The Importance of Art and Visual Media in American Studies

Christine Satory & Sania Siraj

Abstract

Images—whether they are fine art, advertising, or photographs—are never impartial and objective. American history is replete with the consequences of the political use of imagery. There is growing evidence that visual media constructs cultural cohesion, nationality, patriotism, social status, and identity. The human brain acquires seventy-five percent of information through images and that visual learning is far more effective than conventional learning methods. Higher education has not been spared from this global upheaval. In the United States, scholars across academic disciplines recognize that traditional educational structures are not working, and more universities are moving away from disconnected academic curricula toward interdisciplinary ones. A course on the American Dream is a perfect example. Norman Rockwell, a masterful visual communicator, understood how to create powerful messages that evoked strong emotional responses through painting the experiences of ordinary Americans. The combination of visual and textual language in American Studies courses leads to an astute analysis of contemporary American culture and governmental policies. Visual literacy must become integrated throughout all academic disciplines to counteract the reduction of complex topics and competing ideologies to social media memes. The curriculum most prepared to do this is American Studies.

Christine Satory is Associate Professor of Art, Visual Communication & Graphic Design School of Art, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, U.S.A
Sania Siraj is Lecturer at Department of Art and Design, Visual Communication, Graphic Design, History of Art, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar, KPK.

Christine Satory & Sania Siraj

Introduction

Images—whether they are fine art, advertising, or photographs—are never impartial and objective. Combining images with finely-crafted words and disseminating them through mass media plays an implicit role in what we think and how we think. Images visualize ideologies expressing the beliefs, morals, and worldviews of the person who creates them. Furthermore, because images are culturally-dependent, they are filtered through the viewers' familiar traditions, personal experiences, knowledge, and worldview. When a publicized image confirms the viewers' beliefs, the image is understood to represent factual truth and reality. However, images that confront the viewers' cherished beliefs elicit reactionary emotions. Antithetical images, and the culture that produces them, are judged as inferior and obscene (Pater 2016).

For example, American history is replete with the consequences of the political use of imagery. One of the most notable examples is images used to persuade and incite before the American Civil War. Political proponents of the Union and Confederacy transformed their convictions into political cartoons using dehumanizing visual satire. People reacted according to their pre-existing beliefs when these cartoons were published, with devastating results. Families split apart, sons fought on both sides, and citizens endured the bloodiest war on American soil. Today, numerous citizens hold firmly to vicious stereotypes of the "other" from those political cartoons.

Researchers and scientists (only) are now understanding the power of images. There is growing evidence that visual media constructs cultural cohesion, nationality, patriotism, social status, and identity. Moreover, it visualizes societal norms, traditions, belief systems, stereotypes, and racism. There are countless historical

examples where visual media demonstrates an extraordinary power over text to motivate, unite or incite (Stephens 1998). Above all and most disturbing, history demonstrates that visuals can instantly create a collective identity and entrench participants in groupthink when paired with concise, incendiary text.

Why is visual media so powerful?

According to a recent study by MIT neuroscientists, the human brain processes and understands images between 13 milliseconds and 80 milliseconds. MIT professor of brain and cognitive sciences Mary Potter stated that the brain uses vision to extrapolate concepts and create meaning (Trafton 2014). Furthermore, research has proven that the brain acquires seventy-five percent of information through images and that visual learning is far more effective than conventional text-based learning where reading comprehension is emphasized. (Raiyn 2016). Even now, the human brain operates for survival by comparing past experiences with new ones. Familiar experiences equal safety; unfamiliar ones are dangerous. Moreover, because the brain is hardwired to interpret experiences symbolically—with sight being the most dominant sense— humans subconsciously developed a culturally-specific visual language (Pater 2016, pp. 96-99). Therefore, everyone intuitively assigns meaning to the elements of art—the visual qualities of shapes, lines, textures, values, and colors. Additionally, researchers in the cognitive sciences have found that approximately seventy to eighty percent of human communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication is culture-specific and roughly broken into three types: body language, visual appearance, and visual artifacts. Body language consists of facial expressions, eye contact, hand and body gestures, posture, paralinguistics (tone of voice, volume, pitch, and inflection), touch, and proxemics (the distance between people when interacting). Visual appearance comprises clothing, adornment, hairstyle, and facial or body

alterations, while visual artifacts refer to tools and the built environment.

