

Appendix A: “Reading the Visual Record”

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As historians move toward including the visual record as a site for evidence about the past, we face new challenges in historical methodology. How can historians, and their students, develop useful questions when faced with the mute visual record? While many students have learned strategies for analyzing textual documents, such as identifying the author’s use of metaphor or imagery, few history students have been trained in parallel methodologies for reading visual records. This essay is designed to suggest one method, among many, that history and American studies students might use in analyzing visual texts, with a special attention to photography.¹

Stage 1: Description

The first step to analyzing an image and its historically contingent meanings is to *see* the image. Viewers have a tendency to quickly process visual information into cultural meanings which may, or may not, be warranted by the visual evidence: a quick glance at a found snapshot of a smiling woman cradling an infant seems to confirm the cultural assumption of a young mother and her newborn child. In fact, however, the image itself provides no direct reference for this cultural relationship. The image might actually be showing, for example, a childcare worker and a child; or the child’s aunt cradling her niece for the first time. A key step in mining the image for what it can tell us, on its own terms, without inferences and assumptions, is to slow down and describe what you see, using *only* the visual evidence present in the image. This crucial step can be frustrating, in that you might feel it is “obvious” what’s in the image, but I guarantee that your understanding of what you see will often vary from another viewer’s, since seeing is a subjective

experience. We don't all, in fact, see the same things, nor draw the same meanings from what we see; history, politics, and culture inform every aspect of seeing and interpretation. So step one: describe what you see, without recourse to any analyses or assumptions that cannot be verified by evidence drawn from the image itself. Resist the impulse to skip ahead to an analysis of the image's meaning: describe what you see, first, no matter how boring or obvious this might seem. Here are three specific steps in the description stage of an image analysis, with reference to Figure A1.

First, note and describe the physical and material aspects of the image. Is the image printed on paper, on a coffee mug, or composed of pixels encountered in a digital environment? Describe the material articulation of the image, including its size and, for digital images, its resolution. At this stage, you might not in fact know what the materiality of the image might be: the coffee mug might look like porcelain to you, for example, but it might in fact be white stoneware. Nonetheless, make your best effort; you can always research later.

Second, describe the content of the image. Here, you are mostly concerned with subject matter. What does the image depict, in the most obvious sense? Include a mention of any text embedded in the image as well. In Figure A1, for example, a simple description of the image's content might be that the image depicts a smiling young woman in a semi-kneeling position holding a bouquet of what appears to be flowers. Don't describe her as "Hawaiian," since though the rest of the image urges you to read her as "Hawaiian," you in fact have no independent knowledge that she is. For all you know, she might be an underemployed actress, not of Hawaiian descent, who's picked up a modeling job on Madison Avenue. Include here a brief discussion of any text in the images, such as the Matson Line "card" in the bottom right of the image, or the text at the upper right part of the image.

Finally, describe the visual character of the image in what's known as a formal analysis. A formal analysis is a very close reading of a text or object, which uses an understanding of form as basis for interpretation. A formal analysis of an image doesn't mean that one cannot also perform other types of readings, such as those informed by feminism, history, queer theory, or post-structuralism; these theoretical and historical frameworks can be extremely important, but come in at a slightly later stage of the image analysis, after you have had a chance to explore, see, and understand the image's formal elements. Start with describing the image's composition, beginning with two-dimensional organization. Isolate vertical lines, then horizontal lines, then diagonal lines. Count them up, describe all of them, where they begin and end. How is your eye encouraged to move through the image? Do the lines lead, and then entrap or release, your eye to a particular location, either within or outside of the frame? For example, in the figure, note that the



