

TEACHING VISUAL LITERACY THROUGH DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND IMAGING EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

Students of visual communication design need the ability to analyze, compose, and interpret images that speak in a visual language. Teaching visual literacy is one way that enables students to be aware and critical about images that surround their lives everyday. Visual literacy gives students the ability to actively unravel and deconstruct codes given by an image, rather than become a passive receiver of it. As a method for teaching, exercises or challenges in creating or composing images can be a good complement in developing this ability, rather than mere analyzing. Digital photography is an excellent medium for this, since it is quick at capturing and producing many images that we want, and very lenient on mistakes or technical errors so students are less afraid to take risks and more productive. Through strategic exercises of digital photography and imaging, students can learn visual literacy in a very dynamic way; not only reading images, but also creating them and reinterpreting them through class presentations and discussions.

Keywords: teaching method, visual literacy, digital photography, digital imaging, visual communication design, analyzing, interpreting

ABSTRAK

Mahasiswa Desain Komunikasi Visual memerlukan kemampuan untuk menganalisa, membuat, dan menginterpretasi gambar-gambar yang berbicara dalam bahasa visual. Mengajarkan Visual Literacy adalah salah satu cara agar mahasiswa mampu menyadari dan kritis terhadap gambar-gambar yang ada di sekeliling kehidupan mereka sehari-hari. Visual Literacy memberi mahasiswa kemampuan untuk secara aktif mengungkap dan mendeskonstruksi kode-kode dari sebuah gambar, dari pada menjadi seorang penerima yang pasif. Sebagai metode pengajaran, penugasan untuk membuat gambar visual merupakan pelajaran tambahan yang baik untuk membangun kemampuan ini, selain hanya menganalisa gambar. Fotografi digital adalah media yang tepat untuk ini, karena cepat dalam merekam dan menghasilkan gambar-gambar yang kita inginkan, serta sangat fleksibel dalam kesalahan-kesalahan ataupun kekeliruan teknis, sehingga mahasiswa cenderung untuk tidak takut mengambil resiko dan lebih produktif. Lewat latihan-latihan yang dibuat secara strategis lewat fotografi digital dan digital imaging, mahasiswa dapat mempelajari visual literacy secara dinamis; tidak hanya belajar membaca gambar-gambar, tetapi juga menciptakan dan me-reinterpretasikan lewat presentasi dan diskusi dalam kelas.

Kata kunci: metode mengajar, visual literacy, fotografi digital, digital imaging, desain komunikasivisual, analisis, interpretasi

INTRODUCTION

The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as of the pen.-- Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1936, quoted in Goin, 2001, 91

Visual literacy has been described as an understanding and critical analysis of all visual imagery presented to the individual in a culture (Golubieski, 2006). Actually, there are numerous definitions that slightly differ from one publication to another. There are also differing names as to who

thought up of the term first. Wikipedia (2006) notes that:

Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image. Visual literacy is based on the idea that pictures can be “read” and that meaning can be communicated through a process of reading.

The term “visual literacy” (VL) is credited to Zach Flo, who in 1969 offered a tentative definition of the concept: “Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time

having and integrating other sensory experiences” (Avgerinou, 1997).

Surprisingly, the same contributor, Avgerinou, in a different site gives credit as to who coined the term first to a different name, which is John Debes (www.ivla.org):

The term “Visual Literacy” was first coined in 1969 by John Debes, one of the most important figures in the history of IVLA. Debes’ offered (1969b, 27) the following definition of the term:

“Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication.”

However different or slightly different these explanations are, they all involve “seeing” and develop something from that seeing; either understanding or finding meaning, or a competence in “reading” what we see and make something of it. Visual literacy is something we learn and can be categorized as a skill, just like our text reading skills or verbal skills.

In a world like today, with so many images surrounding our lives, where we are constantly surrounded by images through television, magazines, etc., and at the same time being visual communicators, we need to learn to decode and encode these images as visual language. It is important that we can be an alert reader of visuals rather than a passive receiver, so that we may also use this “reading” skill to strategically, responsibly, and innovatively communicate through visuals.

DIGITAL-VISUAL CULTURE

Students of the Visual Communication Design department in Petra Christian University are engagers in many visually excessive media. Some are involved professionally, others for fun. They may be working in photography, video, animation, graphics, film, illustration, interactive, among others. Today, images

are the students’ language because we now live in a visual culture. However, being alert and critical about what they are doing or seeing is something different and has to be taught through a learning process. The same with a language class for Bahasa Indonesia is still taught for Indonesian who are already speaking the language. Grammar and structure have to be addressed, habitual language mistakes have to be straightened out. The same goes with visual language.

