Visual Literacy: Images and the Stories They Tell
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by Bettina Fabos

If every picture tells a story, what's the story in this photo? The photo itself reveals only certain information. It appears to be two soccer teams in a ceremony, presumably before the game begins, in a huge outdoor stadium filled to capacity (at least in the part of the stadium we can see) on a sunny day (evidenced by the shadows). Both teams—one in white jerseys, one in dark jerseys – are giving a raised arm salute. The photo's black and white graininess tells us this is an archival photo, and we can also tell the photo was taken by a photographer at field level.

But, there is a lot more to understand the story of the photo. What is it about the composition of the photo that makes it so striking? What does it mean when a row of soccer players raise their arms in a uniform salute? Does the time and place of this photo, and our time and place as viewers of the photo, make a difference in how we understand the gesture? Finally, what is the truth behind the photo's story?

Here's what the historical record tells us about the image: The two soccer teams weren't cross-town rivals, but instead the national teams from England (in white) and Germany. The event was an exhibition match in Berlin's enormous Olympic Stadium. The date was May 14, 1938. The era was a time when sport, especially soccer, was increasingly becoming a commercial spectacle (the first World Cup was played in 1930, and the third one would come to Paris in June 1938, just one month after this match in Berlin).[1] It was also an era of socio-political drama and heightened tensions in Europe. Hitler's Germany had just invaded and annexed Austria two months earlier in the *Anschluss*, a violation of the Treaty of Versailles signed at the end of World War I. In England, the government of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, terrified of Germany's growing power and grasping for ways to avoid war, took a cautious approach of diplomatic appeasement.

Into this moment laden with international politics enters the English team in Berlin. In the locker room just minutes before the England's team entered the field, British Football Association officials ordered the team to perform the salute during the German national anthem to "ensure a friendly reception by not only the huge swastika-waving crowd present in the Berlin stadium" but also by the even larger the radio audience in Germany and beyond.[2] What the photo doesn't show is that the English players voiced their strong opposition in the locker room. Although they may look like Nazi sympathizers in the photo, none of the English players were saluting willingly as they faced the dignitary's box, which included top Nazi officials.

Interestingly, the photo also tells us nothing about the game itself. Going into the match, Germany had won nearly 26 straight games in a row (one game ended in a tie). The team had undergone an unprecedented two weeks of intense training in the Black Forest, and had an overwhelming home advantage: 110,000 fans in a stadium filled to capacity (400,000 people had applied for tickets).[3] Meanwhile, the English team had just finished an exhausting league season and had undergone no special preparations. Nonetheless, England performed brilliantly, beating Germany 6-3. Yet, a big win for the English team is not how the exhibition match of May 14, 1938 is remembered. It's not the "story" that this photo tells.

Versions of this photograph appeared in nearly every British newspaper the next day. The British public was outraged by the image, and what they believed to be Germany's demand that their soccer team perform the "Hitler salute."[4] In his 1946 autobiography, former England team captain Eddie Hapgood said the salute (and the subsequent public indignation) disturbed him for the rest of his career. "I've been V-bombed in Brussels before the Rhine crossing, bombed and 'rocketed' in London, I've been in a shipwreck, a train crash, and inches short of a plane accident," he wrote. "But the worst moment of my life, and one I would not willingly go through again, was giving the Nazi salute in Berlin."[5] The photo disappeared from public view, but emerged 65 years later in a BBC documentary, *Football and Fascism* (2003), to renewed British outrage in news outlets and blogs as a "moment of shame" that still haunts British sport.

In this chapter we will investigate how photographs and images tell a story, which in turn connects to a larger narrative about our culture and our values. We will explore an image's narrative on multiple levels: on the level of composition, on the level of symbolic meaning, and also in terms of its ability to evoke realism. As we will discover, realism, or the truth behind an image, is tricky to discern: what is "real" in the first place, and how can reality possibly be captured? As we'll see, realism is both socially constructed and changes over time. For example, we may think a black-and-white family snapshot more faithfully captures "reality" because people are caught off guard (they aren't posing) and black-and-white signifies to us a more "documentary-style" (and thus more truthful) representation. But why do we think of black and white as more "real"? We are conditioned by tropes of realism, and they become so normalized we sometimes forget to question them. In television, the 1950s show *Dragnet* was once the standard for "realistic" police dramas but looks very contrived by the standards of today's procedural detective shows and their aesthetic. Does this mean that the police dramas we appreciate today are more "real"? In undertaking an examination of visual literacy, we will visit the themes that guide our critical process: communication technology and the constantly-changing media environment; democracy and the role images play in fostering democratic thought; and commerce—how our image comprehension and construction are inextricably linked to the visual languages of advertising and photojournalism.

The Aesthetic Power of the Visual

Composition is the creative activity of placing objects within a frame. When painting a picture, we're choosing where to place shapes and dots and lines on a two-dimensional plane. When we create a page design, we arrange images, words, and graphic elements, most typically filling some sort of rectangle. Whether we do this using construction paper and glue or digital software, we're directing viewers to notice certain elements within a frame, purposefully communicating our ideas through visual language. When taking a photographic or video image, we arrange external objects within the 4x3 or 16x9 dimensions of a viewfinder, panning left and right or crouching down to get the kind of perspective we're after. As Herbert Zettl points out, understanding the aesthetics of composition does not necessarily mean knowing how to create a beautiful image, it means knowing how to structure both still and moving screen images for "maximally effective communication."[6] The best photographs and graphic designs do that: they dictate a reader's comprehension. Michael Rabiger discusses good composition this way:

While it interests and delights the eye, good composition is an important organizing force when used to dramatize relativity and relationship, and to project ideas. Superior composition not only makes the subject (content) accessible, it heightens the viewers' perceptions and stimulates his or her imaginative involvement, like language from the pen of a good poet.[7]

To understand this "organizing force," then, we must understand the various elements we need to organize when creating images: Color, Form, Line, and Movement. Every choice can be a powerful way to both convey and understand meaning.

<u>Color</u>

How do color choices impact an image? We consciously and unconsciously respond to color every day, and are constantly making aesthetic choices. We decide to wear a blue t-shirt instead of a yellow one, pick an orange cereal bowl opposed to a white one, choose a pen with blue ink over black ink. Most of us have a favorite color, or are drawn continuously to the same color palette. We also have intense emotional reactions to color. We may love the color orange but hate the color blue. We may walk into a room that makes us feel uncomfortable, feel the intense urge to leave, and then realize upon reflection that the color was the thing that turned us away. Virginia Kidd, who teaches media production at California State University, has an emotional response to Room 317, the room in which she holds her classes:

I have a theory that the University obtained paint for this room at an enormous discount because nobody with any choice in the matter would have purchased it. Three walls are battleship gray. The impact is dismal. I am reminded of battered aluminum cooking pots and galvanized garbage cans. Apparently in an effort to counter this, the fourth wall was painted yellow; not, however, a soft banana yellow, which happens to be my favorite color, but a glaring mustard yellow that could have come straight from a French's jar; this covers an entire classroom wall and oppressively dominates whatever is happening. If nothing else, the choice of paint for room 317 at least graphically demonstrates the power of color.[8]

The power of color was also evident during "tulipmania" in seventeenth century Holland. The Dutch were so taken by the vivid colors of tulips (an import from Turkey) in the gray Dutch landscape that they became intoxicated; a frenzy of financial speculation followed and a single tulip bulb could cost a thousand Dutch florins (the average annual income was 150 florins).

