing a very useful metaphor. He writes:

“neither news nor language are transparent windows on the world. They are both like maps of the world...[and] a map organizes, selects and renders coherent the innumerable sense impressions we might experience on the ground. It does not depict the land, since water is not blue...and neither natural contours nor social boundaries are visible in the way they are shown on a map. Clearly a map is an abstraction from reality, translating it into an autonomous system of signs and codes, proposing ways in which the various and contradictory phenomena of the land can be artificially categorized, classified and differentiated.” (p.15)

Using this analogy, we can begin to think about the ways that news-discourse utilizes its own system of signs and codes to construct a version of reality that can be understood much as a map is understood—as an oversimplified, but useful representation of reality.

In talking more specifically about the selection and importance of signs, Hartley sets forth an example considering the use of ‘terrorist’ as a sign that is distinctly different from other words that could be chosen to replace it, i.e. ‘soldier’, ‘freedom fighter’, ‘guerrilla’, ‘volunteer’ or ‘gunman’. He writes that, “for the purposes of news-discourse, the main issue is the choice of which sign [is used] to realize, to make sense of, [a] real event.” (p.20) To further explain and explore the impact of the choice of signs on news-discourse, he also discusses them within the context of paradigm and syntagm, the use of accent,

and also the power of connotation and myth.

In terms of paradigm and syntagm, Hartley presents the idea that the way signs are selected in news-discourse has to do with, “the absence or presence of related values.” Thus, most signs can be better understood by looking at how the choice of their paradigmatic opposites would alter the meaning of an event when it is presented in a news story. He illustrates this

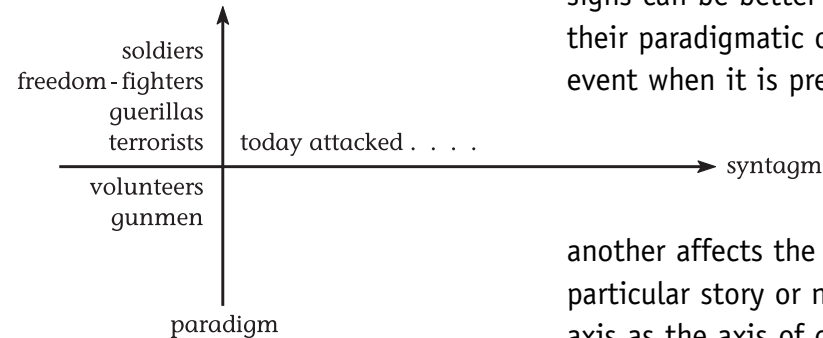


Figure 15

as two-axis relationship (Figure 15) in such a way that it allows us to see how the choice of one sign versus

another affects the news narrative throughout the rest of that particular story or news-discourse. He refers to the vertical axis as the axis of choice or sign selection, and the horizontal axis as the axis of combination. As he writes, “the sign ‘terrorist’ and the sign ‘liberated’ belong to two opposing discourses in social use. To the extent that there is a ‘general acceptance’ of the value of ‘terrorist’, it precludes notions of approval. So, having selected ‘terrorist’ form the paradigm of possible signs, you would find it easier to combine it with ‘captured’, or ‘over-ran’ or ‘occupied’ than with ‘liberated’.” (p.21) In terms of looking at visual imagery, it is interesting to think of those textual signs as being replaced with images along similar axes. For example, what are the specific qualities of images with similar subject matter that might lead to their placement on opposing sides of the paradigmatic axis? In terms of the present war with Al-Queda and the Taliban, how are soldiers on the Al-Queda side of the conflict visually portrayed in relation to U.S. soldiers, since those on one side of

the conflict are labeled enemies and terrorists while members of the opposing side are portrayed as defenders of freedom.

Another property of signs that Hartley introduces in seeking to explore how the choice of signs affects news coverage is multi-accentuality, which he identifies as a property of all signs. In presenting an explanation of the concept of multi-accentuality, he writes “signs do not have a fixed internal ‘meaning’, but only meaning-potentials, which are actualized in use. All signs can have their meaning potential ‘accented’, or directed towards a particular kind of meaning, depending on the context of the utterance, and on the speaker.” (p.22) He then goes on to explain that, “people struggle over what choice of accentuation for a given sign ‘counts’.” (p.23) Thus, we struggle over the meaning of signs, and those meanings are subject to change, but at any given time, signs are lent a specific meaning as a result of the context in which they are used, and in the emphasis that is placed on them. One example Hartley cites to clarify the concept of multi-accentuality is the use of the word ‘democracy’. Today, he writes, democracy is “‘generally accepted’ to be a neutral descriptive term for a certain form of government, or a ‘hooray’ word in political rhetoric.” (p.23) Hartley notes that in its earliest uses in England in the 1500s, however, “the word was virtually synonymous with ‘mob’ — very much a ‘boo’ word.” (p.23) To make clear the impact of multi-accentuality on news-discourse, Hartley writes that, “many of the explicit ‘values’ of journalistic codes are concerned with unambiguity, clarity, etc. And...one of news-discourses’ most consistent...tasks is to prefer particular meanings for events over other possible meanings.” (p.24) Thus, the importance of multi-accentuality in news-discourse can be understood as a tendency on the part of the news media to choose specific signs and then to lend them a preferred meaning as a way to clarify situations that may in fact be more ambiguous or complicated in reality than they seem when they are presented in the news. Although Hartley talks about this factor primarily in relation to language, it is also possible to think of it in terms of imagery as well. For example, the graphic symbol of the swastika has taken on a negative accentuality that can be used to call up the fear, hatred and anti-semitism associated with Nazi Germany and more recently, with skinheads. However, before it was co-opted by Adolf Hitler and later by white power groups, it was simply a benign runic symbol.

The impact of the socially derived signifiers of connotation and myth that become attached to the mean-



ing of signs is another semiotic process that Hartley introduces early on as an important element in understanding how news-discourse is shaped. His descriptions are largely built upon terminology derived from the work of Roland Barthes, a social theorist whose work included writing about visual semiotics. At their most basic, Hartley presents connotation as something that signifies emotion, feeling, or other 'subjective' values. For example, the sign 'blue' can be used to connote feeling sad or down, or the combination of 'red, white and blue' can be used to connote feeling of patriotism in the United States. He presents myths as a slightly more complicated signifier whose values are more conceptual, intellectual, or 'objective'. In explaining the role of myths in news-discourse in particular, he writes about the societal tendency toward creating myths around 'élite personalities' or particular events, for example, the Olympics. He also describes the ways in which myths serve the role of highlighting particular people or types of people, and also events that are deemed important, valuable and notable within society. One current example of a group of people who have been mythologized within news-discourse are the New York City fire fighters and police officers who were involved in rescuing victims of the September 11th attack on the World Trade Centers. As Hartley writes, "one of the primary functions of the news in any medium is continuously to signify myths through the everyday detail of 'newsworthy' events...news is a myth-maker...[and] the function performed by myth is, roughly, to allow a society to use factual or fictional characters and events to make sense of its environment, both physical and social." (p.29-30) Since visual imagery is often used to evoke the mythical and connotative signification of signs, this factor is also important to consider in any visual analysis of news content.

John Hartley also writes specifically about visual language elements that affect news-discourse and says of them that, "the way meaning is produced visually is fundamentally structured 'like a language'...its signifieds are very close to those of verbal language since they are borrowed wholesale, and its way of selecting and combining its signs by paradigmatic choice and syntagmatic chain is similar." (p.30) In clarifying how visual signs are different, he notes that unlike linguistic signs, visual images generally resemble their signified in some way. Furthermore, he writes that, "this characteristic of visual signs is *motivation*. A motivated sign is one where the arbitrariness so characteristic in language is limited, curtailed. *Planned* resemblance to 'the real' is introduced...[and] realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is discursively familiar" (p.30-1) Thus, the power of

images, especially photographic images, is that there is very little difference between the signs' signified and signifier. Ann Marie Seward Barry also introduces this concept in her writing and notes that since most images don't have to be translated from the abstract symbols of language into meaning, their meaning can be absorbed almost immediately if not even instinctually.

