

Reading an Image

In our world of multi- and visual media, we must expand our notion of what a text is and how we must read it. As more texts are used to convey information print once did, we must bring to these visual texts critical literacies that will help us construct meaning from their elements. The following questions are designed to help readers make sense of images they encounter in various contexts.

Ask the Following Questions

1. Why are we looking at this?
2. What are we looking for?
3. How should we look at this?
4. What would be a good title for this image?
5. What choices did the artist make and how did they affect its meaning?
6. Is this image in its original state (i.e., no manipulation or “doctoring”)?
7. What are the different components in this image?
8. How are they related to each other?
9. What is the main idea or argument the image expresses?
10. In what context or under what conditions was this image originally created?
Displayed?
11. Who created it?
12. Was it commissioned? (If so, by whom? And for what purpose?)
13. What was the creator trying to do here? (i.e., narrate, explain, describe, persuade -- or some combination?)
14. Can you find any tension or examples of conflict within the image? If so, what are they? What is their source? How are they represented?
15. Do you like this image? (Regardless of your answer: Why?)
16. How would you describe the artist’s technique?
17. What conventions govern this image? How do they contribute to or detract from its ability to convey its message?
18. What does it consist of?
19. Why are parts arranged the way they are?
20. What is the main idea behind this image?
21. What does this image show objectively?
22. What does it mean subjectively?
23. Is this presented as an interpretation? Factual record? Impression?
24. What is the larger context of which this image is a part?
25. What is it made from?
26. Why did the creator choose the materials, medium, and perspective they did?
27. What is the place to which your attention is most immediately drawn?
28. What is the smallest detail that says the most?
29. How would it change the meaning or viewer’s experience if different materials, medium, or perspectives were used?
30. What motivates the creator here?

31. What verbs could be used to describe what the components -- colors, lines, light, space, objects, characters -- are doing in the image?
32. What adjectives could be used to best describe the precise details of the objects in the image?
33. What nouns most accurately describe the content -- colors, lines, light, space, objects, characters -- of the image?
34. What adverbs most accurately describe how the components -- colors, lines, light, space, objects, characters -- of the image?
35. What do we need to know to read the image successfully?
36. How did the original artist expect this image to be read, e.g., as an interpretation, a prediction, a documentary?
37. Is the creator working within or against a particular genre or school of expression?
38. What are the criteria you are -- or should be -- using to evaluate this image?
39. What are the image's motifs, themes, plot, and characters?
40. How would you describe the style of this image and why did the artist make the choices they did?
41. Where should you begin as you try to read this? Why there?
42. Is this image authentic, i.e., it has been touched up or otherwise doctored using other materials or software programs?
43. If this image was altered, who did it and why?
44. What questions do I need to ask to read this image successfully?
45. What is the best or the prescribed angle from which I should view this image?
46. How has the artist used the following elements to communicate with the viewer: light, line, space, time, color?
47. Does this image achieve -- or is it offered as -- symbolic or iconic representation e.g., Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother"?
48. Is there an observable pattern used here? And if so, what is it and how is it used?
49. Does the creator use any devices -- repetition, symbols, visual puns? And if so, what are they, and how do they work in the image?
50. Does this image remind you of any other story, film, work of art?