Figure A1. Advertisement for Matson Line cruises, *Vogue*, November 1, 1941, inside cover. Edward Steichen, photographer; Lloyd B. Meyers, art director (Bowman Deute Cummings)

combination of vertical lines (including, for example, the edges of the image, the left bikini strap, the block of text), horizontal lines (such as the platform structure or the horizon line), and diagonal lines (such as the model's thigh, the grass skirt, the flower stalks). One could argue that all of these intersecting lines lead the eye to a particular location, located on the lower portion of her body; the composition of the image reinforces this sexual reading. After

describing the arrangement of lines, do a similar analysis of the use of three-dimensional space, as represented in the image. What is the relationship between a foreground (here, the kneeling model) and the background (mountain landscape)? Is there a middle ground in between the two, and how and why is your eye encouraged to move, in a spatial manner, through the image? In this case, for example, one can argue that the lack of a pronounced middle ground encourages the eye to remain in the foreground, with the model; there's no middle ground to act as a “bridge” between the foreground and background (the mountains).

Continuing with the formal analysis of the image, consider the use of light. Are there masses of light and dark throughout the image, or is the image evenly lit? The use of light can also direct how the eye moves through the image, as well as suggest the relative importance of specific aspects of the overall composition. Light may also tell you, through an analysis of shadows, what time of day the image was taken, or whether the image was made with artificial lighting (for example, if there are contradictory shadows, or none at all – though this might also suggest the sun was directly overhead). Finally, consider color: is it used, where does it appear, what is its quality? In an intentional image, such as an advertising photograph, you can be certain that art directors have thought through the use of color in connoting specific meanings about a particular product, just as art photographers choose various color processes in order to suggest differing tones for the overall work.

Stage 2: Deduction

You've now concluded your information-gathering about the image, and have mined it for absolutely all the visual information you could possibly wring from it. At this point, you should be surprised if a colleague or classmate points out a visual element that you hadn't noticed, such as the vaguely floral motif of the model's bikini. At this stage of the analysis, the deduction stage, you are still working primarily with the image and the information it suggests, rather than moving outside the image to consider history, conduct research, and think through theoretical frameworks. The goal here is to consider the image in relationship to your own subjectivity. This process usually has two aspects. First, pay attention to your “instincts” about the image, your initial “take.” An initial reading of an image might be accurate, and supported by evidence, but your job is to figure out, for example, how the image is able to make its meaning clear, or connote a particular sensibility. For example, to return to Figure A1, this image is not only connoting “sex,” but, one could argue, a very specific Western fantasy of the East as passive, feminized, and sexually available – what the late Edward Said identified as “Orientalism.” You

might “get” some or part of this interpretation almost immediately. Your job, however, is to analyze *how* this meaning is communicated through formal decisions made by the photographer, art director, and others who may have been involved in the image’s creation. This is where the close looking you’ve done in stage one becomes useful. You need to draw on visual evidence to support any argument you might make about the image’s meaning. For example, available sexuality, one could argue, is connoted through the open thighs, the parted skirt, the flower necklace half off the shoulder, the abundance of bare skin, the symbolism of blooming flowers. At the same time, the model’s sexuality is rendered non-threatening, as well as “natural”: though her body is open to the viewer, she discreetly averts her gaze (no confrontational or seductive looking here); we can look at her, but she can’t look at us. Nearly every detail of the image connotes the “natural,” whether the floral pattern on the model’s bikini top, the flower in her hair, the braided mat platform, or the mountains in the background: here, her Orientalized sexuality is rendered natural, while the implied Western viewer is the “culture” to her “nature,” a relationship central to the discourse of colonialism. The strongest image analyses connect the analysis and interpretation of the image to specific visual evidence.

The second aspect of the deduction stage is to engage with the image empathetically. Place yourself in the represented world. What’s the weather like? Is there a breeze blowing? Would you be warm or cold, comfortable or disoriented if you were inhabiting the pictorial space? Crucially, why? This empathic exercise can be complicated, in that the image, especially an ideologically loaded advertising image, usually suggests an implied viewer, yet the implied viewer is not always, of course, the actual viewer. You need to be sensitive to how the image is asking you to interact with its pictorial space. In Figure A1, for example, the full sunshine, cozy clouds, slight breeze, and limited clothing suggest a welcoming warmth and sunlight. At the same time, however, you can be aware of what the photographer is asking you to think about the image (what can be called a preferred reading, or a dominant reading), while at the same time being aware of your own resistance (if you have any) to that preferred reading. For example one could argue that the image assumes an “implied” reader who is a middle-class North American with a potential interest in traveling to Hawaii for a vacation; one might further argue, with evidence drawn from 1940s advertising history, that the implied viewer is a white heterosexual man and, potentially, his wife. At the same time, however, let’s say you are yourself of Hawaiian descent, and read this image as a colonial fantasy: despite the warmth and sunshine, you might not find the image to be so “welcoming” after all, because you find yourself rejecting the terms in which you are being “welcomed.” You might perform what’s called an oppositional reading of the image, one where you situate your