Human brains identify, assess, and draw conclusions from visual stimuli in milliseconds. Deciphering textual stimuli is considerably more complicated than visuals and therefore takes more time to process and understand. For example, reading English is a skill broken into many steps. Here are a few: 1. Learning that specific shapes are letters; 2. Understanding that each letter corresponds to a sound (phonics); 3. Visually grouping letters into words and deciphering the meaning of the words; 4. Ignoring individual letter shapes and focusing on the word and its meaning; 5. Learning grammar and syntax, then applying it; and lastly, decoding the meaning of the text. Further complicating this brain-processing task is the ability to read quickly by grouping and chunking textual information while decoding the message (Tetlan and Marschalek 2016 pp. 70-74).

Moreover, cognitive scientists have identified other aspects that affect reading narrative text, such as attentional capacity, cognitive overload, prior knowledge, and the reading brain's ability to transfer information from short-term memory to long-term memory. The brain compensates by slowing down when decoding text versus images. When confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts, the brain processes the text even slower or becomes overwhelmed and shuts down.

This complex brain process is only partly why low adult literacy rates by different sources widely vary. The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics Data Point, *Adult Literacy in the United States,* reveals that "43.0 million U.S. Adults possess low literacy skills" (*Adult Literacy in the United States* 2019), while Jonathan Rothwell, Ph.D. Principal Economist, Gallup, states, "roughly half of U.S. adults, aged 16 to 74 years old — 54% or 130 million people — lack literacy proficiency" (Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy).[i]

Other reasons for low literacy rates vary from economic status and food insecurity to the quality of elementary education. While researchers are hesitant to cite social media and smartphones as a definitive reason for the decline in reading comprehension, they acknowledge that technology further complicates finding solutions to illiteracy.

Meanwhile, the human brain naturally perceives and understands images almost instantaneously—thus bypassing logical, linear thinking. In comparison, deciphering text uses a linear thinking process dependent on multiple factors, from social, economic, and educational circumstances to physiological ones. Therefore, it is easier for brains to decode and understand images, which explains why humans develop beliefs based on what they see.

Historical Advancements in Communication and the Enduring Power of Images

Throughout history, three innovations in human communication impacted social order, economic progress, and technological advancements on an unprecedented scale: the development of writing systems from rudimentary pictorial symbols, the development of the moveable-type printing press circa 1440, and the Industrial Revolution's improvements and innovations in communication technologies.

Writing systems codified governmental structures and created an intellectual revolution by preserving knowledge for future generations. Moveable-type printing during the Middle Ages impacted social power structures through the mass production of disparate textual ideas; literacy increased, intellectual diversity expanded, and power dynamics collapsed —then adapted. During the Industrial Revolution, mechanized printing accelerated literacy rates, and mass-produced products established the need for

visually-distinctive advertising. These advancements in communication evolved slowly, with each phase forming an adjudication process to stem the flow of information, particularly socially-disruptive radical ideas. Nevertheless, they drastically changed social and governmental structures, including cross-cultural ones. Each time the reach of human communication expanded, previously insular cultures were exposed to new ideas and worldviews, causing cultural and cross-cultural misunderstanding, social unrest, and conflict.

Humans are now at the beginning of the fourth and most disruptive development in communication: the internet and social media. For the first time, everyone can express their opinions, ideas, and beliefs, and in a millisecond, these textual and visual opinions are globally disseminated. National, political, and ideological opinions are no longer private conversations—conducted with educated civil discourse. Meanwhile, the adjudication process for mass communication has disintegrated. Replacing adjudicated articles are social media memes and click-bait articles featuring provocative images and biased TikTok videos—all created to elicit a public reaction. Within 13 milliseconds and 80 milliseconds, millions of people are extrapolating context and meaning from these images (Trafton 2014). Civil discourse and measured, logical discussion of ideas—in person— is no longer the public's preferred method of communication; instead, complex ideas reduced to few words paired with striking, biased images have replaced rational discourse. Like the development of writing systems and the mass production of textual and visual content, the expansion of human communication through the internet is disrupting and altering social, cultural, political, and governmental power structures and civil order.