Furthermore, it is the digital era where everything is instant and transferable. You may take a picture with your mobile phone and then print it out on to a banner, or upload it and share it with the rest of the world through the Internet. This fast and instantaneous character is what the students are now living through and accepting as the norm and becoming their character as well. And it is what the teachers must face so that we can still “speak” the students’ language, get their acknowledgement, and guide them through to a better understanding of the digital-visual world. The challenge is to make them able to interpret what they see and know exactly what they give out for others to see. And digital photography is the perfect medium for that.

THE EVOLVING MEDIUM

The concept of photography in this digital age has shifted a little. It is now more of an image capture medium, since just like a scanner, everything inputted is almost always run through the computer first before outputted to various media. We can look back to its history where only a hand few people can shoot photographs, and it has a few purpose or function, and also a few genres. However today, almost everybody can take pictures or shoot a camera, photos have many varied purposes, and have also developed into many genres. Therefore, the medium has become simplified or human friendly, so the results become more complex and as diversified and eclectic as humans.

Digital photography is the perfect medium to teach visual literacy because it mirrors the characteristics of students today. It is a high quality, quick capture medium that is intuitive and very lenient on mistakes. It gives students the opportunity to be very productive and not afraid to take risks. Computer and digital imaging software are also inseparable mediums along with digital photography, because all images captured through the camera are then downloaded into the computer for further processing. Thus, the computer and the digital imaging software play big roles also in digital photography. With these mediums in mind, it is our concern to explore their capabilities, their advantages and positive aspects, and

make use of them to their maximum capacities for teaching visual literacy.

DESIGNING THE VISUAL EXERCISES

Making visual exercises through photography is a constant challenge. There are few basic exercises however that need to be given to students. They are basic design elements, such as line, shape, form, texture, pattern, and color. But before creating the exercise, it is important to first of all determine the objective. As with the Experimental Photography class I teach, the first assignment given to each student is to think of a color he/she likes, and take 100 shots of pictures for a week of anything that has that color. The specific color in the pictures must be dominant or the focus (not necessarily meaning “in focus” or not blurred) in each photograph.

This photo exercise challenges the students to not only start taking lots of pictures, but also be alert and aware with their eyes as to what they see around them. The setting of 100 pictures is to set a standard of productivity, not specifically a standard of quality yet. It sets a standard of how often each student should be taking pictures and at the same time taking advantage of the digital camera’s capability of capturing lots of images. From there, students are supposed to pick only the best 10 pictures of 100 to be presented in front of the class. The discussion topic would include not only about color and its language or expression or mood, but also composition and other design elements. This exercise could be applied to other design elements as well, for example, to take pictures of patterns and textures, lines, forms, and shapes.



Figure 1. “Crawling Spider” by student Kevin Winaldy

Another important subject for visual literacy is points of view, where images can tell the same story differently, just by shedding a different light, changing where to focus, changing the viewing angle, and

cropping or what to leave in or take out of the picture. Every decision that we make in fitting our subject matter into a frame speaks something about the subject matter and about ourselves as the photographer. Covering a story about someone of an interest to the students would be a good exercise in such a topic. Discussions could include documentary and photo-journalism genres.

A third example of exercises would be to challenge the students in creating pictures that are inspired by sounds or music. The challenge is to pick out a song. It could be instrumental or with lyrics. Then try to photograph something inspired by that music. It might be better if the teacher picks the song and let the students listen and create photographs from that one song. There are two sub-challenges for this. One is to aim for abstractions or, in other words, make abstract photographs. And two, is to have non-abstract photographs, this means with clear representation of subject matters. The goal of this exercise is to have us translate the language of music into the visual language, which most of the time can speak about similar things, such as rhythm/pattern, melody/line, moods/textures or colors, and so on. Interpretation comes to play from our listening to the music or lyrics and transferring it into an abstract picture and a representative one. Abstractions force students to again use basic forms of design to communicate, and experiment on using the camera for making abstract images.