The fact is, humans are physiologically programmed to respond to color, and we respond to certain colors in particular ways. We see red especially easily, not because it's a bright color, but because our eyes are designed to block the opposite of red: ultraviolet electromagnetic waves that can be harmful to our retinas. Red and orange light wavelengths pass through our retina more easily, making these colors the most noticeable: stop signs and traffic lights are red for a reason. Correspondingly, violet is the least noticeable color. Thus, as we make our own images or respond to the images of others, we can understand how color works for "maximum effect." Red works well as an accent color to draw attention to a certain part of an image. Photojournalists are pleased, for example, when a person in a crowd they are documenting happens to be wearing a red scarf or shirt, allowing them to use that individual as a focal point in their frame: "look here."

In the classic short film, *The Red Balloon* (1956), a boy is followed through the grey streets of Paris by a huge red balloon: its redness makes the balloon especially prominent. In another film, *Schindler's List* (1993), which was shot entirely in black and white, Director Steven Spielberg chose to accent certain "key moments" with red. For example, a young Jewish girl in a red coat is, for Schindler (and for us), a key character standing out (in red) from the black and white masses; the story turns when Schindler sees her, develops a sense of empathy, and decides to protect Polish Jews from annihilation. Advertisers are also keenly aware of red's power: the color will lead a viewer to a particular corner of the page, clarifying a message or saying "this is important." Consider how red is effectively deployed in corporate logos, signage, and national flags.

       Moreover, red juxtaposed with blue simulates depth—the warmer color will appear closer (more noticeable) while the colder blue tones will recede (not noticeable). This is why intense blue and red fields on the same two-dimensional surface will seem to pulse back and forth in a third dimension. Thus, color helps to bring three-dimensionality to the two-dimensional frame.

       Colors also create emotional responses. If red can agitate or provoke, then green can soothe; blue can yield to emotions of melancholy and coolness; gray can lack emotional commitment. Because light colors have soft and cheerful associations, we tend to surround babies with various shades of pastel; we tend to demonstrate dark and moody emotions through dark colors. Color is thus a powerful, if often ambiguous, tool for directing visual messages.

Form

Form has to do with the object inside the frame, how big it is, and where it is placed. The simplest form is a dot, and placing a dot within the four walls of a frame commands attention: We look at the dot before we look at any blank space within a frame. (Even if a form does not have an explicit frame—imagine a sculpture in the middle of a vast plain—it is still implicitly framed by our field of vision.) Moreover, with the act of framing, something rather magical happens, something we refer to as **frame magnetism**. When a dot is closer to one side of a frame, that side seems to pull the dot towards it. Notice the diagram below: the dot is being pulled upwards in Figure One. In Figure Two the dot is being pulled to the right. The result, not surprisingly, is a bit of agitation, or at least interest. Place the dot in the absolute center of the frame (Figure 3) and it becomes inert—all four sides of the image are equally pulling at the dot, making for a rather boring composition.
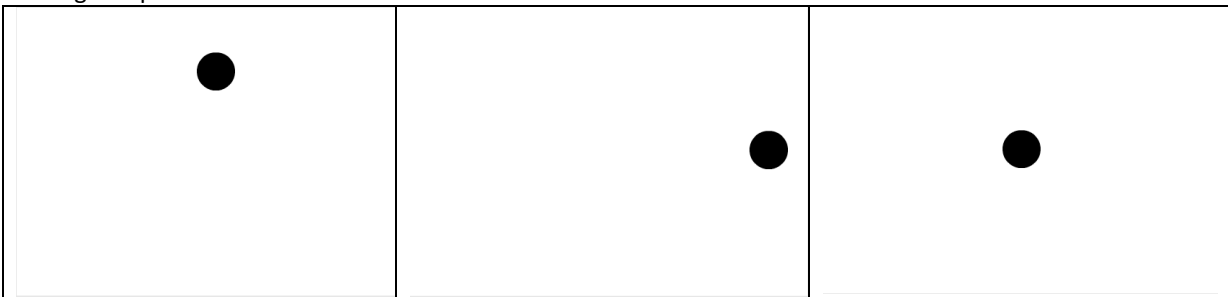
Depending on how large the dot is and where it is placed, the four sides of the frame impact form (in this case, the dot) in significant ways. Consequently, we can use the pull of the frame to add drama or significance to our message. We can create tension between two individuals, for example, by placing them close to the edges of each frame.

Vladimir Putin and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad   Conventional Talk show format

NOT COMFORTABLE   COMFORTABLE

Or, we can do the opposite, framing figures so they are not pulled by the sides of a picture, and comfortably balanced within the frame. TV producers usually strive to achieve this kind of balance: they routinely make talk show hosts and their guests sit uncomfortably close to each other (for them) so that they are *not* pulled apart by the sides of the video frame. The result is to have them fake their comfort in order to make *us* comfortable: as viewers we feel as if these individuals like each other and are having a pleasant conversation—they are not being pulled apart by frame magnetism. As we can also see in the Nazi salute photograph, the two dominant shapes (in this case, each soccer team) are cohesively grouped without being pulled to one side of the frame or another, creating a sense of pictorial balance.

  The realities of frame magnetism has led to framing conventions. One is *head room*: framing an image so an individual has a bit of space over her head to convey that she is not cramped by the frame or pulled upward by frame magnetism. Head room creates the illusion that the figure is in a larger setting and not a cramped box. Another is "rule of thirds," a well-known principle of photographic and image composition. By breaking an image down into thirds (both horizontally and vertically), and by placing elements on the points of intersection, we can avoid both the uncomfortable pulling when the form is too close to the frame, and the boring inertia when the form is too central.
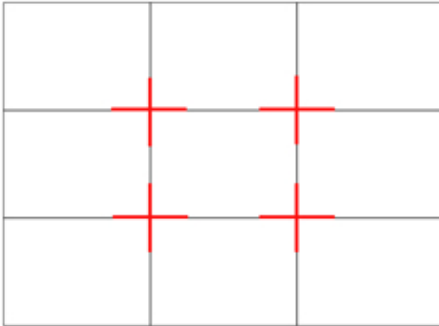
Knowing the rule of thirds is to create images that are balanced yet interesting. However, knowing when to break the rule—to add tension—is also an essential part of the artistic vocabulary and a means for conveying narrative. In this movie poster for the classic Hitchcock thriller, *Birds,* for example, Tippi Hedren is placed at the bottom left corner of the screen amidst diving birds, which are also placed at odd intersections within the frame. Ignoring the rule of thirds at every instance causes a sense of discomfort and anxiety that permeates the film.