An additional element of visual language that Hartley writes about is the ability of visual mediums to present simultaneous signifiers. When information is delivered verbally, signifiers are presented individually and in a linear fashion thus simultaneous presentation of signifiers is not possible. He also notes that, "there is as much attention given to, and signification in, the spatial composition as the sequence of verbal/written signs. The composition within the TV screen puts different iconic signs together so that they modify or reinforce each other's signification. The same is true of the combination of headline + picture + story in newspapers [and news magazines and also web pages]. We read them simultaneously." (p.31) Another important point that Hartley makes is to highlight the element of 'truth' that images lend to news stories wherein a "picture...validates the headline and story with which it is simultaneously printed." (p.31) It is important to remember here, however, that, as Leslie Stahl found out in her piece about the Reagan administration (*see pg. 15 for more information*), sometimes the power of images can overwhelm the verbal components of a news story, making viewers believe a 'truth' through the selection of images that is actually contrary to the actual information presented in a the news story.

One of the next major areas that Hartley covers in his book is an introduction to the codes and conventions of news-discourse. He defines the term *code* as something that is "descriptive, analytical – it describes a particular system, or the conventions at work in producing meaning in a particular system...[and] what [all] codes share is the social agreement of their users – the 'encoder' of a message puts it together in a way calculated to be recognized by the 'decoder'...[Furthermore,] codes are a cultural phenomenon, expressing the relationship between people and groups." (p.32) For the sake of clarity, he also notes that the two words, codes and conventions are essentially interchangeable.

Following this introduction to some of the fundamental elements that make up news-discourse, Hartley suggest that we can begin to read news-discourse differently from the "preferred" meaning that it was

encoded with. This can be done by considering how the choice of signs affected the message and how that might have led to a preferred reading of a situation or event. We can question the accentuation that was given to particular signs. We can also question the myths and connotations that were implicitly woven in the news stories. By this process of actively decoding and potentially refusing the “preferred,” or overly simplified meanings presented by the news media, we can begin to look at news-discourse more critically and “we can [also begin to] ‘negotiate’ with the apparently unarguable meanings of news-discourse.” (p.10)

In addition to looking more critically at news content through the lens of semiotics, Hartley also writes about the economic, social and cultural contexts within which the news must operate and which directly affect the creation and production of news content. Because news coverage is shaped so dramatically by these forces, understanding some of the ways in which they influence news coverage is crucial. As Hartley writes early on in Understanding News, “if we can find out how the news works, what interests it serves, and analyze its meanings, we can use that understanding every time we see or read the news: our critical understanding of news-discourse and of the world constructed within it can change even if the news doesn’t.” (p.9)

Although he only touches briefly upon the impact of economic factors on news production, Hartley highlights a few issues that are key to understanding the structure of the news media in this country. One such factor is that, in the United States, news producers operate in a competitive marketplace in which they must vie for consumers time, attention and money. One result of this is that not only must the news be informative, but in order to attract and hold the attention of viewers, it must also be entertaining. As Hartley writes, “an interesting characteristic of the telling of news is its entertaining quality...certainly television news is competing with the ‘semiotic context’ that surrounds it. No matter how terrible the event, broadcasters must still exploit the semiotic and discursive arsenal at their disposal. Otherwise there might be no viewers to tell it to.” (p.47)

Another economic factor which is important to recognize and which Hartley also mentions in Understanding News is that the production and sale of news content in and of itself is not a profitable

undertaking. Newspapers and news magazines don't make money enough on the sale of their publications to support their efforts. Instead, they make money by selling their readers 'eyeballs' to advertisers. Television news programs do the same. Their content is ostensibly free, excepting the fee users pay to their cable or satellite TV providers. What those television news programs really sell is a particular type of audience demographic to advertisers who want to target that market, and it is that advertising that pays the bulk of the news production costs. In talking about the historical evolution of this situation Hartley writes:

"news is largely a product of history. And the history of news since the nineteenth century has been the history of a translation from popular defined as 'for the people', to the popular as 'for the market'. Hence, the way news is produced resembles in many respects the way commodities are produced. And one of the commodities newspapers like to produce is readers. Unable to survive at a price people can afford to pay without including advertising newspapers deliver readers to advertisers." (p.130)

An interesting side note to these developments are that many of the major television networks produce news programs for the prestige it affords them rather than for the revenue it generates for them.

In writing about the current trend towards concentration of ownership among media producers, Hartley notes that one result of this limiting of independent voices is a focus among competing companies to appeal to as large a mass market audience as possible. Striving to operate within the bounds of acceptable opinion is thus an integral part of their business strategy since they have to create programming that will allow them to court potential advertisers as much as potential viewers or readers.<sup>16</sup> Producing unpopular or overly controversial news programs could lead to a loss of advertising revenue and losing revenue is bad for business.

In illustrating some of social and cultural factors that shape news production, one particularly important component of Hartley's explanation of the structure of news discourse is the information he presents about what determines the newsworthiness of any given event. In particular, he references the work of Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge who defined a series of characteristics and conditions which an event must fulfill in order to be considered newsworthy.<sup>17</sup> They include:

1. **Frequency** - The time-span of an event. The example they give is that "murders take very little time and

their meaning is quickly arrived at . Hence, their frequency fits that of daily newspapers and programmes. On the other hand, economic, social or cultural trends take very much longer to unfold and to be made meaningful [thus] they are outside the frequency of daily papers.” (p.76)

2. **Threshold** - The size of an event, given that a story has to be large enough to merit coverage by the news media. They also note that the threshold of drama is also equally important, or, “the bigger the story, the more added drama is needed to keep it going.” (p.76) In addition, a story which generates a dramatic response will often be kept in the headlines as long as that story continues to incite a dramatic response by the public.
3. **Unambiguity** - The clarity of an event. It is interesting to note that what they mean by clarity is not that the event itself be factually simplistic but rather, “the range of possible meanings must be limited...In news, the intrinsic polysemic (ambiguous — capable of generating many meanings) nature of both events and accounts of them is reduced as much as possible.” (p.77)
4. **Meaningfulness** - This characteristic has two features. One is that an event must have cultural proximity, that is, “events that accord with the cultural background of the news-gatherers will be seen as more meaningful than others, and so more liable to be selected,” (p.77) The second is that an event must be relevant to its audience. In the case of events which happen at a great distance, those which are seen as a threat are more likely to be covered than those which are seen as non-threatening.
5. **Consonance** - The predictability of, or desire for an event. The example given is of anti-war demonstrations which took place in Grosvenor Square in London in 1968 during the Vietnam war in which, “the news coverage...concentrated almost exclusively on what was expected – namely violence. Very little [violence actually] occurred, but it was massively reported, whereas the issues at stake in the demonstration were largely ignored.” (p.77)
6. **Unexpectedness** - The unpredictability, newness or rarity of an event.
7. **Continuity** - Once an event is initially covered by the news media, coverage of that event will tend to continue.
8. **Composition** - The mixture of different kinds of events. For example, a balance between foreign and domestic stories to round out the news coverage.

In addition to these first eight characteristics which can be used to determine the newsworthiness of events, Galtung and Ruge also defined four additional factors that are especially important for predicting

the the newsworthiness of events in western media sources. They are:

9. **Reference to élite nations** - Stories about wars, elections, disasters and other significant events that involve powerful nations are almost always considered newsworthy. In contrast, they noted that similar events in lesser nations will tend to go virtually unnoticed.
10. **Reference to élite persons** - Significant events involving public personalities are often considered newsworthy because “it is assumed their actions are more consequential than the daily activities of ordinary people...[Also] the social activities of élite people can serve as representative actions...of interest to us all, since we too engage in these things.” (p.78)
11. **Personalization** - Events seen as the actions of individual people are highlighted as newsworthy because individuals are seen to be easier to identify, and to identify with, than institutions, corporations or governmental structures.
12. **Negativity** - Bad news makes for good news stories. This is supported by looking back to some of the earlier characteristics that Galtung and Ruge define as making events newsworthy including: bad news is typically unexpected, unambiguous, it happens quickly, its consonant with our general expectations, and thus the threshold for bad news is typically lower than it is for positive news stories.

