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CHAPTER 13

Dodging Truths and Burning Facts

Visual Literacy and Critical Thinking in the Photography Classroom

Larissa Garcia and Jessica Labatte

Introduction

Today, amid a turbulent political climate, the dominance of social media, and the prevalence of fake news, images can be weaponized and used to incite, while challenging our notions of truth and authenticity. Because of the proliferation of visuals in our daily lives and the presence of a digital camera in many pockets, visual literacy is an important skill for the global citizen to develop. For the photography student, whose goal is to become proficient in visual language and develop an artistic practice, it is essential. However, much of photographic education focuses on the technical skills and aesthetic aspects of creating images, with the reading of images and critical analysis relegated to critiques. Intentional visual literacy instruction connected to specific photographic assignments and taught in collaboration with a librarian can help students develop a critical approach to their photographic work. With some modification, this instruction also can be adapted for those outside of the photography classroom.

This chapter describes a collaboration between a librarian and photography professor to integrate visual literacy instruction into two courses of the photography program at a public research university in the Midwest. In an intermediate digital photography course, students consider images of “altered realities” ranging from early photojournalism to current events and practice articulating the photographic elements used to
influence our notions of truth and authenticity. In an advanced course on alternative processes, students learn historical printing techniques, visit the university’s archives to examine physical examples, and engage in discussions about the nature of archives and representation in the early days of photography. These activities, connected to specific course assignments, emphasize an acute understanding of the photographic choices used to create a message as foundational to artistic practice, give students an opportunity to refine their visual literacy skills needed to effectively participate in studio critiques, and underscore the visual discernment required when not only creating, but also encountering images in the classroom and beyond.

**Visual Literacy and Photographic Education**

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines visual literacy as “a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media." Or, simply put, it is the “ability to read, write and create visual images.” Photography is a visual art; therefore, visual literacy is foundational to photographic practice, with the idea of “reading images” appearing frequently in the photography education literature. For example, Shlomo Lee Abrahmov and Miky Ronen assert that photographic instruction should include “the development of ‘reading’ skills as well as the practice of ‘writing’ skills in which both the reading of images and the making of them are regarded as informed activities.” The practice of reading images is essential because of the deliberate nature of what is represented; for example, photographers not only make specific choices about the subject of a photograph, but also the framing (what is included and excluded in the image) and the composition (how elements are arranged in the frame). Therefore, as Terry Barrett states, “We need to teach people to look at a photograph as a constructed image of the world, rather than as a chunk of the world itself.”

The ACRL Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (VL Framework) states that “visuals are created by people.” As a result, an understanding of “the cultural, social, and historical contexts” of an image is an important element of visual literacy and “requires deconstructing and interpreting different elements and contexts of visual communications in order to comprehend their aesthetic, evidentiary, and persuasive functions.” James T. Brooke notes that “appreciation of the photograph will be greatly enhanced and intensified if its place in the continuum of photography, art, history, philosophy, etc., can be brought into play.” Daniel Rubinstein also emphasizes consideration of the systems that create images, noting that photography education should “engage all producers and users of images in a dialogue about the ways in which images are being manufactured, interpreted, distributed and stored and about the ideologies that are being furnished within these processes.” These discussions of photographic
education underscore the need for photography students to be able to interpret and analyze images and visual media for meaning. While visual literacy may not be the term frequently used in this literature, the inherent relationship between what we mean by visual literacy, or the reading of images, and photographic education is apparent.

Although visual literacy is clearly essential to photographic practice, little is written about how to teach visual literacy to photography students beyond discussions about advancing learning through critiques. For example, Brooke provides a checklist of four stages for analyzing photographs: description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, and this model has become a guide for many photographic educators in how they approach critique. Glenn Rand, Jane Alden Stevens, and Garin Horner refer to this framework in their discussion of critiques, explaining that when we discuss reading pictures, we are first and foremost talking about how the structure of the image portrays the meaning we will gain from the image. In the analysis, it is helpful to show how changes in the design modify how the image is seen and thus what the image can convey.

Here, the emphasis is again on interpretation and identification of photographic choices made to express meaning. However, beyond what aspects to consider during critiques, there is little guidance on how to teach students these more complex analytical skills. Therefore, it is important to incorporate visual literacy instruction that includes specific assignments and activities that scaffold, or intentionally sequence, learning. In this way, students have an opportunity to develop their visual literacy skills, not only to create sophisticated work, but also to effectively participate in studio critiques.