  Shape is tied to form. The most basic shapes—square, circle and triangle—are often connected to the three basic (primary) colors, red, blue and yellow. Each shape in turn has an expressive quality. Squares convey stability, solidity, support, confidence, strength, but also boredom. They carry a heavier weight in the frame than circles or triangles, and tend to be imposing, dominating an image. Rectangles—part of the square family—usually feel slightly less stable and slightly more interesting than squares. In contrast, circles are fluid instead of solid, expressing wholeness, completion, happiness, unity, and motion. Circles are more interesting than squares, but nowhere near as interesting as triangles, our most dynamic shape. Triangles are stimulating because they *point*, leading one's eyes to various areas within the frame, adding tension with diagonal lines, and energy to the entire visual composition. Like the color red, triangles are useful in isolating ideas and identifying the significance of an element within the frame. For example, a photograph of two basketball players jumping up towards a ball

completes the shape of a triangle and dramatizes the ball's significance.   A photograph of a bird landing on a gutter—the bird's wings outstretched—shows two triangles: each one pointing in a different direction and asking the viewer to follow the direction of both invisible lines. In the Nazi salute photograph, the flags in the stadium point upwards, lifting our eyes out of the narrative. As designer and theorist Johannes Itten commented about shapes, "The square is resting matter, the triangle is thought, and the circle is spirit in eternal motion."[10]

Line

A line embodies a narrative significance of its own. Horizontal lines evoke calm and stability; vertical lines convey energy and upward thrust. Diagonal lines, like triangles, are dynamic, exciting, somewhat unstable, and for these reasons are advantageous towards visually communicating complicated ideas. It's an important strength, when creating an image, to be aware of how lines divide a frame. For example, telephone lines can slice a frame into numerous boxes and rectangles against the sky, or dramatically slice a frame at a diagonal, directing viewers to various points of interest. We also intentionally create diagonals by cocking the camera—making what we call a **dutch angle**— and destabilizing an otherwise sturdy image to make a visual point. In advertising, dutch angles are used constantly to add excitement, or to juxtapose instability (e.g., discomfort in the doctor's office) with stability (e.g., relief after taking a certain pill).

A tilted horizon or a flagpole make obvious lines within a frame, but lines can also be inferred: A look between two figures—gaze meeting gaze—creates an invisible line linking characters. A person (or in the case of the Nazi salute photograph) pointing produces a directional force that we can follow, perhaps even beyond the frame. Two figures working in a vast field, one in the foreground and another far off in the background, are invisibly connected by a diagonal line; we look at the foreground figure first and then are drawn to look at the second. Thus, diagonal lines both offer directional force and convey depth. Lines, whether visible or invisible, help us understand spatial arrangements and the corresponding relationships within the visual narrative.

The angle from which the image is taken offers more invisible lines and another means for communicating depth—the more extreme the angle, the more intense the feeling of depth. The invisible lines that angles create are also infused with meaning. A very low angle intensifies the stature of a figure or inanimate object. A child portrayed from below can look like a giant, a monster can appear even more scary and powerful, and an army tank all the more menacing. When shooting *Citizen Kane*, for example, Orson Welles was so intent on portraying Kane with as much grandeur as possible in certain scenes that he dug holes in the floor of sets and shot from below the floorboards, creating extreme low angles for maximum 3-dimensional effect, which was heightened further by the backdrop of a low, lighted ceiling.

Shooting at a low angle also tends to create directional lines towards sky, clouds, windows, and the vigorous thrust of buildings, all of which can bring powerful associations. The opposite is true for high angles. People shot from above tend to look weaker, diminished, and victimized; a high angle correspondingly leads one to focus on ground, dirt, feet, and litter, all of which can bring a negative energy to an image. Line thus helps define perspective, and leads a viewer to points of emphasis within a frame. Other ways to communicate spatial organization in an image include high-contrast lighting, sound, and, as we discuss next, the temporal elements of motion.

Movement

In western cultures, we automatically assign a movement to lines—we read lines (and images) the same way we read text, left to right. Lines therefore have additional energy—the energy we read into them. For those of us in the Western world, our left-to-right orientation has certain compositional implications. For starters, our eyes tend to rest or linger on the right side of the frame, so whatever appears on the right side seems to dominate the image. For this reason, advertisers and graphic designers typically place product logos on the right, the last place a viewer's eye will rest. We read diagonal lines according to this left-right orientation as well. For example, we understand a slope that starts at the bottom left hand corner of a frame and ends at the top right as an "uphill" slope; we easily interpret a slope that begins from the top left and ends at bottom right as "downhill" (even though it could easily be uphill).
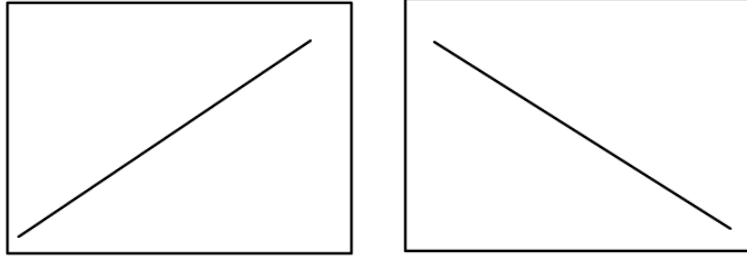

In Western cultures, then, placing critical elements on the right side rather than the left can become a forceful tactic in planning visual compositions. If we grew up speaking and reading Arabic, we would learn to read images from right to left, and we would plan our visual compositions differently.

With these directional forces—also called vectors—at play, lines within a frame can either compete with our natural desire to read left to right, causing tension, or flow with the left-right momentum. For example, car advertisers use these tendencies to their advantage: if the message is "speed," they might show a car driving left to right, and preferably downhill, as if to increase the speed of the car: the car is traveling in the same direction our eyes are naturally traveling. If the message is "rugged and powerful," advertisers might show the Jeep traveling right to left and uphill: by going against the grain it appears that the truck is working harder and is twice as tough.