It is also possible to think of the selection of visual materials in relation to this checklist. If visual materials are available that emphasize any of these twelve characteristics, then it is likely that those visuals would also be selected for use. Furthermore, if visual materials are available that suggest additional characteristics within a story that might not be apparent otherwise, they could be used to increase the relevance or importance of any given event. It would be interesting to think about how or if this list would be affected by the availability or lack of related visual materials as well.

Highlighting Galtung and Ruge’s twelve characteristics of what makes a given event newsworthy also speaks to the social function of news. As Hartley writes, “the news contributes to the ‘climate of opinion’, to the horizons of possibility, and to the process of marking the limits of acceptable thought and action. In other words, it functions to produce social knowledge and cultural values.” (p.56) By setting up parameters for what events, what people, and what countries are considered news worthy, a culture and a society also projects a sense of what it considers valuable and important.

Not only does the media play a significant role in defining cultural values through what is deemed to be

news worthy, but it also plays an important role in shaping and defining the identity of individuals and also groups within society. Regarding this tendency, Hartley quotes the work of the British cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, who wrote:

“the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices and values of other groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a ‘whole’. This is the first of the great cultural functions of the modern media: the provision and the selective construction of social knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

This process is especially important to recognize and consider. Through news coverage, we gain an understanding of people in distant locations we might never have any direct experience with or introduction to. Because of this, what we can come to know or understand of other peoples is only the information we’re presented with through an intermediary that determines what is relevant to constructing an ‘image’ of the lives, religious practices, etc. of those other groups. For those of us who have never been to Afghanistan or met Afghani people for example, what we know of them, of their culture and of their current plight is only what has been presented to us through the news media, and that view is inherently limited, since only information deemed newsworthy will be incorporated into the constructed, mediated image of their identity.

One of the most powerful methods that the news media uses to communicate information about events, people and cultures is through narrative. Compelling news coverage is rarely, if ever, just a straight reporting of facts; more often, it is presented as a rich narrative that is told in such a way as to grab, and hopefully hold, the attention and interest of viewers and readers. Hartley defines four “narrative moments” that are common to most news stories and are used to add significance and meaning to events for news consumers. (p.118-9) They include:

1. **Framing** - At the beginning, the topic and its associated discourse are established.
2. **Focusing** - The significance of the event or events are explained.
3. **Realizing** - The topic is made ‘real’ by accessing voices that can help to verify the ‘reality’ of the news provider’s version of the story.

4. **Closing** - Closing is not about telling the end of the story, instead, it is “the closure of various possible interpretations of the event and the preferring of just one ‘reading’ of it. The story means, ‘this’..Closure begins right at the start of a story and gathers momentum as it develops.” (p.119)

To further explain and illuminate this process of developing common narrative themes that are used repeatedly in the structuring of news discourse, Hartley goes on to present a concept which I have found to be especially crucial in my own efforts towards gaining insights into how events are presented by the news media. It is the tendency to translate complex situations into dichotomies of oppositional forces, i.e. us vs. them, the good guys vs. the bad guys, etc., in which events and participants can be assigned a place on one side or the other of this basic oppositional structure. To illustrate this us vs. them dichotomy as well as some of the various levels of opposition that can exist within this model, Hartley included an illustration from Stuart Hall’s work (*Figure 16*)<sup>19</sup> which places ‘us’ or ‘civilized society’ at the center of a set of concentric circles. Each ring outside of that first circle marks increasingly greater levels of opposition. In speaking about the implications of this tendency, Hartley writes that, “once an individual or topic has been stereotyped it will always be presented in terms of the stereotype, and further, it will never be selected as newsworthy unless it does or says something that fits the stereotype... Furthermore, once a topic has been assigned a place on the ‘negative’ [them]

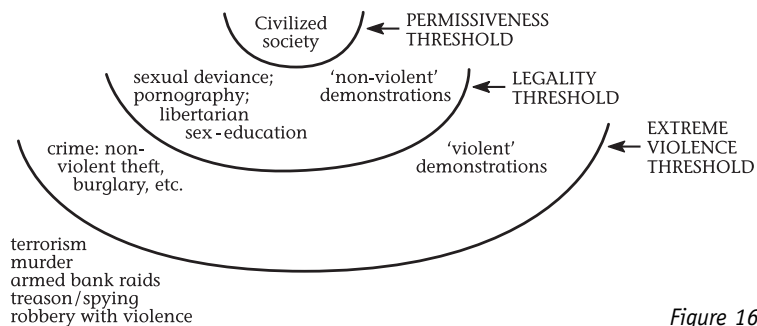


Figure 16



side of the basic opposition, its doings cannot be seen in positive [us] terms.” (p.116)

The use of this narrative convention of translating situations into dichotomies of oppositional forces seems to be one of the news media’s strategies for translating complex issues into more easily understandable, familiar narrative structures that are easier for viewers to digest. What is unnerving about this strategy, however, is that it leads to the oversimplification of complex, multi-dimensional situations that cannot be fully understood, or their complexity grasped, when viewed within this type of structure. Hartley discusses this process in relation to British news coverage of the situation in Northern Ireland in which he writes:

“translating the political-military affairs of Northern Ireland into the popular mythology of commandos, and into the commonsense discourse of cops and robbers, ‘News at Ten’ produces a way of understanding which proposes that not only is it possible for the events to be made sense of in this accessible, commonsense way, but that this is necessarily what they mean, of themselves. From this ‘insight’ it is perhaps only a short step towards ‘our’ uncritical acquiescence in the government policy of ‘criminalization’ – which is never discussed as such in this bulletin. On the contrary, it hardly needs to be seen as a policy since its rationale appears to arise ‘naturally’ from the ‘facts’ of the situation.” (p.106)

Hartley also goes on to specifically define some of the roles that visual elements play in illustrating the “us vs. them” oppositional structure of news discourse that is perpetuated through the use of this narrative convention. His writing focuses in particular on visual conventions in the arena of television news coverage. First, he defines three formal presentation modes which he refers to as visual structures within news narratives. They are:

1. **The newsreader** - the person who ‘frames’ the topic at the beginning of the report, then provides links between other story elements during the report, and finally ‘rounds off’ the topic at the end of the report.
2. **The correspondent or commentator** - The person who sets the topic into context and also explains its significance.
3. **The film report** - Footage that presents images and ‘actuality’ from the field, ‘real’ experience.

Next, by using these three presentation modes as a jumping off point, Hartley also talks about the specific visual elements that tend to be used within those presentation modes, and also how those visual elements are treated. They include:

1. **The talking head** - This can be the news reader or correspondent, both of whom are usually given a neutral visual treatment differentiated only by the addition of graphics and/or a title identifying who they are.
2. **Graphics** - Animations, graphical imagery, still photographs and text-based headlines. They can be used to introduce stories or segments. During a report, they can be used to fill the screen while a voice over supplies commentary. Or, they can be used behind a talking-head to provide additional context during a news report.
3. **Nomination** - Captions and verbal introductions used to introduce and name participants, either reporters or outside individuals. For outside individuals in particular, captions serve to tell the audience who the speaker is, they establish the 'status' of the speaker (expert, eyewitness, etc.), and they establish the speaker's right to and/or competence to speak on the topic in question, thus establishing their credibility and/or authority within the discourse.
4. **Actuality** - The film used during news reports. It tends to be either film with a voice-over added so no reporter is visible, "stake-out" footage of a reporter speaking directly into the camera from the location of the news story, or "vox pop" footage in which an interviewee is seen talking to a reporter. According to Hartley, this content is "the backbone of TV news" since it serves to confirm the 'reality' of the event[s] being reported on.

