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IMA320: Visual Culture

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The Cost of Visual Culture

Humanity has survived through the use of our senses to navigate the realities of our world. It is through the use of the five senses that people instinctively based their interactions with the world. While smell, hearing, touch, and taste can be controlled (or at least managed), hearing and sight are quite different. Individuals are constantly bombarded with both random and directed sights and sounds. Things seen with the eyes and heard with the ears are impacted by environment, history, and personal experience. In the present technological age, the availability of visual information has surpassed auditory ones as people are openly presented to limitless information through exposure to images and videos through multi-media. Visuality is considered to be a prerequisite of human interaction. It guides those interactions and the perspectives of the relationships that develop from them over time. Based on visual information, one can choose with whom and what to interact with and why. However, the current events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have altered traditional relationship structures involving people, things, and institutions. This paper will present semiotic analysis (the Barthes model) of images obtained from the Internet and apply concepts of visuality as described by Hal Foster to examine this unusual cultural phenomenon.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (1970) is the study of signs and sign processes. It consists of five codes, each one serving as a way for different media forms to express meaning. These codes are hermeneutic (use of imagery to show mystery or entice an audience), proairetic (elements

used to signify something is going to happen), semantic (elements that possess an extra layer of meaning), symbolic (use of an image represent meaning), and referential (elements that possess a cultural reference to appeal to individuals of a particular culture). Images and text and be dissected using these codes, allowing them to be processed for interpretations by the standards of different individuals, cultures, and societies. The term *visuality* can only be defined through its separation from vision. While vision is defined as the physical act of seeing with one's sight, *visuality* is different. According to art historian Hal Foster in *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, *visuality* refers to sight in a "social context." From this approach, *visuality* becomes the comprehension of an image, video, or opinion based on the respective individual's predetermined understanding of social norms. But real understanding and appreciation for social norms can be lost over time. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the social norms central to everyday existence in the United States and other countries. Internet and social media have been the primary vehicles revealing how our relationship and social norms have been affected.

Business and Food

Due to the sudden COVID-19 epidemic, the adjustments to a new lifestyle has caused conflicts with how relationships traditionally take place, particularly in the business environment. One of the first issues was the increased emphasis on cleanliness. To combat the viral spread of the disease, countries around the globe were asked to follow four simple rules illustrated in this propaganda poster created by the FDA to ensure the best practices of employee health and retail food:

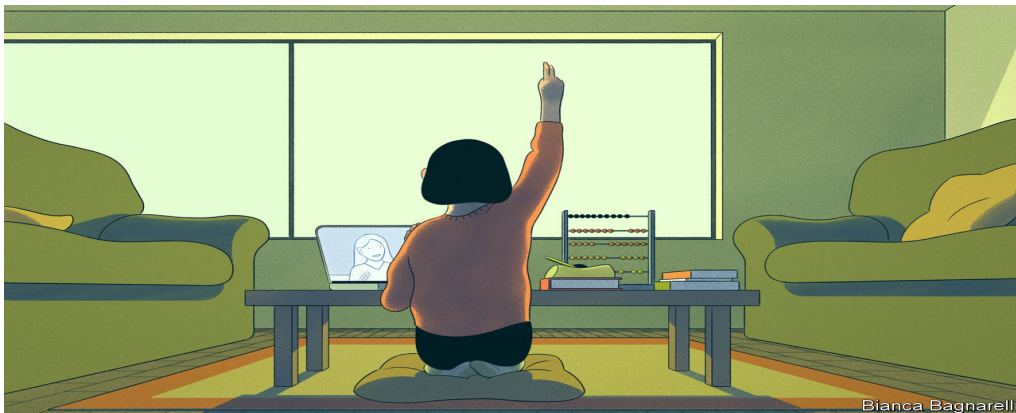


The first thing you notice is the fact that each rule is accompanied by a corresponding color and placed within order of relevance. Each rule also possesses three images alongside them to place a signifier with the signified ensuring little is lost over the language divide. The colors are a semantic element as each other one is complementary to every other color (red with blue and yellow with purple) making it easier to memorize which rules apply to individual safety and company safety. Ultimately, this poster attempts to warn citizens and businesses of the same thing: remain healthy and clean; all the while following rules such as social distancing and the pick-up and delivery option. Its simplicity is its strongest quality only making use of denotative constructs to present its case.