These kinds of *continuous* vectors extend beyond the frame and cause anticipation: we don't know if the motorcycles will crash at the bottom of the hill, or if the Jeep will ever reach the top of the mountain. The arms raised in Nazi salute and the flags pointing upward also cause anticipation, leading our eyes outside of the frame. *Converging* vectors, where two forces converge together in the same frame, tend to evoke a sense of calm because the forces are pulling together and a sort of resolution is taking place. *Diverging* vectors—two forces moving away and out of the frame, can be deeply troubling. Indeed, the directional forces of lines, combined with our left-to-right orientation, can yield considerable drama and storytelling to a still image. In the movie poster image for *Little Miss Sunshine*, for example, most of the vectors within the image are continuous: the characters are running from left to right, and the VW bus is positioned past the edge of the frame to suggest forward movement and a feeling of being out of control. However, the character within the bus with outstretched arms works as a converging vector, suggesting that there is a resolution in to the narrative (there is) and that the family will all get on the bus. A different attitude is expressed in the poster for *Brokeback Mountain*, which illustrates the power of diverging index vectors. In this still image, the cowboy positioned in the foreground (Heath Ledger) looks down to the left, and the cowboy positioned in the background (Jake Gyllenhaal) looks down to the right, encapsulating the narrative conflict of the entire film. The single image tells a story: both the physical closeness of the two characters, and—with the diverging vectors—their disconnect.
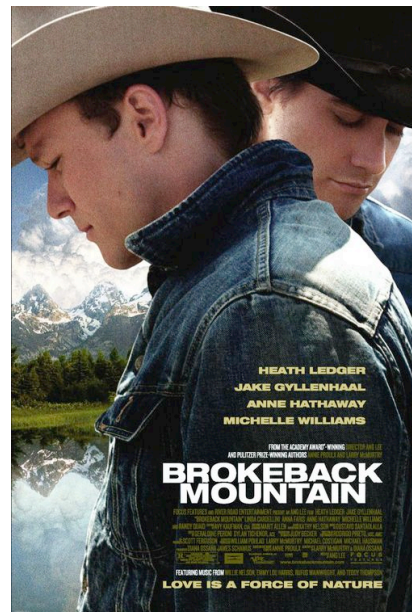
When that image moves—as in film or video—the narrative possibilities multiply. Panning (horizontally swiveling from one side to another) to the right tends to evoke a sense of panic; we are already reading to the right and the rightward sweeping pan doubles the speed of our reading. Panning to the left, on the contrary, calms things down. Following a character moving left to right within the frame is invigorating, but troubling if the filmmaker or videographer doesn't supply enough *lead room*—the extra space to suggest a character is traveling towards something outside of the frame and not slamming into the frame's edge. To frame an individual in the most flattering conditions, a videographer might pose a subject—say the President—walking left to right (i.e., "forward," not backward), walking with extensive lead room (i.e., he is open, comfortable and in control of their environment), and at a low angle (i.e., he is powerful). In contrast, a videographer also has the power to do the opposite, portraying a political official in extreme close up, walking left or against the edge of the frame, and looking up at the camera rather than down, as if to portray the person as cramped, uncomfortable, squirming under pressure, and belittled.

Narrative structure in film and video is, of course, propelled forward through editing: the juxtaposition of long shots, medium shots and close ups. Perhaps it's easiest to think of individual shots as sentences, and sequences of shots as paragraphs. Each shot delivers a new idea towards a cohesive

storyline: A long shot (sometimes called an "establishing shot") establishes place and context; a medium shot draws attention to a particular character or object; and a close up describes that character/object in terms of emotions, actions, or other details. Think of the first five sentences in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (1995)—a story about India in the 1930s—as a series of five edited film shots:

1. (long shot) The Morning Express bloated with passengers slowed to a crawl, then lurched forward suddenly, as though to resume full speed.
2. (medium shot) The train's brief deception jolted its riders.
3. (medium shot) The bulge of humans hanging out of the doorway distended perilously, like a soap bubble at its limit.
4. (close up) Inside the compartment, Maneck Kohlah held on to the overhead railing, propped up securely within the crush.
5. (extreme close up) He felt someone's elbow knock his textbooks from his hands.

Similarly, a fully edited film could be broken down, shot by shot, into a stream of descriptive sentences and paragraphs. Pacing combined with shot size can also dramatically affect meaning. Quickly edited shots and sequences accelerate tension, especially if the shots are all close ups, conveying a feeling of entrapment or suspense. In contrast, numerous slow-paced long shots side by side slow down the narrative and give room for reflection. Finally, the juxtaposition of extreme shots—long shot to close up; slow-paced to fast-paced; moving to still—is a chance to create a jarring scene in the narrative, one where the viewer has to work extra hard to figure out what the story is.

Indeed, juxtaposition is a way to induce meaning not through the actual content of individual shots but through the coupling of two or more shots. The famous Russian film theorist Lev Kuleshov demonstrated the power of juxtaposition by coupling the same expressionless head shot footage of a prominent actor, Ivan Mozzhukhin, with three completely different film segments: first a bowl of soup; then a coffin in which lay a dead woman; and finally a little girl at play. Kuleshov and his colleagues presented the three juxtapositions to an audience, who commented on Mozzhukhin's superior acting ability: "the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup," "the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman," and "the light happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play."[11]

Even though the head shot never changed, Kuleshov concluded that "with correct montage, even if one takes the performance of an actor directed at something quite different, it will still reach the viewer in the way intended by the editor, because the viewer himself will complete the sequence and see that which is suggested to him."[12] *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart has put juxtaposition to good use, creating clever montages where the content of an individual image (for example, a soundbite from a politician) is subordinate to the editing of two or three images in sequence. The effect of such editing on *The Daily Show* is usually to illustrate irony; that is, the juxtaposition of editing makes or reveals the meaning of the politician's soundbite to be the opposite of its original intention. As with the Kuleshov experiment, we can create meaning by connecting two or more separate elements, providing competent continuity, and asking viewers to fill in the blanks. "The challenge," writes visual theorist Gretchen Barbatsis, "is to theorize, study, and create visual narrative in ways that we appreciate its sense-making function as a way to better understand disordered, raw experience; as a powerful way of constituting reality and not a way of merely recording it."[13]

While the English soccer team photo is not a moving image edited in relation to other images, it effectively communicates meaning and movement through its composition. The photograph's color contrasts (black and white), spatial organization of subject matter within the frame, use of line, and sweeping vector movements suggest a controlled drama of binary opposites and leading lines. This is a story of opposites, order and balance. Both teams balance each other in terms of frame placement and contrasting uniform colors (dark vs. white). The flags are equidistant. The stadium line and the row of athletes—particularly their waistlines—rest comfortably on the horizontal thirds, suggesting interest but little tension, until one considers the vectors. With arm and gaze vectors pointing out of the frame and flags pointing up to an open sky, there is an edginess to this picture, a story of anticipation: we don't know what's going to happen.

If the photograph were cropped, or taken from a different angle, meaning would change drastically. Indeed, different versions of the photograph, such as this one below—unearthed in a German archive in 2008—are cropped and angled in ways that don't communicate the same conflict, balance, and anticipation. Without the context of the opposing German team and evidence of a crowded stadium, the

image is more passive, less oppositional. The outstretched arms have less potency from the frontal perspective.

Photo: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-513358/Shameful-picture-England-squad-giving-Nazi-salute-haunts-British-sport-Why-70-years-later-suck-dictators.html

Semiotics: Cultural Symbols and a Deeper Level of Meaning

Beyond a pure compositional reading, however, we can also read deeper into the image and acknowledge that every element in the frame conveys an independent symbolic meaning. In other words, we can add more narrative layers through our understanding of the *signs* implanted within the image.