Although Hartley focuses primarily on the roles that visual elements play in the arena of television news coverage, some of these concepts have parallels in other media as well. The concept of actuality has a parallel in print and web-based news content in that photographs are often used like film footage to confirm the 'reality' of events being reported on. Graphics can also play a role in highlighting specific information or providing readers with additional context much as it would when used behind a talking head on television. The selection of imagery and the way it is used in print or web layouts can also play a role in visually framing who stands on each side of the oppositional narrative structure that is commonly used within news discourse. A clear example of the role that visual elements can play in framing news stories, discussed earlier in great detail, is the comparison of the *Time* and *Newsweek* covers featuring O.J. Simpson. (see p. 24 for more information)

After providing readers with a clearer understanding of how to look more critically at news content through the lens of semiotics, and following his explanation of the economic, social and cultural factors that shape news production, Hartley also arms his readers with some specific questions and techniques for negotiating meanings in both printed and televisual news content. In looking more closely at the presentation of information in newspapers, Hartley provides a list of questions<sup>20</sup> which can be used as a starting point for undertaking a more critical reading of both textual content and also visual content. I would further suggest that the same questions are also as applicable to news magazines, and in some cases web-based news content, as they are to newspapers. A selection of some of the questions he poses include:

- In any one instance, what is the relationship between copy, headlines and pictures
- How well does the overall layout help to promote a particular 'meaning' for the event reported?
- What role do the photos play in 'closing' the meaning of the stories? What codes are at work in producing this effect?
- What is the relationship between different stories on the same page? Does this type of juxtaposition itself produce any meaning which is not 'contained' in either of the stories on their own?
- Is there any evidence to suggest that some interests in a dispute are presented as natural and general interests, whilst with others a convergence is proposed between their interests and deviant/criminal behavior?

Hartley also talks about the power of comparison as a method for looking more critically at the presentation of information in news content. He writes, "comparison brings out the distinctive features of the object or study, by showing which of its characteristics are *unique to itself*, which are *common with others*, and what possibilities are *absent all together*." (p.162) He suggests five methods for comparing news content which can be used across a variety of media. They include:

#### 1. **Compare topics, treatment and rhetoric**

To do this, he suggest collecting all the newspapers put out on any given day, or over the course of a week, and looking at how the same stories or topics are treated and presented, both visually and textually by each source. This could also be done by collecting multiple news magazines from any given date, by studying television coverage of stories across multiple channels, or by looking at the treatment of related

stories across multiple on-line news sites as well.

## 2. Compare genres

In terms of comparing genres, Hartley suggests comparing hard news stories to human-interest stories, or comparing the treatment of politics to the treatment of cultural topics. In order to look more critically at difference in news content across genres, he suggests looking at, “the language, the topics, the stereotyped characters and the social setting of stories in fiction and in the news.” (p.167) He also suggest looking at how, “the narrative sequence of stories in TV news compare[s] with the sequence of stories in TV fiction, and the layout of magazines with that of popular newspapers [or web sites to try to determine] by what distinctive features...news discourse announce[s] that it is not fictional.” (p.167)

## 3. Compare across time and cultures

Hartley suggests that these types of comparisons highlight how the codes of news discourse have changed over the course of centuries and decades, and also how they differ between countries and even between different groups within the same country. This is also one method for considering news-discourse within the context of historical developments and significant historical events. He also notes, for example, that recently, “there has been a shift away from openly stated propaganda towards less easily contestable appeals to the ideology of common sense.” (p.176)

## 4. Compare media

To compare news content across different media, Hartley suggests considering the ways in which any given story is presented in the newspaper versus the way it is presented on television, on the web, or in news magazines, keeping in mind questions like, “what do newspapers carry that the TV news leaves out? Are the same stories regularly carried in both media? Do both media ‘make sense’ of events in a similar way?” (p.177) This method of comparison seems to be a particularly rich technique for comparing and looking more critically at news coverage. Additional questions could include considering how and what visual elements are used to support a given story in different mediums, or how the priority given to different stories changes across media. The order in which news stories are presented in a time-based medium in relation to the way they are laid out in printed or on-line sources could also be analyzed, just to name a few additional avenues for consideration.

## 5. Compare experience

This is perhaps the most direct method for comparison suggested by Hartley and it could also prove to be one of the most compelling. He suggests attending or participating in some type (or in many) news worthy events such as a march, a demonstration, a cultural event, a political rally, a sporting event or any other type of event that will be covered by the media. Then, compare the coverage of the event to your

experience as a participant in it. This could allow for powerful insights into the differences between the reality of events and their mediated representations by news sources.

Hartley also presents some specific techniques for looking more closely at the presentation of information on television, highlighting some of the distinct differences that must be considered when analyzing time-based content versus static print or web-based content. He notes that television news is difficult to study because of its transience, and also because “meaning potential is generated by the relations between particular images and the commentary, and by the [combination] of visual and verbal codes in operation.” (p.176) As a result, he writes that, “it is better to be able to analyze the real thing rather than a written record.” (p.177) In order to make it easier to decipher meaning from television news content, Hartley identified three distinct categories within which television content can be analyzed. They include visual codes, verbal codes and absent codes. The four visual codes (or conventions) which Hartley identified include:

1. **Codes of Composition** – the way a picture is framed, colored and lit (For example, the camera is usually held at eye-level and remains fairly static and lighting tends to be neutral.) I would expand this category to include the composition of all visual elements on screen including the use, selection and composition of graphic, photographic and/or typographic elements, the choice of colors used for on-screen elements, the scale and juxtaposition of visual elements, and also the layering of information.
2. **Codes of Movement** – governs the movement of the subject and the camera. An example would be a zooming in from a long shot on location to a close-up of a reporter on the scene, or a standard medium-close-up shot of a seated news anchor reading the news in a news studio.
3. **Codes of Sequence** – associated with editing and include things like how quickly shots are changed, the ways in which images are juxtaposed, and how a story is edited to create a narrative sequence.
4. **Codes of Realism** – based on the idea that ‘realism’ can be more naturally conveyed by hand-held cameras that seem to be located in the midst of the action being filmed. This is exemplified by film with a grainy appearance shot with ‘inconvenient’ lighting.

Hartley goes into less detail about the verbal and absent codes (or conventions) that can be used to frame the analysis of television news content. What he does say is that the verbal codes tend to be, “derived from conventional speech, narrative and journalism...[and they play an important role in mak-

ing] news...appear to be so 'natural.'" (p.181) Regarding the absent codes, he defined them as the difference between techniques used in fictional television programs and techniques used in television news broadcasts, including things like music and the dramatic reconstruction of events. He suggested that upon close review, many of the same codes used in fictional television programming will also be present in television news coverage, but that it is helpful to note which familiar television devices are not used as well.

In my own work, I found Hartley's division of the codes of television news, and in particular his division of the visual codes, to be a very useful method for framing and beginning to undertake a visual analysis of television news content. By using still shots of television news, I was able to, "analyze the real thing rather than a written record," and to do so in such a way as to limit my analysis to looking more closely at just the visual codes of composition as independent and separate from the other codes of movement and sequence, which would have required a study of dynamic audio-visual television clips. This allowed me to undertake an introductory level analysis of visual language elements in television news content while helping to identify ways that future analysis, done at a more advanced level, could incorporate the additional visual, verbal and absent codes of television news content that Hartley identified.

John Hartley's book, Understanding News, has been critical to my own understanding of the structure and conventions of news discourse. His framework and methodology for analyzing news content presents strategies for undertaking both a textual analysis of news content and a visual language analysis of news content. In addition, his assertion that, "this critical activity [of decoding the news] is something we can all perform...Armed with a little knowledge and a lot of suspicion, we can 'negotiate' with the apparently unarguable meanings of news-discourse on slightly more equal terms" (p.10) is one that has struck a chord with me. It is a theme that has provided me with great deal of inspiration in my own efforts to learn to decode the news. It has also influenced me in my efforts to develop a platform that will help to arm other with a little bit of the knowledge they will need to do the same.

## Communication Design

Although I have relied heavily on work from the field of communications and media studies to develop the methodology, and conceptual and theoretical framework for my thesis undertaking, some important voices from the arena of communication design have also played a significant role. They have influenced me in my efforts to look more critically at the role of visual language in the design of news content, and also to look at the larger role design plays in contributing to visual culture. Unfortunately, the work mentioned here only skims the surface. Additional research into the areas of publication design, visual journalism, and design criticism and commentary relating to the visual design of news content, and also to the role and impact of design on media and visual culture would inevitably have proven extremely valuable. Some of the people and work that I have studied and would like to highlight include Steven Heller and Elinor Pettit's interview with Chris Pullman, published in Design Dialogues (1998), the writing of Maud Lavin and Jessica Helfand; also the books, Issues: New Magazine Design (2000), and Designing with Photographs (1998).