The Context

Northern Illinois University (NIU) is a public research university located in rural DeKalb, Illinois, sixty-five miles west of Chicago, with a total school enrollment of just over 16,000. NIU’s School of Art and Design has both undergraduate and graduate degree programs in art, art history, and art education and offers both a bachelor of fine arts (BFA) and a master of fine arts (MFA) in a range of studio art disciplines. As of the 2021–2022 academic year, photography was the school’s fourth largest BFA program, after visual communications, illustration, and time arts. The authors met during the new faculty orientation when Garcia started as the art subject specialist librarian and Labatte began as lead faculty member for the photography program. While Labatte’s own artistic practice includes multidisciplinary research, she struggled to teach her students similarly productive research habits. Therefore, our initial collaboration sought to develop a library session that would teach information literacy skills and emphasize the importance of research in the creative process. What began as a one-shot library session in two advanced photography courses evolved into a research assignment, two library sessions, and librarian participation in one set of
studio critiques for each course, and eventually resulted in a curriculum mapping project that would embed information literacy instruction in five of the six required courses for the BFA in photography. Visual literacy, as a related information literacy skill, is reflected in the information literacy objective “interpret, analyze, and evaluate images for context, meaning, and quality” and is addressed with specific assignments and corresponding instruction in two courses in the program discussed below.

**Truth and Authenticity in Photography**

ARTD 419 is an intermediate course where students build on the basic skills acquired in beginning photography to gain a more “thorough understanding of digital photography workflow” and create works with sophisticated digital compositing tools. In addition, students continue to develop their ability “to discuss photographs for their formal and conceptual qualities.” During curriculum mapping, we consulted Standard Three of the Visual Literacy Competency Standards, which states that “the visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media,” and matched one of its performance indicators—the ability to identify “the physical, technical, and design components of an image”—to the course objectives. The learning outcomes for this indicator, which focus on the technical and aesthetic components of an image, were useful in developing the assignment and corresponding learning activities. In addition, several knowledge practices and dispositions from the “Learners practice visual discernment and criticality” theme of the VL Framework, published since we taught this course, align to our instructional content and student learning activities. These include “examine visuals for signs of alteration, such as cropping or use of digital filters, and consider the intent and consequences of any changes made” and “discern the role of visuals in the spread and acceptance of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation.”

The main assignment for the course, Digital Conspiracies and Altered Realities, is inspired by the contentious political climate and prevalence of fake news, which we define as news stories where “the story itself is fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes,” and incorporates both technical and visual literacy skills. Students explore notions of photographic truth and challenge Roland Barthes’s famous assertion that “in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there.” Because processes such as retouching are not purely technical, but can also be deliberately deceptive, students play with the idea of authenticity to create works that not only make the audience question what they see but also attempt to convince the viewer of an alternative reality. The project is evaluated on digital skills, such as retouching or compositing techniques, and on how well the visual elements support the message.

Several learning components scaffold students’ visual literacy learning in preparation for the altered realities assignment. Students read a chapter from Fred Ritchin’s *After Photography* and the professor leads a class discussion about the various ways digital
retouching of photographic imagery has influenced our understanding of the world. From seemingly harmless alterations, such as the repositioning of the Giza pyramids to fit a vertical composition on the cover of *National Geographic*, to more sinister manipulations, such as *Time Magazine’s* darkening of O. J. Simpson’s skin tone in a mugshot on the magazine’s cover, these examples sound alarm bells for our reliance on “photographic truth” and its implications for society.

For the corresponding library session, we co-present a lecture and facilitate a learning activity to identify photographic choices that convey meaning. We present several “fake” photographs from past and current events, which the librarian updates for each instance of the course to include the timeliest images. In one example, we compare the 2017 cropped photograph of Donald Trump’s inauguration released by his administration to the original photo from the National Park Service that shows a sparser crowd. In another example image from the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, a man with a beanie hat, goggles, and a green mask stands with a military-style rifle in front of what appears to be a smashed storefront. The image was published on the Fox News home page with stories about the riots in Seattle and Capitol Hill’s autonomous zone. After discussion about the different visual elements of the photograph, the source of the photo, and the message conveyed, we reveal that the image was digitally manipulated to combine three images taken in different areas at different times. The professor identifies the specific techniques used to manipulate the images, noting how these alterations can revise our understanding of events.