What is a sign? A sign is simply something that conveys meaning beyond the object itself. Flowers are a sign of spring; dark clouds are a sign that it might rain; yawning is a sign for fatigue or boredom. We know these things because we are familiar with weather and human nature. Other signs are not quite so obvious, requiring more knowledge of cultural norms to understand their meaning. A child dressed in a princess costume and holding a bag of candy may suggest some sort of event or festival, but one has to know more about Disney characters and the cultural traditions surrounding Halloween to deduce that the child has gone trick-or-treating as Cinderella. Public spitting or picking one's nose may be culturally acceptable in other countries, but in the United States, for example, these actions are often considered improper personal hygiene, a sign of being distasteful, anti-social, and unclean. A child might not know this, however, unless he or she learns it from parents or teachers. A right arm raised at an angle above one's head may be someone's way to say hello or hail a taxi, but it is mostly a gesture loaded with negative meaning, symbolizing Nazi power.[14]   "For something to be a sign," Paul Lester writes, "the viewer must understand its meaning. If you do not understand the meaning behind the orange color of a jacket, it isn't a sign for you."

Semiotics (or semiology in Europe) is the study of signs. The discipline evolved in the mid-twentieth century after two linguistic theorists, Ferdinand de Saussure (in Switzerland) and Charles Sanders Peirce (in the United States) independently published theories about the use of words (signs in their own right) to communicate meaning. Both analyzed the relationship between the sign ("signifier") and the object ("signified"), and asked important questions about how something comes to stand for something else, and how the sign is connected to the object. Visual communication scholar Sandra Moriarty notes that Peirce's work has become particularly helpful in reading images because he emphasized *representation* as "a key element in how a sign 'stands for' its object."[15] Peirce formulated three different types of representation, "iconic," "indexical," and "symbolic," which range from the most easily-interpreted signs (iconic) to the most complex (symbolic).

Iconic signs are the most basic sign types because they closely resemble the thing they represent: a photograph or film; a pictorial sign (e.g., a no-smoking sign, male/female restroom sign; a trashcan icon on a desktop computer; certain pictorial road signs).

Because they represent a tangible gesture, action or thing, iconic images are easily understood across cultures. They also can be a part of more complex indexical or symbolic images.

One step up in complexity, **indexical signs** are less straightforward but still logical representations of an object. A deer hoof print in the woods is a sign that a deer passed by. A bullet hole is a sign that both a bullet and a gun were present at a certain time to create the hole. The whistle of a tea kettle is a sign that water is boiling inside. A map is not as literal as a photograph, but is a logical representation of a landscape nonetheless—an index sign pointing to a terrain. As literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes described index signs, "they point but do not tell."[16] And one has to have a certain amount of lived experience to recognize indexical representations. One has to have boiled water in a tea kettle, or gone to the woods looking for deer, to fully understand what a tea kettle whistle or a deer hoof print mean. When reading indexical signs in media images, we also borrow from our own lived experience to determine how the signs contribute to the overall narrative. If a car advertisement, for example, cuts from an image of a shiny new car to some black and white, grainy, flickery footage of cars not recognizable on today's roads, we can read that footage—based on our own experience with today's cars and the media—to mean "old" or "historical." Even though the black and white footage may have been shot recently and overlayed with special effect filters to look archival, it still signifies "old." If we see an image of a person smiling as they hold up a beauty product, we can deduce that the smiling gesture is an indexical sign associated with the product: the smile points to the act of using the product (even though we don't actually see the product being used). "Before" and "After" images are good examples of index signs; we never see the product being applied, but are led to conclude that the product shown had something to do with the result
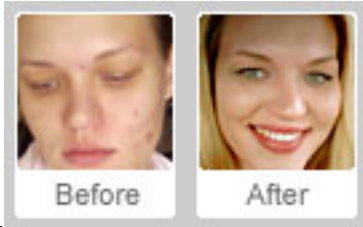
displayed.

Symbolic signs are the most complex of all signs because they are determined by culture and therefore in need of a higher level of interpretation. For this reason they tend to be the most interesting for semioticians to analyze. Language and words are good examples of symbolic signs: one has to learn the language before he or she is able to interpret the sign.

Besides their inherent connection to spoken and written words, symbolic signs include other cultural indicators: socially-defined gestures, collective practices, styles of dress, national emblems, and cultural innuendo—all the things that are learned through one's upbringing, education, and interactions with specific social groups. In the category of socially-defined gestures, for example, one hails a taxi differently in Paris (point down) than in New York (point up). One has to learn through cultural practice whether to point up or down; that in the U.S. and elsewhere, red, white and pink together signify Valentine's Day; orange and black indicate Halloween, and red and green mean Christmas.

When British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife, Cherie Blair, was photographed publicly yawning without covering her mouth at the Braemar Highland Games in 2003,[17] and again at the Commonwealth Games in 2007, the symbolic gesture was read by many in Britain as both a sign of rudeness and a lack of cultural knowledge. Reactions to the gesture in the British press were scathing, and pointed to other signs of Cherie Blair's cultural ineptitude: The *Telegraph* reported in 2007 that "Mrs Blair's [yawning] faux pas compounded blunders on her first visit to Balmoral in 1997 when she failed to curtsey to the Queen and wore a trouser suit, a choice that, it was claimed, left the Queen Mother 'mortified.'"[18]

Of course, Cherie Blair's public yawn could have been (and was) slotted into different narratives. One was that she had every right to yawn because Braemer Highland and the Commonwealth Games are so dreadfully boring. (This was the point of view of numerous bloggers.) Another is that the physical process of yawning, from a scientific standpoint, cools down the brain and makes it function more efficiently. Thus, even though it's something we might be embarrassed by, yawning is a normal part of human nature.[19] As Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall have observed, the meaning of an image "is not in the visual sign itself as a self-sufficient entity, nor exclusively in the sociological positions and identities of the audience, but in the articulation between viewer and viewed, between the power of the image to signify and the viewer's capacity to interpret meaning" (p. 4).[20] What Evans and Stuart recognize is that an image (or text for that matter) has the possibility for multiple readings, with each reading dependent on a person's culture and their own personal interpretations.[21] For example, advertising images in Japanese business magazines routinely depict men in groups holding hands—an image understood by many Japanese as heroic, representing teamwork, strength, and togetherness. A different culture might read homophobic meanings into such images, or consider men holding hands a sign of weakness rather than a sign of strength. U.S. advertising images, for instance, tend to frame men as "independent" and "individual" doers and thinkers.