### Steven Heller and Elinor Pettit's Interview with Chris Pullman

In their book Design Dialogues, a compilation of interviews with designers, artists, authors and media producers, one of the interviews that Steven Heller and Elinor Pettit conducted was with Chris Pullman, the Vice President of Design for WGBH, a public television station located in Boston, Massachusetts. The focus of the interview was on designing for television and one of the questions that Heller posed to Pullman was to ask about the differences between designing for print and designing for television. About the strengths and weaknesses of television as a medium, Pullman said, "TV is linear and is only good at certain things. TV is good at giving an impression, expressing an emotion, interesting you in something, amusing you, but not too good at making information stick." (p.55) In trying to look more critically at television news content, I have been repeatedly struck by the ability and seeming determination of television news programs to deliver emotionally charged content, as well as by the role that design can play in that process. The idea that television is good at giving an impression, but not good

at “making information stick” is something that I question. Perhaps I don’t learn precise facts and figures from watching television, but the visual images that television delivers—the footage of the planes crashing into the World Trade Centers, for example—are images that have yet to leave me and perhaps never will. My memory of the visual information delivered through the medium of television seems quite strong and long lasting.

Another issue that Pullman raises about television content which has particular resonance for me is that, “TV is real time, you can’t skim it; and one-shot, it’s hard to refer back to.” (p.55) Here, I would have to agree. I have found it to be a difficult challenge to effectively analyze television content. By removing the audio component and taking television stills out of the context of their original time-based format, much is lost. At the same time, however, to be able to extract still images of television content in order to analyze them as closely and in as great a detail as one is able to do with printed materials, has provided me with some interesting and helpful insights; I have found this to be a valuable research strategy. I believe that the challenge now is to see whether or not those insights will allow me, and hopefully my targeted user group, to develop more critical viewing habits when watching television news programming in real time.

Maude Lavin

Although Maud Lavin is a writer and not a designer, I found that her recently published work, *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design* (2001) included some extremely insightful commentary regarding the role that graphic design and graphic designers play in shaping visual culture as well as the restrictions that designers face in contributing to that sphere. She writes:

“Because graphic design is so powerful and so warped (in most commercial practice) in its ability to communicate, it provides an exaggerated model for the same questions that dog other communication fields like photography, film, the Internet, and...writing. Who really has a voice in our culture? Do we have public forums that are democratic, alive, open...able to make a difference? Or are too many of our public spaces bought and closed off...reporters, TV news anchors, graphic designers, and others hired to condense and



deliver messages but to keep their own mouths shut?" (p.3)

In attempting to look more closely at the role of design in producing and packaging news content, I found that some of the issues I was raising provoked sharp responses from some designers. Those voices reminded me that designers who work for news organizations must operate within strict corporate and editorial structures that demand a very specific type of design product. As a result, designers typically do not have the authority to exert complete control over the way that visual news content is presented. I would have to agree that this is indeed true, but what I think Lavin does very successfully is to question the larger problem that arises from that lack of control, not only on the part of designer, but also on the part of reporters, news anchors, photographers and others. My own investigation does not seek to point the finger at designers, or to hold them responsible for skewed presentations of information within news content. I do, however, think that it is both worthwhile and important to recognize, to question, and to critically analyze the role of design in shaping the visual presentation of information in news content. While it cannot and should not be done without taking into consideration the larger cultural and corporate context within which designers operate, I believe that this is still an important dialogue to pursue and a difficult issue that bears further study.

Another related issue that Lavin raises in her book is the impact that design and designers have on visual culture. I found her comments to be both empowering and also thought provoking. They speak to issues that crisscross the fields of design, communications, media studies, cultural studies and economics, to name just a few, and they also present a view of the larger role that design and designers play within our society. Lavin writes:

"today design sits at the intersection of cottage-industry cultural production, corporate sponsorship, and mass-distribution systems, such as magazines or the Internet, which are dominated by the visual. It papers our world, and its paper trail tells us much about how culture is funded and disseminated. It helps formulate our norms and even the speed with which those norms are constantly recast...Yet ironically, there is still much more writing about high art like painting or mass culture like TV than about design—even though it is design that operates as a kind of visual 'fluid' connecting these other cultural products, selling them, and keeping them circulating, while also communicating its own messages. We can't afford to ignore design's operation in

a broader social and cultural context: design is a key marker in the historical shifts of institutions of funding, distribution, competitive reception, and audience.” (p.7)

This need for a better understanding of, and more critical writing and commentary about the role and impact of design on our culture is a common theme that has run throughout my graduate design education. It is both a call to arms and also a challenge to the field of design which, I suspect, will continue to be an ongoing one.

Jessica Helfand

One of the most interesting and exciting books on design that I have read recently is Jessica Helfand’s book, Screen: Essays on Graphic Design, New Media and Visual Culture (2001). Each essay is truly a gem, filled with insightful and frankly spoken commentary. While they have all contributed to my own understanding of the role and power of design in visual culture, there are a few segments in particular which I would like to note in relation to my thesis endeavor. In her essay titled, “On Sound, Authenticity and Cultural Amnesia,” Helfand writes, “Though it is unlikely that in and of itself, design will ever be capable of saving the world, eliminating hunger, or restoring peace to embattled nations, the degree to which it can be used to facilitate exchange, disseminate ideas, and elucidate information remains central to its essential value.” (p.128) I was struck by the inherent truths and contradictions contained in this quote. Certainly few, if any, would ascribe to design the power of such lofty potential as the ability to save the world or mend its problems. At the same time, and as Maud Lavin’s work indicated earlier, design can and does play an important role in shaping the information sources around which public understanding and opinion, and even cultural values, are so often built. This idea too, that one of the great strengths of design rests in its ability to, “facilitate exchange, disseminate ideas, and elucidate information” is a powerful capability and one whose ramifications I am extremely interested in trying to better understand.

In the essay “Teasing the Nerves: The Art of Technological Persuasion,” (pp. 28-33) Helfand wrote:

“what appears increasingly true is the striking degree to which information, education and entertainment each employ a closely intertwined combination of design, technology, and psychology to engage audiences in new and increasingly invasive ways. Beyond speed and software and special effects lie a host of sophisticated psychological methods that strive, in countless ways, to reach audiences with an even more mesmerizing pull.” (p.30)

It is certainly possible to talk about the drama of television news programs. We are all familiar with the phrase, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Ann Marie Seward Barry wrote extensively on the relationship between image, design and perception. Clearly both print and television news content have the ability to provoke deep emotional responses from readers and viewers. Helfand, as I cited earlier, clearly noted some of the key strengths of design. The point at which design, information, entertainment and technology meet is a complex and fertile ground for investigation and critical study. Although I could only touch upon a small part of this area of intersection, I have found it to be a rich and exciting territory. Clearly, neither design nor designers operate in a vacuum—both must operate in a much larger and more complicated context. Trying to clarify and to better understand some of those inter-relationships and causalities is something that Helfand was able to accomplish in her book, and reading it imbued me with a desire to try to do the same.

### Designing With Photographs

Peter Bonnici and Linda Proud’s book, Designing With Photographs, begins with an introduction by Tibor Kalman in which he wrote, “how to look at photographs should be taught in schools but isn’t. There is no course which teaches how to stop and listen to the sounds of an image. It’s disturbing that in an image-driven culture no-one knows how to look at images,” (p.8) Kalman’s frustrations certainly reflect those raised by Donis A. Dondis and Ann Marie Seward Barry, (which I noted earlier). It also led me to think that since looking at and working with images is so much a part of the job of a graphic designer, it seems logical that a designer could play a role in helping a non-design audience begin to look more closely, more critically, and hopefully more knowledgeably at images and at the way that they are used within the context of designed objects.