After the lecture, students practice identification of visual elements and interpretation with an activity that focuses on images from the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. We give students two headlines from news coverage: “Trump Mob Storms Capitol,” and “U.S. Capitol under Siege.” They must find an image online that corresponds with each headline, identify the specific visual elements that help to convey the message, and determine whether the source of the photo adds additional meaning or context. The session ends with a class discussion about the images students found.

With the readings, class examples, and library activity in mind, students experiment with technical tools and the messages conveyed through their alterations to create a convincing “altered reality.” Submitted work for the project range in techniques used and topics explored. In one example (figure 13.1), a student juxtaposes two unlikely elements—scale and physical reality—to create a metaphor for the delicate dance some individuals face when navigating institutional power structures. Another student image explores fantasy worlds where anxieties inspired by chaotic current events manifest in horrific narratives or playful escapes from our contemporary moment (figure 13.2). Because many students find it challenging to create images with specific intended meanings, by intentionally scaffolding visual literacy learning elements, we ensure that students are better prepared to engage with the conceptual considerations of their technical work.
Figure 13.1
Example of student work submitted for the Digital Conspiracies and Altered Realities assignment in ARTD 419. (*Longing* by Ashley Martinez, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.)

Figure 13.2
Example of student work submitted for the Digital Conspiracies and Altered Realities assignment in ARTD 419. (*Timeless Wonder* by Kate Seimetz, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.)
Archives and Historical Processes: An Opportunity for Critical Visual Literacy

ARTD 460: Experimental and Alternative Photography is an advanced technical skills course that focuses on alternative printing techniques. In addition to developing proficiency, students learn about “the technological innovations within photography and their relationship to the creative and conceptual developments of the medium.” The term *alternative process* typically refers to techniques other than digital. Because these historical methods have been revived in recent years to create alternatives to the dominant narratives represented in early photography, students also learn about the history of photography. Standard Three of the *Visual Literacy Competency Standards* was, again, a touchstone during curriculum mapping, and we identified a relevant performance indicator that matched well with the course: “The visually literate student situates an image in its cultural, social, and historical contexts.” We used the learning outcomes for this indicator to develop assignments and corresponding instructions that asked students to explore “representations of gender, ethnicity, and other cultural or social identifiers in images” and investigate “how the audience, context, and interpretation of an image may have changed over time.”

The visual literacy assignment for this course is Annotating Images, a four-part iterative project, inspired by Nigel Poor’s *The San Quentin Project* and Wendy Red Star’s 1880 Crow Peace Delegation series. Students practice slow looking and physically write on matte inkjet prints of images, using their notes from one photo to develop search terms and find a source for the next image. They start with a photograph they created, then locate an image from a book in the library, and then choose an image from an institutional or public archive. Finally, students use search terms identified in their archival image to locate a relevant article in the discovery tool and use keywords, concepts, and themes from the article as instructions for “revising and remaking” the first image they used for the assignment.

Again, scaffolded learning components prepare students for the assignment. First, students learn about the power structures present in early photography and archives through assigned course readings. In “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” Rodney G. S. Carter examines archival silences, how they are manifested, and their implications for the groups that are excluded. In Abaki Beck’s interview with Wendy Red Star, a Native American artist who uses archival images in her work, Red Star discusses historical representations of Indigenous people in the United States. The class also looks at work from contemporary artists, such as Antonne Dolezal and Laura Shipley, who use and respond to archival photographs. In class discussions led by the photography professor, students consider the impact of colonization and industrialization, the gaps in representation, agency in photographic portraiture, and the notion of contextual authority.
To complement course readings and examples, the librarian developed a series of three library sessions to help prepare students for the assignment. In the first session, students visit the library’s Regional History Center and University Archives to see and touch materials they have read about in class. They get to use a stereograph card to see a three-dimensional image, observe the shimmering reflection on the silver surface of a daguerreotype, and browse through cyanotype and tintype portraits. Because most of the images include only white subjects, the curator explains how materials were and currently are collected for the archive, noting that historical exclusions not only result in a lack of representation but also perpetuate distrust and resistance among diverse people when they are asked to donate materials. The library’s special collections also include the forty-volume set of Edward S. Curtis’s *The North American Indian,* the work referred to in the Red Star interview. The volumes, which include platinum prints, are charged with the uneven power dynamics of the photographer and the group represented. As Beck notes in their conversation with Red Star,

> These images are thought of as a glimpse into the past; they did not necessarily represent Native Americans as they were, but how whites wanted them to be remembered. They craved the imagery and a romanticized American past, but not the Indian himself.