Symbolic signs can be highly charged and emotional simply because they reflect or comment upon culture (ours or others). Thus, they can be a very powerful means of storytelling, bringing a deeper meaning to an image as viewers are asked to make cultural connections to understand the symbolism. Beer advertising, for example, is often loaded with phallic and sexual imagery that are symbolic indicators for a highly sexualized beer culture (in the U.S. but also evident in other countries), not so subtly connecting beer to male sexual conquest. The sexualization of beer imagery is a representation of this culture, but it has also become part of the culture itself. Beer foam, the sweat on the beer bottle, the angle and direction a male model holds the bottle of beer, allusions to the cultural practice of bachelor parties, the disappearance of wedding rings (first you see it, enter the beer, then you don't)—all are typical narrative strategies to connect male sexuality to beer. Symbolic signs can be so charged, however, that they can easily backfire.[22] Take the Danish print ad for Tuborg beer that attempted to represent a bachelor party with beer bottles standing in as "men." Seven beer bottles with labels *on* (signifying dressed men) encircle a beer bottle with no label (signifying a woman just completing a strip tease). The words "bachelor party" are intended to clarify the scene. But still, the label-less beer bottle might be understood as an undressed *man*—an awkward message for the heterosexual target audience Tuborg is intent on reaching.[23]

Like any textual message, visuals can thus be complicated and fraught with controversy. They can be extremely evocative, but also extremely vague. Therefore, context is always a critical part of the story and meaning behind any visual message. This includes who created the image and why; the political, economic, and social circumstances that influence the image's creation and distribution; where the image is placed and how widely it's circulated[24]; the image's historical background and iconic stature[25]; the speed at which one is expected to digest (or has to digest) the image[26]; and of course who will be reading and interpreting (and often misinterpreting) the image.

Truth and Photography.
One of the most controversial aspects of visual imagery is the relative truthfulness of images and the ease with which images can be manipulated. Can visuals be trusted? Some visual theorists, like Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag, have repeatedly raised suspicions over the merit of visual representation as an illegitimate replacement for the "real thing." Writing in the 1930s, German cultural critic Walter Benjamin was appalled that films could replace live theater. For him, "fake" screen performances in front of a "mechanical contrivance" were no match for authentic theater performances, where actors could respond and adapt to a live audience.[27] Sontag made a similar argument with photography. For her, taking a picture was the same thing as capturing something live and committing "sublimated murder."[28] In other words, photographers rendered something real into a representation and thus detached it from the truth. Both of these cultural theorists were deeply troubled by the potential of mass production and consumerism— brought on by industrial-era technology such as film and photography— to erode authentic experience. [it seems that somewhere earlier we need a discussion on how the notion of authenticity is also socially constructed!!] DONE!

But beyond the photo standing in for "real" experience, what if the people in a scene are not even being truthful in their actions when a photograph was taken? For example, in performing the Nazi salute the English soccer team was not being truthful to their real positions about the Nazi regime. French literary theorist Roland Barthes talks about the nature of the pose, and how the presence of a camera—and the fact that one is aware being photographed—affects the captured image, even if the intent is to be "real."[29] But what is a "real" pose? Is it a smile?

In photographs from the mid-1800s, particularly daguerreotypes, notice that people's typical expressions are serious: they don't smile. In the early days of daguerreotype technology, photographic subjects had to keep very still—up to 20 minutes—so the image could fix on the copper plate. Apart from this technical reason, there were also social reasons. Since photography was so new, it was also scary, and many people had their photographs taken with the underlying fear that cameras were capturing their souls. Their serious poses, consequently, masked their inner panic. Smiling was also considered vulgar and lower-class. In fact, a popular expression before a picture was about to be taken was: "Say prunes." This all changed, at least in the United States, when Kodak—trying to aggressively market their new $1 Brownie camera in 1900—sought to make cameras less intimidating and more integrated into people's everyday life. Kodak did this by celebrating the ease of new technology ("You press the button, we do the rest"); associating the consumer camera with the Kodak girl ("so easy even a girl can do it"); teaching Americans to

take pictures of happy events in their lives (celebrations, vacations); and suggesting that the "normal" pose to assume when having one's picture taken was a smile. [30] Kodak brought a new era of documentation into our lives. But what kind of documentation? Even today, we don't tend to take pictures of unhappy moments such as people crying, arguing, or attending funerals, and we tend to smile when people point a camera at us, even though we're not necessarily happy. Are many of the snapshots in our albums, then, fake? What about the photographs taken before Kodak taught us how to smile before the camera: were those blank poses also a misrepresentation of reality?

Photographers, in fact, have been intentionally misrepresenting reality since the earliest days of photography. One of the first concocted photographic poses dates back to the 1830s when Frenchman Hippolyte Bayard, bitter that his photographic process wasn't recognized before Daguerre (who created the now famous daguerreotypes), posed as if he committed suicide.

The very earliest photographers also altered backdrops (and thus altered reality): Civil War photojournalists dragged corpses to different locations and added props to enhance the drama of the battlefield; early "art" photographers dangled items from imperceptible threads so that objects "flew" into the frame, and photographers used all sorts of props to enhance their photographs. During the Great Depression, many of the famous Farm Security Administration photographs taken by Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange that documented the dust bowl and extreme poverty were posed. [31]

Still, as Barthes noted, even if photographs are a mere representation, at least they do offer some sort of proof that the people or objects photographed were there. For example, even if we weren't at the stadium in 1938 to witness the pre-game ceremonies and the infamous Nazi salute, the photograph of the English Football team at least offers some documentation that the English football players were *there*, in Berlin's Olympic stadium. Or were they? Perhaps the stadium was fake, the real backdrop was really just a field in England, and the football players were digitally pasted into the stadium.

http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1234420
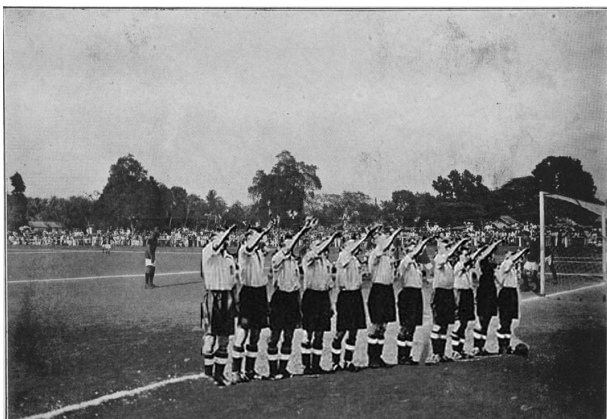
Here we have done the opposite: Photoshopping the British team onto a 1926 soccer match between England and Jamaica/Haiti. The point is that with the proliferation of Photoshop and digital image manipulation techniques over the past twenty years, it's anyone's guess. Part of reading images today means reading *against* the likely possibility that a photograph has been "Photoshopped," or digitally altered. In advertising and promotional imagery especially, nearly all photographs are altered: Bodies are elongated, slimmed, arched, re-textured, and colorized. Men's biceps and pectoral muscles are inflated; women's arms and legs are thinned, wrinkles are ironed out, teeth are altered and whitened, and separate heads are often placed onto different bodies.

Like the manipulation of photographic backgrounds or poses, content manipulation, which most people associate with new digital technology, also dates back to the earliest days of photography.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cottingley_Fairies_1.jpg
This image is in the Public Domain

This 1917 photograph fooled many people who actually thought the fairies, which were superimposed using clever dark-room techniques, were real.