Figure 2. An example of an abstract photo that uses an extreme close-up technique to create an abstraction. It is a picture of the Virgin Mary, entitled “Sacrifice” by student Yohan Ariel

The fourth exercise and usually the hardest is juxtaposition of things unrelated to create new meaning. One of the trade secrets or strategies of advertising and contemporary art is the unexpected juxtaposition of things unrelated to attract attention,

shock, puzzle, or question people's perception of those things. We can look at Oliviero Toscani's works for example for the United Colors of Benetton campaign. This is just one example of many. And when we realize this, we can start to be aware that we are a part of the photograph, because as a viewer, we start to interpret what we see according to our background knowledge, and give new meanings to the things posed together on the same scene or photo. Therefore, meaning doesn't necessarily come from the photo, but from the viewer. This photo exercise or challenge has two types that can be explored. One is the juxtaposition of things related and considered pairs or opposites. The other is the juxtaposition of things unrelated and that gives new meaning(s) to the things pictured together. Although difficult, students should aim for number two. A good example would be a Popeye action figure next to an olive fruit. Although these two are unrelated in the type of object they are, when juxtaposed together in the same scene the olive fruit gains new meaning, because of our knowledge of Popeye's wife's name "Olive".



Figure 3. Another example of an abstract photo that uses blurring technique to create an abstraction, by student Tri Gusti Irmawanto



Figure 4. Oliviero Toscani's photo for an ad campaign (<http://www.olivierotoscanistudio.com/>)

A fifth exercise is to utilize the camera to create a sequence that creates humor. It may be a short sequence by using the continuous shooting ability of the digital SLR, or an expanded period of time. The purpose of this exercise is to let the students experience the making of a story through a sequence. To make them understand that sometimes we cannot interpret a story just from one picture but a series of pictures, such as the case in documentary photography for example. This helps them understand the significance of a theme and narrative in photographs. With humor played in, it introduces a fun and creative atmosphere into the process. Students may have the humor in each picture or at the end of the sequence as a punch line.

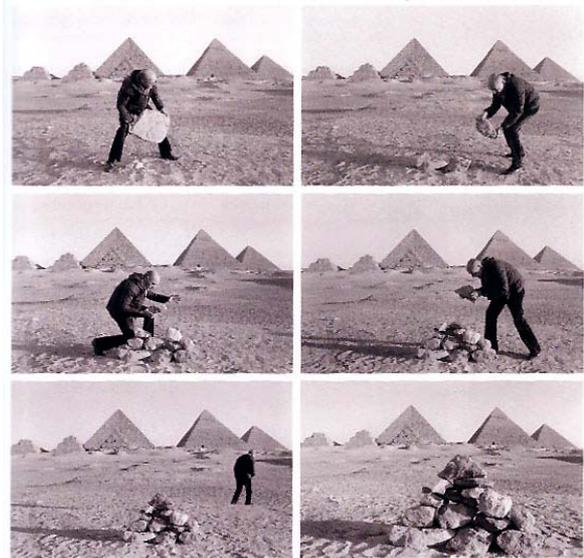


Figure 5. Duane Michals, I Build a Pyramid, 1978 (Ingledeu, 2005)

The sixth exercise is a technical process where we introduce students to digital imaging. High Dynamic Range or HDR photography has been a popular technique since the emergence of digital cameras. It is a technique where 3 or more different exposures of the same picture are taken and merged or composited together to show each photo's best detailed areas and give the maximum range of details and "information" from the darkest to the lightest parts (dynamic range) on "one" photo. It is closer to the dynamic range of the human eyes, where for a digital camera can only capture a third of our dynamic range in a single shot (Dickman, 2005:213). The result image of a HDR photo in general looks very sharp with long depth of field, clearly detailed in the darkest to lightest areas, and has a wider range of colors, often resembling to contemporary hyperrealistic paintings. It seems "more

real” than reality. Eventhough it is just close to our eyes’ dynamic range, HDR photo somehow seems to show an “enhanced” reality or a clearer reality. This is the purpose of the exercise, which is to show students of such capabilities in digital photography and imaging, and how they can explore and discuss such

hyperrealism. This is truly an experiment that has been impossible to capture using traditional photographic methods. Techniques of compositing HDR pictures on the photo shoot with the DSLR camera and in the computer have to be explained in detail prior to and after the exercise.



Figure 6. A HDR photograph by student Heru Wibowo



Figure 7. Example of a HDR photo by Pete Carr (<http://www.petecarr.net>, via <http://www.vanilladays.com/hdr-guide/>)