own subjectivity in relationship to the image’s dominant narrative of Hawaii as feminized playground, and identify a subjective response of irritation or refusal.

Although this stage of the image analysis asks you to consider your own subjectivity in relation to the image, you must engage with these questions with a certain degree of skepticism. As historians, you are going to be primarily interested in who the actual viewers may have been in the 1940s, when the image was in original circulation, and what readings these 1941 viewers made have made of this image; alternatively, you may be interested in the implied 1941 viewers that the image suggests. Either way, you are interested in a specific moment in history when the image was in circulation, and are generally less concerned with contemporary readings of the image, since these readings and meanings, like other historical phenomena, change over time. This information is difficult to track down of course, and in the meantime you can use your own subjective responses to the image as a set of useful tips on where you might want to go for further research.

Stage 3: Speculation

At this point, questions are probably emerging in your mind as you view the image. These questions are central to developing a research paper, since a historical essay is only as good as the research questions you have posed. The speculation stage entails two steps. The first is to use the information you have gleaned from your interaction with the image to pose further questions designed to crack open the image still further, en route to pushing you to develop ideas for further research. The second step is to develop a program of research that will allow you to further pursue questions raised by the visual evidence and, as part of this process, to develop theories and hypotheses about the social and cultural work performed by the image in the historical context of its production and circulation. First, consider the following questions in relationship to your image:

Step 1: posing questions of your image

- 1 When and by whom was this particular document made? What is the format of the document? Does it appear in conjunction with other images, for example in a magazine, in a museum exhibition, or on a website? Has the document been edited? Was the document published? If so, when and where and how? How do the layout, typographical details, and accompanying illustrations inform you about the purpose of the document, the author’s historical and cultural position, and that of the intended audience?

- 2 Photographs don't create meaning all on their own; instead, a photograph's meaning is usually "anchored" by some other framework that encourages us to draw a particular kind of meaning from the image. A photograph's meaning is most usually directed by accompanying text (such as a caption under a news photo, or a label on a museum wall); the placement of the image in relation to other images (such as a photo-essay or an exhibition); and/or an institutional setting (such as a historical society's archive, or the university classroom). What is the larger context in which this image appears? How is the image's meaning directed by this context, through the use of text, placement, repositioning, cropping, sequencing, or other methods designed to anchor photographic meaning?
- 3 Who is the photographer, and why did he or she create the document? Does it even make sense to identify a single "maker"? Perhaps a "creative team" or a public relations office is a more appropriate "author" for the piece.
- 4 Using clues from the image itself, its form, and its content, who is the intended audience for the text? Is the audience regional? National? A particular subset of "the American people"? How do you think the text was received by this audience? How might the text be received by those for whom it was not intended?
- 5 How does the text reflect or mask such factors as the class, race, gender, ethnicity, or regional background of its creator? (Remember that "race" is a factor when dealing with cultural forms of people identified as "white," that "men" possess "gender," and that the North and Midwest are regions of local as well as national significance.)
- 6 How does the photographer describe, grapple with, or ignore contemporaneous historical events? Why? Which cultural myths or ideologies does the author endorse or attack? Are there any oversights or "blind spots" that strike you as particularly salient? What cultural value systems does the photographer embrace?
- 7 From a literary perspective, does the photographer employ any generic conventions, such as visual clichés of the heroic worker or the kindly grandmother?
- 8 With what aspects of the text (content, form, style) can you most readily identify? Which seem most foreign to you? Why? Does the document remind you of contemporaneous or present-day cultural forms that you have encountered? How and why?