These two photographs of Charles Dickens illustrate that, even in 1867, photographers were altering and tidying publicity photos. Dickens looks disheveled and fatigued in the original photo (Left), taken originally in 1861. He was transformed into a quaffed gentleman in 1867 after numerous touch-ups in a photography studio (Right).[32] Additionally, Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Fidel Castro and Mussolini all saw the value in retouching photographs to adjust the truth. In many cases they retouched people out of photographs who had fallen out of favor with them.[33]

[I found this next series of photos a little confusing – explain better who is being edited out in each one – and maybe separate them with their own captions … these are great, by the way!]OK


A photo of Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin circa 1930. The man removed was a political commissar who evidently fell out of favor with Stalin.
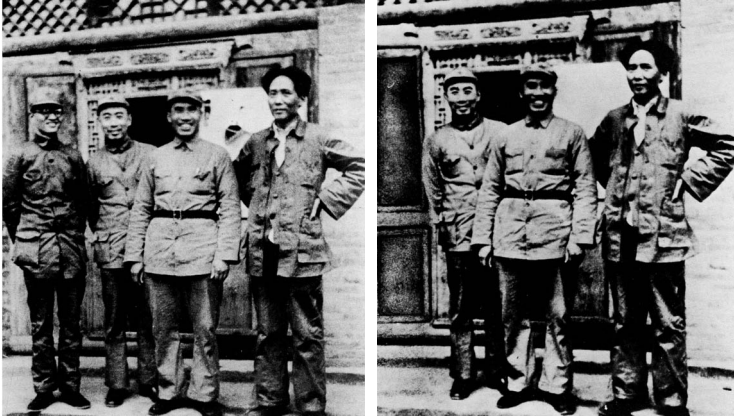
In this photo taken in 1936, Chinese communist leader Mao Tse-Tung (far right), had Po Ku (far left) removed from this photograph after he also fell out of favor.
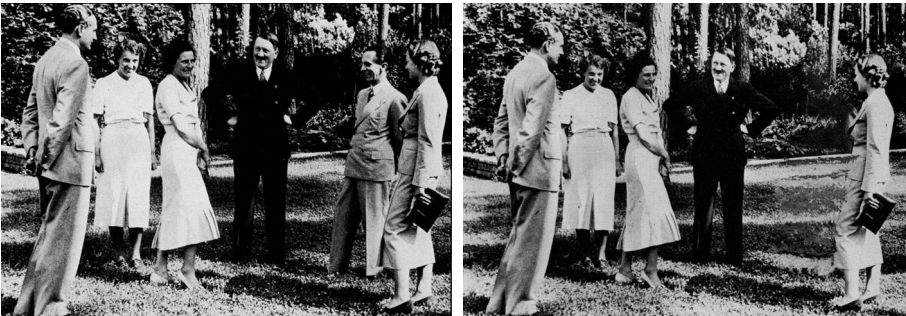
The photograph on the left, taken circa 1937, shows Hitler with Joseph Goebbels (second from right), who at the time was Hitler's propaganda minister and one of the most prominent members of the Nazi Party. It is uncertain why he was removed retouched out of the original photo.
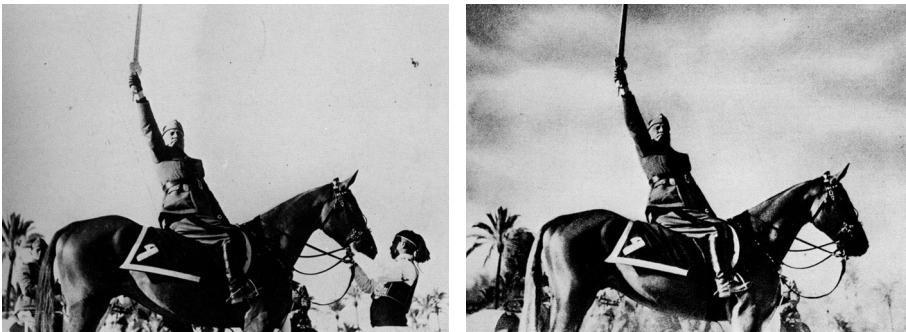
In this photograph, taken in 1942, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini benefits from some public relations truth-reconstruction—anything to make him look commanding.

Retouching photos by hand has, of course, been replaced by far more sophisticated digital techniques, which has generated vigorous discussions about the ethical nature of Photoshop manipulation. Slimming down already too-thin female models or adding more pronounced washboard abs to perfectly fit male models create false ideas about beauty. One study conducted at the University of Missouri concluded that women have to look at the highly-manipulated images within fashion magazines for only one-to-three minutes to experience a drop in self-esteem.[34] "Surprisingly, we found that weight was not a factor," the study's director Laurie Mintz, observed. "Viewing these pictures was just bad for everyone," It's also no surprise that __ percent of U.S. girls are obsessed with weight loss, and that too many high school boys use dangerous steroids to add muscle. We are awash with highly distorted images of what it means to be attractive, which build up our anxiety levels and encourage us to buy beauty and health products to "fix" the

problem, which is ultimately our inability to ever measure up. Digital manipulation in advertising plays into the most egregious aspects of our consumer culture—when products are marketed under false pretenses. How ethical is it for a beauty product company to fake anti-wrinkle cream results in their before-and-after images?

Photoshop is also used prolifically in public relations materials, and, like with advertising, stirs up controversy about the ethical nature of digital manipulation. How ethical is it for a university's public relations department, for example, to add images (via Photoshop) of minority students in their admissions brochure in order to sell the notion of campus diversity to donors or prospective students? And how ethical is it for a government to publicly release an image of a missile launch that has an additional missile image digitally inserted (as in the case of Iran in 2009)?[35] Today, these practices are routine and problematic, especially when digitally-altered documents are disseminated throughout the news media and are advanced as "fact."

Indeed, the increased ease and application of Photoshop has even encroached into the practice of photojournalism itself -- a field or profession in which the photographic image is considered a true or accurate reflection of the "real." In recent years, some photojournalists have been caught tweaking images for various reasons. Some have strived for a more dramatic composition (and thus front-page status) by compositing two photographs together or eliminating unwanted elements from the frame, thus altering the assumed reality. Others have color-corrected photos to, as they say, more adequately reflect what their eye actually saw at the time they snapped the picture. Since cameras can't as easily adapt to the green hue of fluorescent lights, for example, or for the competing exposures of a dark inside and a brighter outdoors, some photojournalists defend the use of Photoshop because it makes their images *more* realistic. To date, the mainstream press has responded to these practices by adopting a zero-tolerance position on any kind digital manipulation or posing—so as to protect the integrity of their product.[36] Indeed, numerous media establishments have fired photojournalists for tampering with their photos—even those who have tried to make their photos more "realistic." For example, the *Charlotte Observer* suspended Patrick Schneider in 2006 for adjusting the background of a silhouetted firefighter against the morning sun. Schneider argued that he had underexposed the original photograph and was trying to recapture what his eyes really saw. The *Observer*, however, cited a strict policy against altering colors from the original scene photographed. Meanwhile, the blogosphere has exploded with "fake or photo" or "fauxtography"[37] detection websites, ratting out unethical photojournalists or uncannily manipulative public relations, and alerting readers to the easy manipulation of journalistic photos in the media.