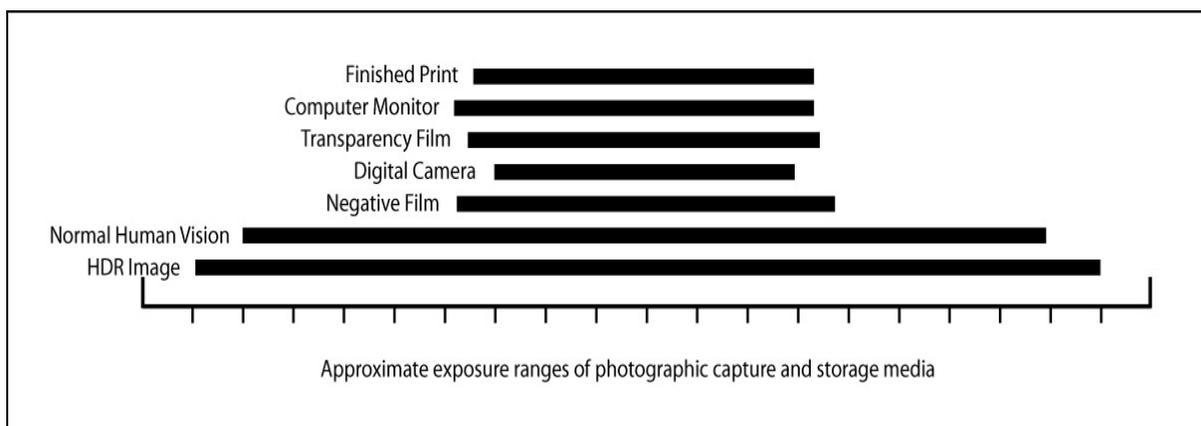


Figure 8. HDR image exposure compared to other media (Dickman, 2005:213)

The seventh exercise which deals more with digital imaging, explores the world of surrealism in the digital age. Today, with the advances of computer imaging technology, almost any kind of creative imagery is possible; by combining different images into one (montage), rearranging them, retouching them, remaking them, etc. However, to direct students in using those techniques, a good exercise would be to make students create an imagery of their dream or dreams by combining many different photos they take. They should do some writing about their thoughts, feelings, and dreams first, and maybe some poetry, then think of symbols or metaphors that would visualize them into a photo illustration. Students should also look into Surrealism and the works of Surrealist artists and photographers, from Salvador Dali to contemporary photographers, to gain references of the diverse look and feel of Surrealist works.

The digital imaging exercise above can also be assigned with another theme, which is a “World Record of something.” This is adapted from Wilde’s Visual Literacy book (Wilde, 1991:166), where in it is an illustration problem, but can be adopted here into a photographic digital imaging exercise. It is a very good alternative or additional exercise to the last one. In the book, Wilde explains the problem:

“Illustrate (in our case, with photos) a world record of any fact, statistic, deed, or achievement, in any field or subject area. Consider the natural world, outer space, bizarre and outrageous stunts, challenging exploits, great sports accomplishments, or occurrences that are ridiculous, provocative, or shocking.”

These digital imaging exercises would also demand titles that would further challenge students to direct people’s interpretations of their created photo

illustrations. Students also at the same time learn the essential digital image manipulation techniques.

CONCLUSION

These exercises are just examples that have been implemented in the Experimental Photography class and have shown great results. Other exercises could be developed and designed further. The basic considerations and objectives of each exercise must be apparent. Pictures of examples may be shown or not during the briefing of the photo exercise, depending on whether they are important in making the students understand of the expected results or not. These exercises should be limiting somewhat, but open for students’ creativity and interpretation. Discussions and readings of the results are critical in the learning and understanding of visual literacy. After analyzing an image often unintentional messages emerge. This is where usually the best learning process takes place. Technical and aesthetical aspects could also be discussed for effective visual communication.

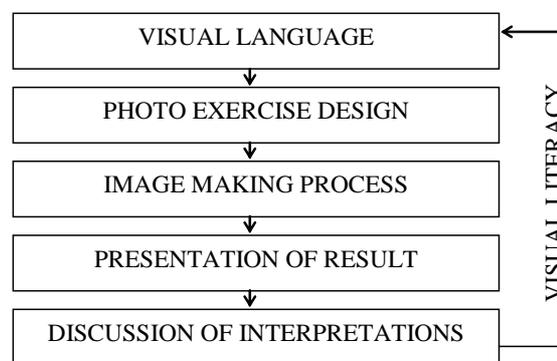


Figure 9. Scheme of visual literacy exercise in class

Continued guidance for the students can be achieved through online discussions. From the

beginning of the class, students are required to have an online portfolio or a photoblog, where they could upload their best pictures and share with class members and the rest of the world. They are required to be active members of groups and contributors to them. It is important for students to be aware of the myriads of styles of photos and references. In this way, the learning process not only takes place in class, but also out of class and even with people around the world. The future is not only the digitality of everything, but how they are all interconnected in the global network. That they contribute, take and give from each other, affecting, inspiring, and continuously innovating.

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