In the next session, we focus on the process of annotating images, developing search terms, and finding books using the library’s discovery tool. As a class, we look at a digital image of an 1892 photo entitled *Pullman Band Leads a Parade up the Hill on 111th Street.* Students spend time making notes about the image, considering the metadata and the photographic elements that provide meaning and context or inspire questions. The librarian helps students use their notes to brainstorm potential search terms (such as *Pullman, marching bands, parades, the Gilded Age*) and then demonstrates how to use them to find books. After the class example, students are placed in groups and given a matte inkjet print of a historical image to annotate. They develop search terms from their annotations, find relevant sources in the discovery tool, and then retrieve a book to share with the class. With this activity, students practice what they are expected to do for the first part of the course assignment.

In the final library session, the librarian demonstrates how to find articles in the database Academic Search Complete using search terms from the previous session. Students read the first few paragraphs of an article from the search results, and the professor leads discussion about how phrases or concepts from the text could inspire the revision of an image. To practice the process, students browse through art magazines, choose an article to skim, and then brainstorm search terms based on the text to use in the database. Because developing search terms is challenging for students, we intentionally provide another opportunity to practice this skill. During this exercise, students often discover new vocabulary and unfamiliar fields of research that inspire a different way of thinking about their themes. One student found the academic field of “feminist humor
studies” (figure 13.3), while another student learned about nostalgia and the “Chinatown aesthetic” of early twentieth-century architecture (figure 13.4).

**Figure 13.3**

**Figure 13.4**
Example of student work submitted for the Annotated Images assignment in ARTD 460. (Image 1: *Illusion* by Qiming Ruan, 2021, courtesy of the artist; Image 2: Annotated image of Fig.9.2 *Disneyland, California, 1979* by Tseng Kwong Chi from the “East Meets West” expeditionary series, 1979–89, courtesy of Tseng Kwong Chi © Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc.; Image 3: Annotated image of *Chinatown, San Francisco, California* by Carol M. Highsmith, courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division; Image 4: *Strange* by Qiming Ruan, 2021, courtesy of the artist).

With specific assignments and focused library sessions that both model and allow for the practice of research skills, we empower students to strategically explore innovative ideas. The resulting creative work often exhibits deeper reflection and complexity. For example, many students focused a critical lens on their own histories, exploring their artistic or family archives for the course projects. One student, struck by the concept of silence in archives,
created an album of their own family photos and photographs purchased from thrift stores. During critiques, they explained that the found portraits were valued for their frames, not the images still inside, representing a loss in relationships and in personal significance. Through intentional, scaffolded visual literacy instruction, students practice, question, and experiment with the conceptual messages of their work in more complex ways.

**Conclusion**

In our experience, scaffolding visual literacy learning better prepares students to think and talk conceptually about their work. The combination of assigned readings that critically discuss visual concepts and focused library sessions where visual analysis and information literacy skills needed for course assignments are modeled and practiced allows students to progressively build their visual competency with guidance and support. Students not only learn the techniques used to construct an image, but also how the message is explicitly and implicitly conveyed in these choices. They practice critical analysis and how to express their ideas verbally, essential skills for participation in studio critiques, for as Terry Barrett notes, “To interpret an image is to respond to it in language.” Most importantly, students gain the confidence to strategically explore new ideas and avenues of research, which often results in more complex work.

For photography students, visual literacy is more than just foundational to photography practice. In his book *New Ways of Seeing: The Democratic Language of Photography,* Grant Scott contends:

> The development of visual literacy allows young photographers to explain photography to those who recognize its existence but look no further than the image itself. The young photographer then becomes a conduit outside the photographic community for a reinterpretation of photography as language ...as a result, studying photography not only becomes something more than creating photographs, it becomes an essential learning process in understanding global communication.42

In a world where digital communication is the norm and images are used to incite and challenge what we know to be true, fluency in the language of images is crucial for communication and for democracy. As the VL Framework states, “Visual literacy learners must cultivate critical evaluation skills for creating, viewing, consuming, and disseminating visuals through persistent and purposeful negotiations with visual media over time.” As trained interpreters of visual language, photographers can serve as guides through the disinformation landscape with the power to reveal deeper truths about our world and ourselves.
Notes


27. Fred Ritchin, After Photography (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

Bibliography