All of these concerns have led Fred Ritchin of the New York School of Photography to create a symbol for digital manipulation, and to advocate that all photographers acknowledge any image tampering in their advertising, publicity, art, or photojournalism.
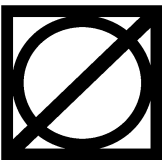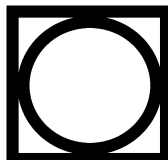
Manipulated   Non Manipulated

But perhaps the real problem is simply the intent to mislead. As filmmaker and photography critic Errol Morris notes, the extreme response from the mainstream press to ban any kind of photo manipulation is grounded in the notion that there is something true about photography in the first place. [such a good point!] "It allows the false assumption: if we can just determine that this photograph wasn't Photoshopped, then it must be 'true,'" he writes. "But Photoshop serves as a reminder to us of something that we should have known all along: photographs can deceive."[38] Indeed, an unaltered photograph, like the "objective" treatment of a news story, is no proof of a particular reality. Like any text, it is a glimpse of a moment in time, an interpretation reflecting both the photographer's point of view and the subject's. The opposition to digital manipulation—while helpful in developing a critical eye in reading images—also gives us a false sense of consciousness about the supposed truth of any visual image that has not been perceptibly altered.

        To fully read an image, then, we need to understand the *context* in which the image was produced, as well as the context in which it continues to exist. Context can include the way the photo or image was made, who made it and why; the historical circumstances under which it was made; the extent to which the image was circulated, altered, and reconfigured, and the way the image continues to be interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals and publics. For example, when George W. Bush, then the Governor of Texas, was videotaped in the mid-1990s flipping his middle finger to the cameraman as he sat in a local television studio, the real meaning of the clip was lost as it circulated (without proper context) over the next decade. The image was true (it happened) but it was also false. Without proper context, one couldn't understand the real story: that Bush was joking around before (not during) a live public television appearance, and before he thought the cameras were rolling.

        More often than not, the context surrounding a photograph or image exists in written form. Barthes has argued that an image is forever dependent on verbal text for comprehension.[39] [no parentheses here for Barthes – this is too good a point, one that should be made more often] As such, an image's context often appears as a caption below or beside it, or within the pages of a book, the news media, or a website. The Nazi salute photograph, for example, first appeared in newspapers with various captions and accompanying articles explaining the event. It was later reinterpreted (and given deeper meaning) through the autobiographies of at least two people who were there: national team caption Eddie Hapgood (a usually-reserved leader who reportedly told officials to "stick the Nazi salute where the sun don't shine"), and younger player Stanley Matthews (who would eventually become one of England's most legendary soccer players). [40] Without these verbal accounts—for example, if we were to discover the Nazi salute photo in a box somewhere—we might be at a loss to varied interpretations and stories that add context.. We could infer that the black and white photo is a historical record of the Nazi era (assuming we know something about the Nazi era). On its own, however, the solitary photograph does not adequately communicate the historical turmoil in which it was created.

        The photograph would also not communicate the fact that it went out of circulation for 65 years, and was resurrected it for public consumption by a BBC documentary in 2003. Again, the image took on new meaning and new stories emerged to add context. Recast as the "Moment of Shame" in the British news media and in the blogosphere, the picture and one story behind it have become a reference point for understanding government conciliation in the face of power and authoritarian rule. "That picture of impressionable footballers obeying orders from mutton-headed apparatchiks went round the world and became a lasting source of shame to this country," wrote British columnist David Mellor in 2008.[41] Without mooring or a back story, a photograph is thus a slim measure of evidence that something happened, and can have a huge range of interpretations.

        If interpreting a photograph is often dependent on verbal descriptions, we must be critical readers of these accounts as well. Captions, accompanying articles, and autobiographical accounts surrounding a photograph can be misleading or utterly false, and quotes can be taken out of context. For example, Eddie Hapgood's personal recollections about his team's locker room dissent before the 1938 soccer match, which appear in his published autobiography (1946), may have been shaped by historical hindsight. Was his own visceral protest what *really* happened, or did he perhaps alter his story after the photograph was published, after the British press made a big deal out of the photo (initially blaming Germany for requiring the salute), and after WWII revealed the horrible truths about Nazi Germany?

Conclusion

To successfully read an image then, we need to understand:
- the *compositional forces* (either intended or unintended by the image's creator).
- the various *signs* within the image that are either evident, learned, or culturally imbued,
- the possibilities of *posing* or *digital manipulation* (especially when photographs are concerned),
- and, perhaps most important, the current and historical *contexts* in which these images were produced, as well as the context in which they continue to exist. In fact, the verbal texts and multiple stories that grow up around images and photos add levels of meaning that help more fully comprehend any piece of visual culture.

Every choice a creator makes in terms of framing, content placement, manipulation (whether ethical or unethical), and textual mooring affects the way the image operates in our social discourse. Visual literacy is

a way we understand the stories behind and about the image, and attempt to make sense of our image-laden culture.

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[4] Cite source that says it appeared in nearly every British newspaper.

[5] Hapgood, Eddie (1946). *Football Ambassador.* United Kingdom: Clevedon Books.

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[9] http://www.anomalytv.com/site/category/torture/

[10] Itten, Johannes, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color* (1974), p. 120.

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[12] Ann Marie Barry, (1997). Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 201.

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[14] According to German sociologist Tilman Allert, the raised-arm salute, accompanied by the words "Heil Hitler!", became a compulsory greeting under the Nazi regime by 1933. In German, "heil" could be understood as "hail" but also made reference to health, safety, and best wishes. Thus, saying "Heil Hitler" implicitly meant "health to Hitler" but also framed Hitler as a Supreme Being who could in turn grant good health to a greeter's recipient. Civil servants had to both say "Heil Hitler" and to end all paper correspondence this way. Storm troopers were required to say "Heil Hitler" while simultaneously clicking their boots. From 1937 onward, Jews were banned from saying "Heil Hitler," so the greeting began to indicate racial superiority and German unity. Posters along German streets proclaimed "Germans use the German Greeting!" which implied that if you didn't use the greeting you were *not* German, an outcast, and thus an enemy, which reinforced nationalism and reduced individual German's sense of moral responsibility. For more information, see Allert, Tilman (2009). *The Hitler Salute*. New York: Macmillan/Picador translated by Jefferson Chase.

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[16] Barthes, Roland (1974). *S/Z: An Essay*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 62.

[17] Keep you awakehttp://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-465872/Carry-yawning--help-awake.html; Commonwealth: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1552767/Tony-and-Her-Majesty-an-uneasy-relationship.html
Braemar: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1561915/Gordon-Brown-spurns-Braemar-tradition.html

[18] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1552767/Tony-and-Her-Majesty-an-uneasy-relationship.html

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[37] Craig Johnson, creator and manager of the website "Little Green Footballs," is credited with having come up with the term "fauxtography." See http://morris.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/11/photography-as-a-weapon/

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