Higher education has not been spared from this global upheaval. In the United States, scholars across academic disciplines recognize that traditional educational structures are not working, and more universities are moving away from disconnected academic

curricula toward interdisciplinary ones (Morgan 2021). Consequently, there is a growing consensus throughout academia that interdisciplinary knowledge construction, including visual literacy, is critical to solving complex problems. Thus, the future of education appears to be moving toward the American Studies curricular design.

The Importance of American Art and Visual Media in American Studies

"Images and visual artifacts do things. They are political forces in themselves. They often shape politics as much as they depict it." (Bleiker 2018)

Over the past 20 years, a growing body of researchers has recognized that higher education needs significant structural and curriculum revision. Many are now promoting the combination of interdisciplinary programs in specialized disciplines. The impetus for this change is recognizing that contemporary national and international problems are complex and solving them requires a balance of divergent and convergent thinking.

American Studies is one of the few programs that provide an interdisciplinary curriculum where students study diverse viewpoints on the same topic. This approach leads to holistic, nuanced knowledge, which hones critical thinking and analysis. International relations, economics, history, politics, social issues, and literature are the subjects of many academic articles, books, and research in American Studies. However, art history and visual media courses in American Studies are only beginning to be recognized as integral to research across all academic disciplines.

Historically, art history courses taught 19th-century concepts of objective artistic quality designed to maintain the social structure

of the high-brow (ruling classes) and the low-brow (commoners) (Freedman 2003). Art historians minimized the social impact of art and ignored graphic design, advertising, and visual culture. Instead, educational content focused on fine art's visual aesthetics, compositional design, and technical prowess. By divorcing aesthetics from content and ignoring the power of visual culture, these art history courses reinforced non-artist academicians' and the public's beliefs that art was socially irrelevant (Freedman 2003). The study and critique of visual culture rose from cultural critics, perceptive graphic designers, sociologists, linguists, and media critics. For example, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's seminal book, *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), resonated with young graphic designers, college students, scholars in the humanities, and media critics. Eventually, the persuasive power of images in visual culture became research content for many academic disciplines in the humanities. Today, scholars in cognitive sciences, behavioral science, neuroscience, social anthropology, sociology, cross-cultural communication, and semiotics are publishing articles and books on the impact of art and visual culture.

The integration of visual literacy and critical analysis of visual culture in political science, economics, and international relations is in its infancy (Bleiker 2018). While there are many scholarly articles, the only book that examines visual culture's impact on international relations is *Visual Global Politics* (2018), a collection of scholarly articles edited by Roland Bleiker, Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland. Bleiker's book is cross-disciplinary, integrative, and groundbreaking. However, the content raises more questions than answers—inviting more academic research. The interdisciplinary structure of American Studies is a perfect place to begin emphasizing visual analysis within all courses.

The combination of visual and textual language in American Studies courses leads to an astute analysis of contemporary

American culture and governmental policies. For example, knowledge of American history provides the intellectual context needed to decode historical images. Furthermore, background knowledge in economics, political science, international relations, sociology, religion, and psychology equips viewers with the conceptual framework to critically analyze seductive imagery. Because images construct knowledge differently than text through the brain's complex process of extrapolating meaning, there is a danger: viewers who are untrained in visual analysis are susceptible to the power of visual persuasion and groupthink. Visual literacy gives researchers and students the intellectual framework to critically analyze images that idealize or persuade. Additionally, visual literacy creates a knowledgeable schema that counterbalances emotional reactions when images confront personal beliefs. Furthermore, decoding images of power hierarchies, social classes, historical events, and ideologies reveal academic and intellectual knowledge gaps. Therefore, visual critical analysis generates new questions leading to more textual research and more profound knowledge construction (Kędra 2016).