Another piece of the book, Designing With Photographs, which I found intriguing and thought provoking was the way the authors presented and explained photographs. They commented that all photographs exist on a spectrum which runs from “primarily informative” to “primarily evocative.” At the same time, however, they noted that each image inherently communicates both information and emotion. They went on to write that, “‘reading’ an image...can be seen as the activity of identifying its position on the spectrum. [A designer] must then assess whether that position is consistent with the needs of the [creative] brief...Different design disciplines will typically tend to use images from the different areas of the spectrum. The Picture Editor on a newspaper, for example, will be looking for the pictures that primarily give the viewer information.” (p.11) In looking at news content throughout the course of my thesis investigation, at least in the realm of news magazines and television content, I have tended to see many images that I would be more likely to place closer to the evocative end rather than the informative end of the spectrum Bonnici and Proud have presented. That has raised some interesting questions for me about what a design brief created for some of that news content might look like. Unfortunately, I have not had a chance to interview the designers who worked on some of the news content that I highlighted in my case study, but it would be interesting to find out from them how, or if, the evocative versus informative classification of photographs plays a role in their design process. On another note, Ann Marie Seward Barry’s writing about the perceptual impact of photographic elements can also be used to delve more deeply into this classification of images as evocative versus informative, providing a helpful bridge for thinking about and framing both concepts.

### Issues: New Magazine Design

In seeking to confirm and expand upon my understanding of role that visual elements play in publication design, the book, Issues: New Magazine Design, written and edited by Jeremy Leslie with a foreword by Lewis Blackwell provided me with some helpful insights. In talking about the design of magazine covers, Jeremy Leslie wrote, “It has always been the case that covers have to sell magazines to the reader...the cover has to sell the idea of the magazine as a whole...[and] shout to the casual reader that this magazine is about X, while also addressing both casual and regular readers and explaining the content of that

particular issue.” (p.44) In commenting on the design of internal pages, Lewis Blackwell wrote, “Magazines invite us to browse, to graze, to choose the direction we jump in. We sample an eyeful of imagery here and a mouthful of words there...Reading - if we ever do finally read a text from beginning to end - comes only at the end of a process of sifting and sampling.” (p.6) I found these two quotes particularly helpful in my efforts to provide the targeted users of my case study prototype with a snapshot of the role and importance of visual elements in the design magazine covers and also magazine layouts. I would posit that this is the sort of information that most designers know intuitively, but many consumers are unaware of. I am curious to find out if that is actually the case.



# Case Study





**Decoding the news,  
“is something we  
can all perform...  
Armed with a little  
knowledge and a lot  
of suspicion, we can  
'negotiate' with the  
apparently unarguable  
meanings of news-  
discourse on slightly  
more equal terms.”**

John Hartley  
[Understanding News](#)

## Area of Interest

The case study portion of my thesis investigation evolved in response to several factors. Through my interest in media convergence, I found strong connections and distinct overlaps between communication design, media studies and communications, which presented me with an exciting opportunity to develop an interdisciplinary thesis project. The launch of the re:constructions web site by MIT's Comparative Media Studies Department in the wake of September 11th provided me with an inspiring model of how theory, when applied, can provide great insights into complicated and emotionally charged content. It also allowed me to see a space where a designer could contribute through the addition of a parallel component—a visual analysis of news content—which I felt could enhance the textual and semiotic analysis included on the re:constructions site. Studying the work of Donis A. Dondis, Ann Marie Seward Barry, John Hartley and others, made me increasingly interested in trying to contribute something to on-going efforts in media literacy and visual literacy. As a communication designer, I also felt that there was a great potential to use the tools of interactive media to create something that could provide users with an experiential method for gaining insights into the construction of meaning in visual news content.

## Case Study Evolution

The starting point for my case study investigation was the challenge of trying to develop a visual component that could run parallel to

the textual and semiotic analysis posted on the re:constructions web site. From there, I began with a period of experimentation as I tried to develop and test potential methods for analyzing visual news content (Figure 17). The next phase involved refining the theoretical and conceptual framework of my investigation. During the third phase of my case study exploration, I began to design and develop an interactive prototype. The prototype that has emerged at the end of my case study investigation is designed for use as a teaching resource that could fit into existing, introductory, college-level media studies curriculums. It has been designed to provide students with an interactive method for building visual literacy and media literacy skills through exploring the role that visual language elements play in shaping the presentation of information in news content.

### CASE STUDY EVOLUTION

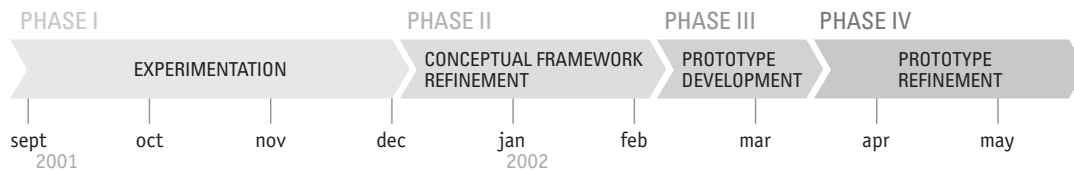


Figure 17

### Phase I: Experimentation

My early experiments were focused primarily on two different processes. The first was to deconstruct layouts as a way to highlight the impact of individual visual elements on the design of news content (Figure 18). I also saw it as a way to provide an audience having little or no design training with some insights into the raw materials that designers have to work with. I experimented with television

Figure 18



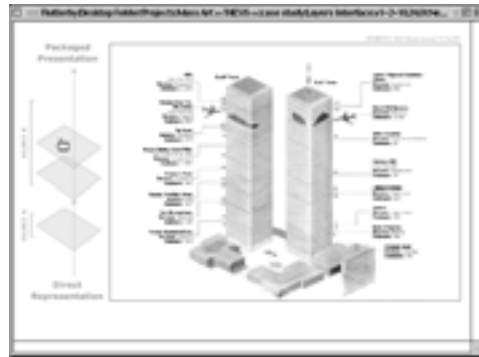


Figure 19



Figure 20

stills, and also with layouts from news magazines and newspapers. I found that the television stills and news magazine layouts lent themselves well to this type of deconstruction process because of the complexity, visual richness and layering of information that was common in the news content from both mediums. In contrast, looking at newspaper content in this way proved to be less informative and those results were less successful (Figure 19).

The second process that I experimented with was to look at the design of news content as it changed over time (Figure 20). Because news was breaking so quickly on September 11th and the full breadth of the events was not immediately known, it was possible to peer inside the process of news delivery in a way that is not usually possible and to actually watch as news content became more packaged and the design more visually sophisticated as time progressed. This was especially apparent on the web and in television news programs. While it was interesting to see the visual progression of news content as it evolved over time, my experiments were problematic because they didn't allow for enough in-depth investigation into what elements were changing, the reasons for those changes, or how the individual changes affected the way that information was being presented. Although my initial results were somewhat disappointing, I still think that this type of investigation could prove to be valuable with some modifications. Unfortunately, I had difficulty securing a sufficient amount of content to allow for more in-depth study in this area. As a result, I decided to focus my efforts on looking more deeply at formal design issues within the context of my experiments deconstructing news layouts.

## Phase II: Conceptual Framework Refinement

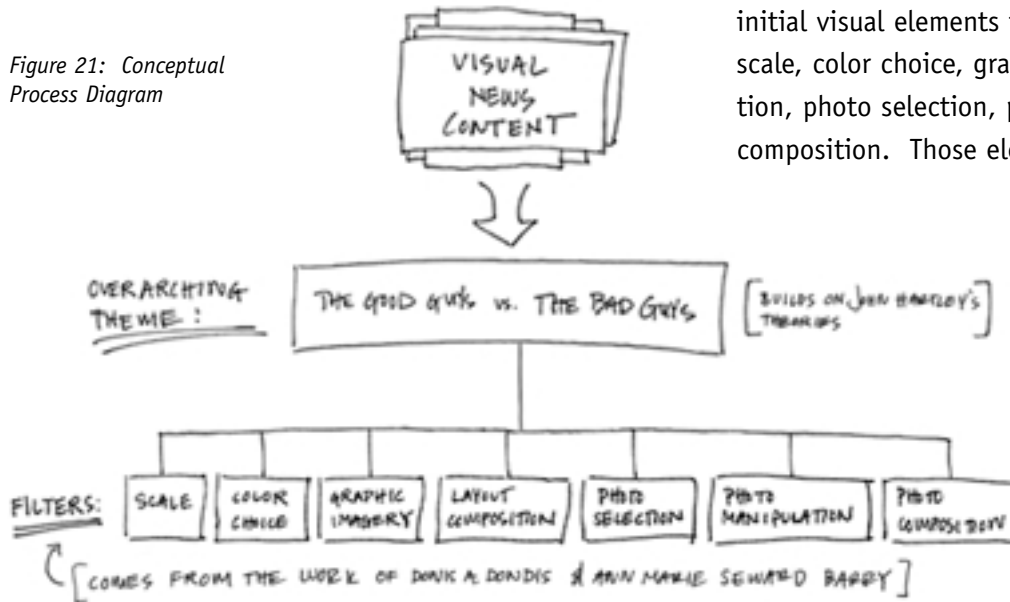
As I looked for ways to enrich the learning potential of my early experiments, the work of Donis A. Donis and John Hartley was recommended to me. I also began to read Ann Marie Seward Barry's work. As I noted in the Context section of this document, the conceptual framework for my case study has largely been built upon their work. The writing of Dondis and Barry provided me with a crucial starting point for developing a vocabulary of visual language elements that could be used to analyze visual news content. Barry's work also helped me to develop a deeper understanding of how perception affects both the creation and consumption of mediated visual messages. The work of John Hartley was instrumental in providing me with insights into the structure and conventions of news discourse. His strategies for decoding meaning within those structures were also extremely helpful.