Step 2: developing hypotheses and a program of research

As a result of your engagement with the image, you now may have a number of "hunches" or hypotheses about the history and meaning of the image.

These insights are tentative, and should be phrased in the form of a research question. This is the point when you move outside the image to research the history of the image’s production, circulation, or reception, as well as to offer analyses about what sorts of cultural work the image performed, and for whom, at a specific historical moment, as well as (perhaps) how these meanings changed over time, and why. Here, you go outside the image, to the larger archive, to other primary sources as well as secondary sources, to help you situate the image in a wider social and historical context. For example, in relationship to Figure A1, you might be interested in a number of different topics, such as the history of tourism in Hawaii; the history of the stereotypical representation of the “hula girl” in American popular culture; the use of images in supporting, or disrupting, US economic and political interests in Hawaii; the history of commercial photography in relationship to advertising and consumer culture in the mid-twentieth-century USA; the relationship between the US tourism industry, Hawaii, and World War II. And, of course, you will probably find yourself lacking basic historical information. For example, what is the history of the relationship between Hawaii and the United States? When, and why, did Hawaii become a state? When and why did the Hawaiian tourism industry develop? And so on.

But identifying a topic is only half the battle. The other half of developing a program of research is posing a research *question* that allows you to explore the relationship between the image, and its meaning, and the larger social and cultural context in which it circulated. You want to think about what sorts of cultural and political work the image performed in the past: how did it work to foster, or render invisible, aspects of the ever-shifting structures of power that define social and political life in all its forms? The key to asking a strong historically based question that will allow you to analyze meaning is to create questions that ask “How?” or “Why?” rather than “What?”. “What” or “When” questions, such as “When did Hawaii become a state?” are useful and important for providing empirical research to support your argument, but they won’t give you the analytical tools you need to frame arguments about the *meaning* of images, events, and socio-political formations in the past. To return to the list of potential topics suggested above, try and turn these “topics” into research questions, keeping in mind the visual information you have already gleaned from the image. One example of such a question might be: “How does this image work to reinforce, or disrupt, early 1940s American ideas of Hawaii’s relationship to the US mainland?” Note how even this question is still a bit too broad, though it’s a useful one to get you started in your research. Once you start researching, you will want to be even more specific: whose ideas will you be focusing on – art directors working on Madison Avenue? Hawaiian sovereignty activists?

Now that you have framed some initial questions, it is time to embark upon your research. As historians, you will want to consult possibly three types of external evidence, depending upon your goals. First, you might wish to consult other types of primary evidence (materials produced in the period you are investigating), such as travel brochures to Hawaii; articles in popular magazines about Hawaii c. 1941; records of Congressional debates about the status of Hawaii as a US territory; oral histories of “hula dancers” who performed in traveling shows during the period. Finding such sources can be exciting; this is the detective work of the historian. Secondly, you will want to read secondary sources, both books and journal articles, that scholars have written about aspects of your topic. Thirdly, you may wish to employ another scholar’s theoretical or conceptual framework as a tool in analyzing the historical meaning of your own text. Examples here might include, for example, Joan Scott’s argument concerning gender as a category of historical analysis; Judith Butler’s idea of gender as an ongoing performance; Edward Said’s notion of “Orientalism”; or Roland Barthes’s useful distinction between connotative and denotative meaning in photographic representation.²

You now have the tools to analyze images as primary sources for understanding the past. How you use those tools, and to what effect, will be up to you. Good luck!

Notes

- 1 The methodology that follows mirrors, quite closely, though with some modifications, the approach outlined by Jules David Prown in his important article on material culture methodology, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17:1 (Spring 1982), 1–20. I would like to thank Jules for his seminar in American Art, where I first learned how to read visual and material culture. I would also like to thank the generations of teaching assistants in Yale’s American Studies program, whose hand-outs on analyzing primary sources have also informed this essay.
- 2 Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1978); and Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).