The Visualization of the American Dream: An Example of The Power of Images

Land of Milk and Honey, Paradise, Utopia. Ancient descriptive words and phrases like these conjure imaginative images with diverse and personal interpretations. These descriptions become mythic and eternal when given creative and expressive forms through the arts. Over time they become iconic, spurring humans to create these visions on earth. The problem, however, is that there is no one definition and no agreement on what they mean. The same is true with the mythic and iconic American Dream.

During the 19th century, a fixed national vision of the American Dream did not exist. Like other idyllic concepts, the American

Dream was fluid, malleable, and personal, defying concrete form. Specifically, it was a mélange of personal definitions formed by idealistic citizens and politicians. It was not until after the 1929 stock market crash that the American Dream gained mythic status in James Truslow Adams' widely-popular book, *The Epic of America* (1931). Adams' eloquent writing framed the American Dream with ideals of abundance, equality, and economic opportunity (Brandt 1981). At the height of the Great Depression, Adams' American Dream gave U.S. citizens hope, pride, and a vision of the future. However, the idealistic visual representation was missing. It would take another national crisis before the American Dream achieved an iconic visual presence.

It is important to note that writing distills and clarifies while images idealize, amplify, and emotionalize. The most potent type of mass communication is visual-verbal syntax. This type of persuasion is charismatic and can be coercive in times of crisis; fearful people are susceptible to simple yet strong messages paired with idealized images. For example, visual representations of the American Dream became iconic after the United States entered World War II. In 1943, wanting to support the war effort, the masterful illustrator Norman Rockwell painted the four essential democratic values outlined in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's State of the Union Address from 1941. The highly-popular U.S. magazine *Saturday Evening Post* published Rockwell's paintings titled; *Freedom from Want, Freedom of Speech, Freedom to Worship,* and *Freedom from Fear* as full-page illustrations beside eloquent and descriptive essays. This group of paintings became known as *The Four Freedoms* and, over time, became the visual representation of the American Dream (Smith 2019).

Norman Rockwell was a masterful visual communicator who understood how to create powerful messages that evoked strong emotional responses through painting ordinary people's experiences. Rockwell's *Freedom of Speech* focuses on a common laborer standing and speaking in a roomful of businessmen. By

contrasting two social classes, the implied subtext becomes: America is a place where everyone can speak freely and openly, regardless of background. *Freedom to Worship* shows people with diverse religious beliefs praying together, and the subtext reads: Everyone can worship without fear of persecution. *Freedom from Want* implies abundance through idealizing the Thanksgiving holiday. Rockwell captures the moment just as the grandmother is about to place an enormous turkey on the pristine white dining table. The family is composed of all ages happily engaging with each other and the subtext implies: There will always be food in abundance, no one will be deprived. In *Freedom from Fear*, Rockwell uses the most universal and intimate moment all loving parents experience: saying goodnight to their children. By doing so, the painting evokes powerful protective emotions while the subtext denotes security, comfort and safety. During this time of international crisis, visualizing the four democratic values in such poignant and emotionally relatable ways, the *Four Freedoms* patriotically united the American people. Consequently, the public redefined concepts in *The Epic of America* into descriptive words, like equal opportunity, abundance, and freedom. However, it was through Rockwell's masterful use of ordinary experiences and pairing them with brief, yet descriptive, text that these four powerful images moved the American Dream from a vague myth into an icon.

Today the American Dream is a national and international ethos, albeit a hotly contested one. For many, the seductive and emotionally-laden paintings of the *Four Freedoms* confirm personal experiences, core beliefs, and desires; therefore, these images represent reality. Others see these images as propagandistic lies. Ironically, arguments about the American Dream are now fought through social media, where memes are paramount and thoughtful discourse is absent. The result is entrenchment and polarization by competing ideologies. Visual literacy must become

integrated throughout all academic disciplines as a complement to essential skills in reading literacy to counteract the reduction of complex topics and competing ideologies to social media memes. As this essay and the example of Norman Rockwell's art have shown, the curriculum most prepared to do this when studying the United States is American Studies.

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i Literacy, as defined by the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), is "the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (PIAAC - What PIAAC Measures).