In thinking about how to refine my initial experiments to incorporate a visual language analysis of news content, I began to focus on specific characteristics within news layouts that could be explored through the lens of visual language filters and seen within the larger framework of Hartley's explanation of the us vs. them, good guys vs.

bad guys dichotomy of news discourse (Figure 21). The initial visual elements that I sought to highlight were: scale, color choice, graphic imagery, layout composition, photo selection, photo manipulation and photo composition. Those elements were selected, in part,

by looking for patterns and recurrent visual themes which I found illustrated in much of the news content that I had collected. It was also my first attempt to try to categorize what I was seeing represented in news content within

Figure 21: Conceptual Process Diagram



the framework of basic visual elements defined by Dondis and extended in Barry's work.

### Phase III: Prototype Development

After refining the conceptual framework for my case study, some important next steps in the development of my prototype included clarifying the target audience, clarifying the context in which it was designed to fit, and also selecting appropriate content for analysis.

#### *Target Audience & Intended Use*

The audience that I targeted is a college-level, introductory media studies audience with little or no training in the practices of critical visual analysis. Because many of the concepts and issues that I have tried to integrate into my prototype would be part of an introductory media studies course, I have worked towards developing a prototype that could be used to provide students with an exploratory, interactive method for reinforcing and visually illustrating some of those concepts. It could also be used to help build visual literacy and media literacy skills that could be applied later on by students when looking at other visual materials.

This prototype was developed for use as a teaching resource, not as a stand-alone interface. As a result, it would be most appropriate for use in a classroom setting in which it could be mapped onto an existing media studies curriculum. This would allow it to be introduced by an experienced educator who could provide important background and contextual information about the concepts and issues illustrated in the interface.

#### *Content Selection*

The content I selected for use in my prototype includes news magazine layouts and television stills. This decision was motivated in part by the results from my early experiments with deconstructing layouts in which both types of content allowed for interesting and unexpected insights when distinct visual elements were highlighted. I also chose news content layouts which would allow me to clearly illustrate and explore the specific visual language elements that I had identified as recurrent themes and important visual literacy concepts in my research. Because I am targeting an audience that is unfamiliar with the practices of critical visual analysis, I also looked for content

that would dramatically illustrate the visual language elements presented in the interface.

My decision to look at print media and television simultaneously was based on the belief that television layouts, when captured as single frames, could be analyzed as visual compositions in much the same way as printed material, and could provide similar insights. Since I have developed this prototype for an introductory audience, being able to extract television stills from their time-based context also allows students to initially focus on looking more critically at visual elements within discreet samples of television news content before undertaking a more in-depth, and more complex study of its time-based compositional elements. I found additional support for this decision in my research; John Hartley, in describing the conventions of television news programming, separated the codes of composition from those governing movement and sequence. As a result, it seemed to make sense to analyze the visual composition of television stills alongside magazine layouts in an introductory level investigation, knowing that future explorations including television content could be expanded to include more complicated time-based elements.

### Interface Design

The initial prototype I developed was a fairly literal translation of my conceptual process diagram into an interface (Figure 22). The basic idea was that each news content option could be looked at through the lens of individual visual filters as a way to highlight the effects of specific design choices on the information presented in the layout. The idea was not to look at each layout through all of the fil-



Figure 22: Main Menu: Initial Prototype

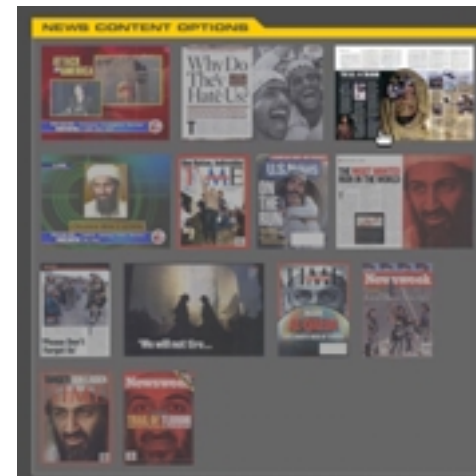


Figure 22a (top):  
News Content  
Option Thumbnails



Figure 22b (left):  
Filter Overview  
Buttons



Figure 23: Filter Overview: Color Choice



Figure 24: News Content Interface with Open "Questions to Consider" Window

ters, but rather, to highlight specific visual elements within the different layouts that clearly illustrated those features. For example, when a user rolled over a layout thumbnail (Figure 22a) in the main menu, all the visual language filters that they could look at that layout through would become highlighted (Figure 22). To reinforce the inter-relationships between the content and the visual language filters, if a user rolled over a filter in the main menu (Figure 22b), all of the content that illustrated the use of that particular visual element would also be highlighted. By selecting an individual filter, the user could read an overview of the impact of that specific visual element, and from there have the option to look more closely at the use of that specific element in a related news content layout (Figure 23). Either by selecting a layout from the main menu, or by selecting one from the related news content options within the filter overview pages, users could then explore the impact of specific visual choices on individual layouts. For example, if the user chose to explore the impact of color choice on a screen capture of Boston's Channel 7 News taken on September 11th, they would be given the option to change the background color of the layout, or to change the tonal value of the background color to see how different colors and/or different color intensities would affect the presentation of information on screen (Figure 24). To help users focus on specific issues relating to color choice, an additional draggable and collapsible window with questions to consider could also be opened up (Figure 23). For users who wished to either return to the color choice filter overview page, or go there for the first time, clicking on the link, "Read About the Impact of Color Choice," would take them there. Finally, the user also has roll-over access to information about the source of the content they are exploring, as well as the opportunity to look at that

same content through additional visual filters.

### *Strengths & Weaknesses*

The development of this prototype was an important step in the evolution of my case study. It illustrated the potential for developing an interactive, exploratory method for critically analyzing visual news content on an introductory level that complements existing textual and semiotic analysis from the field of media studies. It also illustrated the potential for layering and interweaving concepts and methodologies from the fields of communications, media studies and communication design into a unified interface that could be used to help students develop visual literacy and media literacy skills.

There were some critical weaknesses in this initial prototype, however, especially in the areas of information organization and terminology. Both the news content options and the visual language filters were presented without a clear organizational structure or hierarchy. As a result, there was no clear path through the information presented, nor was there a clear starting point that would allow users to follow a logical progression from introductory concepts and interfaces through to more advanced ones. The breakdown of visual language filters and the terminology used to describe them was also problematic. In addition, the filters were visually presented as equal categorical structures, which was misleading. Using the filter metaphor was also problematic because users were not actually filtering visual elements out of the content, instead, they were presented with an opportunity to highlight and modify specific visual language elements within different layouts.

### Phase IV: Prototype Refinement

To address some of the weakness of my initial prototype, while building on its strengths, I worked to refine the organizational structure, the hierarchy of information and the terminology used in the interface (*Figures 25 & 26*).

### *Refining the News Content Selections*

The news content layouts were reorganized, a few were replaced, and the final layouts were put into three categories: “magazine covers,” “magazine layouts” and “television stills.” Within each category, there now exists a



Figure 25: Information Structure for Revised Prototype. Also indicates content interactions and active and proposed links in final prototype.



