

# Deconstructing Images

Visual Literacy and Metalanguage

# Visual Literacy Metalanguage Explored in this Lecture

1. Denotation and Connotation
2. Context
3. Symbol
4. Line
5. Vector
6. Size
7. Reading Path
8. Focaliser and Point of View
9. Social Distance
10. Subject Gaze
11. Saliency

# Deconstructing A Text

“Deconstruction aims to disturb in order to discover. By deconstructing a text, you learn to read beyond a text's straightforward content and uncover new meanings and truths” (John D Caputo)

**When deconstructing a text, one must look at both the denotative and connotative messages.**

**Denotative Messages:** The **denotation** of a word is its explicit definition as listed in a dictionary. The denotation of an image is the literal image presented to the audience.

**Connotative Messages:** The connotation of a word refers to the hidden or underlying message that is tied to the associations and emotional suggestions connected to the word or image.



## Denotation:

- Three boys smoking
- Boys look directly into the camera
- One boy is holding books or magazines
- All wearing clothes for outdoors
- Standing among wooden crates etc
- Missing from the photo: parents, clear setting

## Connotation

First consider context...

- Emotions: what do you feel?
- Assumptions based on your personal context:
- Understanding taken from authorial context, historical context, and cultural context.



## **Context Continues...**

1910:

Newsies and Skeeter's Branch

Photographer: Lewis Hines

Lewis Hines toured America to photograph children as young as 3 doing labour in fields, mines, and factories highlighting the appalling conditions they were made to work in.

These images helped shame America and this influenced a change in laws surrounding child labour.

# When Deconstructing Images, Also Consider:

**Symbol:** Something tangible is used to communicate an abstract idea. Colour, place and object symbols are often used in texts to help construct the connotative message.

**Line:** Choices about use of line in an image include: straight or curved, length, angle, intersection of vertical and horizontal lines, and direction. Lines are used in images to indicate movement and direction. Lines can be natural, formed by objects in the image, or artificial lines created by the author, using subject gaze or pointing for example.

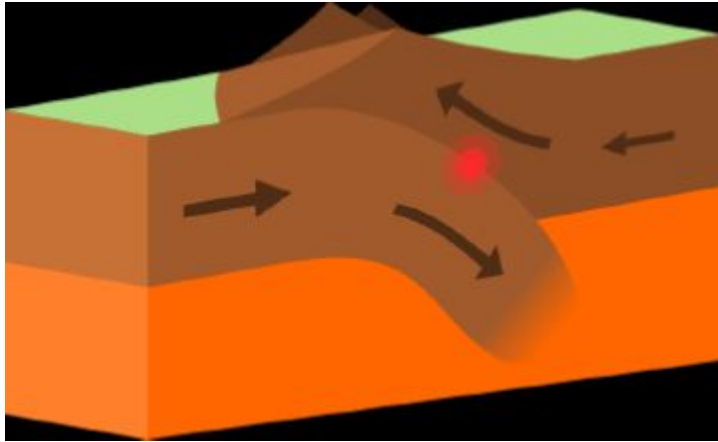
What symbols are  
present in this image?

Discuss lines created...



At last — there it was!

**A vector** shows action and direction in an image through lines. A vector can be a visible line. A vector can indicate movement in a still image; for example, using arrows in a diagram, or using sets of lines to indicate a dog is jumping and wagging its tail, and vectors can also be created using the line of a shadow or an object, subject gaze or eyeline, or a pointing arm or finger.



At last — there it was!

## Size

Choices about size of objects in an image is a comparative process.

**Discussion prompts:** How big is something in the image in relation to something else? What information does this use of size give the audience about the circumstances of this situation? Why has the author chosen to use size like this? How would meaning in this image change if the size of the objects changed or were reversed?

**Reading paths** are how the eye is drawn to something in the image first, and then vectors lead the viewer from this object through the image from point to point. Vectors can be visible or invisible (implied).



**The focaliser** is how the author has chosen to position how the audience 'sees' the subject and action in the image (O'Brien, 2014). It is also known as **point of view**. The focaliser options for designing how the audience sees events are: *direct as viewer* [yourself]; or to see events *mediated* through a character, either *as a character* [first-person]; or *alongside a character* (Painter, Martin, Unsworth, 2012).

### **Discussion prompts:**

How are you positioned to see this image? Is it direct to you ? Or is it mediated through a character? How do you know? What evidence is there in the image to support this? How does this choice of focaliser affect how you feel about these characters, or this subject, and what is happening to them? Do you feel more closely aligned to one character? Why do you think the author made this choice of focaliser for this image? If you changed the focaliser, for example from direct 'as viewer', to 'as character', or vice versa, how do you think this might change your feelings about, or response to, what is happening in this image?

**Social distance** is the distance between the viewer/focaliser and subject.

**Close Social Distance**: (extreme close up) confronting or very intimate

**Mid Social Distance**: see the half or most of the subject's body in the frame, and a little bit of the setting. This is considered a friendly distance as in real life.

**Group Social Distance**: When you can see the character's whole body, and perhaps other characters, and more of the setting, this indicates that the subject is further away from you. This is a group social distance where you are positioned to be part of a larger group

**Public Social Distance**: subjects are far from you and appear as strangers

**Remote Social Distance**: (extreme long shot) subjects are very small and the setting takes priority

There are only two options for **subject gaze**: direct gaze, or no-gaze. **Discussion prompts to consider:** Is the subject looking directly at you? How does use of subject gaze, or no gaze, affect how you feel about this subject and what is happening? Why do you think the author made this choice? If you changed this image so the subject now gazes directly at you, or the subject now looks away ignoring you, how might this change your feelings about, or response to, this subject and what is happening?

**Salience** is how the viewer's eye is drawn to what is important in the image. An aspect of an image can be highlighted by placement in the foreground, size of the object, and contrast in tone or colour. For example, what do you notice first in the image and Why?



# Let's Deconstruct This Text Together

Line and Vector

Size

Reading Path

Subject Gaze

Social Distance

Focaliser

Saliency