Figure 26: Revised Prototype: Main Menu



Figure 27: News Content Category Rollover

Decoding Visual Language Elements in News Content: Prototype Matrix			
NEWS CONTENT	MAGAZINE LAYOUTS	TELEVISION STILLS	VISUAL LANGUAGE ELEMENTS
			IMAGERY
* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	❄️ ❄️ ❄️	PHOTO COMPOSITION
	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	❄️ ❄️ ❄️	IMAGE SELECTION
	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	❄️ ❄️ ❄️	SCALE
	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	❄️ ❄️ ❄️	JUXTAPOSITION
	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	❄️ ❄️ ❄️	CROPPING
	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	USE OF GRAPHIC IMAGERY
	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	* ❄️ ❄️ ❄️	COLOR CHOICE
			TYPOGRAPHY
			TYPOGRAPHIC ELEMENT
			TYPOGRAPHIC ELEMENT
			TYPOGRAPHIC ELEMENT
			TYPOGRAPHIC ELEMENT
			COMPOSITION
			LAYERING INFORMATION
			COMPOSITIONAL STRUCTURE
OBSERVATION & EXPLANATION		INTERACTIVE EXPLORATION	

KEY ❄️ PROPOSED \* ACTIVE + LINKED RELATIONSHIPS

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progression of visual complexity from one layout to the next (Figure 24). This helped to clarify the interface and it also presents users with a clearer path through the news content options. Information about each category of news content was also added, accessible by rolling over the news content category titles, which was intended to help users understand some of the specific characteristics common to each format and news medium (Figure 27). For example, the differences between the function of a magazine cover versus the layouts inside of a magazine were addressed.

### Refining the Visual Language Elements

A new organizational structure was also used for the visual language

elements included in the interface. The categories of elements were expanded as well, and the terminology used to describe the individual elements was also refined. The term “Filters” was removed and replaced with “Visual Language Elements” which more clearly reflects the functionality of the interface; it acknowledges the potential for users to highlight, and learn to recognize those elements within selected layouts as opposed to filtering them out.

The revised organization of visual language elements included the creation of three main categories: “Imagery,” “Typography,” and “Composition,” which now encompass the individual visual language elements. This structure also presents users with a progression of complexity from one category to the next, as does the re-organization of news content layouts, again helping to provide users with a clearer path through the information included in the interface (*Figures 25 & 26*).

An important conceptual element in the development of this organizational structure borrows its pedagogy from design education. One method that is employed for introducing basic design elements to students in graphic design courses is to teach them about the characteristics of image, typography, and composition. This is the same basic informational structure that has been employed in this interface. It is important to note, however, that this interface has not been developed to teach users design skills or techniques. Rather, it is intended to help develop visual literacy skills by providing users with a structure in which they can learn to recognize and think more critically about the impact of specific design elements on the presentation of information in news content, through the use of a methodology borrowed from design education.

#### *Refining the Visual Language Elements: The Typography & Composition Categories*

Due to time constraints, I was unable to develop the “Typography” category further. I believe that developing a more critical understanding of typography is an important component to building and improving visual literacy skills among an introductory audience. As a result, I felt that it was important to at least indicate how and where typography would fit into the overall information structure.

The breakdown of elements within the “Composition” category has been intentionally limited to a single element, “Layering Information.” I considered adding a second element, “Compositional Structure,” which would have related to Donis A. Dondis’ breakdown of different compositional elements. Because this is an introductory interface,



Figure 28: Observation and Explanation Interface: Color Choice



Figure 29: Exploratory Interface: Magazine Layout. Users are able to select new images, change their size and their position by selecting the radio buttons next to the additional image options.

however, and I feel that decoding compositional structures is a more advanced, slightly more abstract concept for an introductory media studies audience, I decided to leave that element out of this interface. I believe that by introducing and exploring the layering of information within interfaces, users will have the opportunity to begin to develop an understanding of the impact of compositional choices on layouts. From that starting point, future interfaces could allow users to explore composition and compositional structure in greater detail.

#### *Observation and Explanation and Interactive Exploration Interfaces*

To continue the progression of increasing complexity as users move through the interfaces in the prototype, the news content categories have been broken down into two different types of interfaces: observation and explanation interfaces and interactive explorations (Figure 25). The magazine covers are presented in an observation and explanation context while the magazine layouts and television stills are presented within an interactive exploration context. When users select a specific visual language element to highlight within a magazine cover layout, they are provided with an explanation about the use of that element within the layout (Figure 28). This helps users begin to identify and focus on the use of individual elements within more complex layouts. As users move on to the magazine layouts and television stills, they are given the opportunity to change specific visual language elements within the layouts (Figure 29). This allows users to begin to look more critically at the impact of those particular elements on the layout by allowing them to compare and contrast the original element to other potential options provided within that interface.

### *Additional Information*

Expanded access to information about the individual news content layouts has also been added to this version of the prototype. In addition to information about the source of the content, a feature that existed in the first version of the prototype, users are now provided with access to contextual information about the layouts as well. A timeline has been included as part of the “Source & Context” and “Context” features which indicates when, in relation to September 11th, the news story was published. It also provides information about what related content from other news sources looked like (Figure 30). Another source for additional information can be found within the “Comments” feature (Figure 31). Although official quotes have not yet been incorporated into this section, the intention is that it could include comments about the visual design of the news content from art directors, creative directors, designers or editors involved in its creation as a way to provide users with additional insights into the design process surrounding the publication of a particular news story. Information about how long a designer had to work on the layout, restrictions about how photographs could be used, why specific design choices were made, or other similar types of information could be provided as a way to help users understand the larger framework or context a particular layout fits into.

### *Conclusions*

The latest version of my prototype built upon and expanded the strengths of the first version and also attempted to remedy many of its weaknesses. Although it is not a fully functional prototype, it has succeeded as a proof of concept. It illustrates the benefits of bringing together concepts, theories, and methodologies from the



Figure 30: Context Feature.



Figure 31: Comments Feature.

fields of communications, media studies and communication design in order to create an interactive, exploratory tool that can be used for critically analyzing visual news content by an introductory media studies audience.

Additional work is still needed, however. In order to determine if this interface, as designed, is intuitive and effective, the prototype needs to be user tested by a sample group of introductory media studies students. Since it was designed to for use as a teaching resource, an assessment of the case study by a group of media studies educators is another important next step. Assessment notwithstanding, this project has reached a critical point in its development. In order to move it beyond the prototype stage, the scope of the project would need to be widened to incorporate a larger, interdisciplinary group of participants including media studies educators, user interface designers, design educators, instructional technology designers, journalists, and possibly others.

For me, the next challenge will be to reach out to some of those people and to explore what role I might play within that interdisciplinary team. I find this to be an exciting prospect. Investigating this thesis topic has sparked my interest in pursuing future opportunities for interdisciplinary work. Looking outward to other fields, and interweaving the ideas, knowledge and methodologies of each, along with the skills, resources and creativity of designers sets the stage for tremendously exciting synergies and valuable new contributions to emerge.



Future Work





The scope of work that I was able to undertake during my thesis investigation was necessarily limited. While I have succeeded in creating a proof of concept for a visual language analysis of news content to be used by an introductory media studies audience, there are many other avenues of investigation that future designers, interested in this topic of visually analyzing news content, could pursue. The creation of intermediate and expert level resources is an important area for future investigations. Including a more diverse collection of news content, from both domestic and international sources would also be particularly useful. Developing techniques for critically analyzing web-based content and also dynamic, time-based content is yet another area for further investigation and experimentation.

Future work could also push the role of the user as a designer and producer of news content. In Understanding News, John Hartley wrote, “probably the best way...to understand the news is to do it yourself.” (p.187) Creating intuitive, accessible interfaces that allow users to create, save, compare and produce multiple versions of news content layouts could look towards that direction.

On a larger scale, the need for improved visual literacy and media literacy skills within our culture is a continual and ongoing need. It is also an area to which designers are particularly well suited to contribute. I would encourage any and all designers to pursue future work in those areas.



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### Additional Resources

Additional resources used during the development of this thesis project, but not specifically referenced in this thesis document can be found on-line at: [www.katebrigham.com/thesis/resources.htm](http://www.katebrigham.com/thesis/resources.htm)



## End Notes

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