Education

The need for social distancing due to the coronavirus has impacted the traditional mentality held by families about education. The broad presence of the virus has led to many schools at every level being closed. The spread has impacted both teachers and families. Since students were now

off-campus, the pedagogical approach needed to change from warehoused lectures to home-based online teaching methods. Teachers were now forced to use conferencing applications such as Zoom and WebEx. Professors at colleges and universities were forced to connect homebound students with the current academic expectations through the use of computer webcams and at-home assignments. The changes have proven hard for many individuals, especially students. Many have experienced an increase in workload and continuous busy schedule or have been left to fend for themselves without work or assignments, ultimately never having a chance to improve upon their grade. The image below epitomizes this change in the relationship.



The image resembles the average living room arrangement with a couch and loveseat to the sides, a coffee table and rug to the center, with a window taking up much of the background. This image is obviously one of an organized spacious home which leads one to question imagery of those students who live in crowded disheveled homes without the benefit of space or solitude. The person in the image is of Asian descent signified by her short black hair, the abacus (a mathematical tool used mainly in Asian countries) on the table and the zabuton (a Japanese sitting pillow) she is sitting on. The background is primarily green signifying youth. The child raises her hand in an effort to ask a question. Everyone who has gone to school has experienced the norm of raising a hand to be recognized in public. This image runs contrary to that as the

student is at home facing a computer screen. Two things are missing from the image that may have significance. First, there are no parents. Many parents view schooling as extended childcare. Their absence implies that they may not wish to be involved in this new educational arrangement. Second, there is only one child, who appears to be a girl in the image (based on the hair). Girls have been traditionally more disciplined to participate in educational arrangements that require stillness than boys are.

Family Events



Other social norms that are challenged are those revolving around familial events such as marriages and funerals. Other events that are challenged by the coronavirus involve death. The traditional norms of marriages, wakes, funerals, and burials have been

drastically changed to comply with the increased focus on health and safety through social distancing. The rules of interaction are pulled into question due to the volatile nature of this virus and the unanswered questions surrounding how it is transmitted. This has introduced odd yet successful ways of getting through these events with little spread of the virus as possible. The first image represents the consequences of the virus within a marital setting. The first noticeable thing is that everyone in the shot uses gloves and masks representing the protective measures taken during the pandemic. Next is the bride and the groom try to consummate their marriage through the traditional kiss yet, their family members attempt to pull them away from one another. This produces a playful mood (with the bright tones and nonsensical movements), but

the image actually can be interpreted as one of potential fear. Not knowing who can catch this virus (or how) is one of the most significant unknowns.

Death and bereavement are highly personal events and most find it comforting grieve with other close friends and family. The following image shows a wake being held at a funeral home outside. There is a canopy present to protect the deceased and



viewers from foul weather. Although family members are present there are only three (center to the right identified by clothing style) and all but one is wearing a mask. The casket is in the back. Most viewings now involve closed caskets to prevent the spread of the virus from the dead to the living. Although this image can be understood as a family trying to come together during a stressful time, it could also be seen as the health risks to the viewing act as more of a deterrent discouraging loved ones from a traditionally proper burial. This can be seen by the limited number of chairs that are present in the picture.

Pets



The coronavirus has revealed the love and care that many people show towards their pets. It hasn't been proven yet whether domesticated pets (dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, etc.) can spread this disease with their needed attention and affection. The image to the right presents two

dogs in a carriage with specially made muzzles to protect themselves from the virus. Although a

silly thought, the concerns pushes the actions of those who seeks to survive the unpredictability of this New Year at whatever cost to their appearance of their loved ones.

Understanding images and text is not something everyone can do. It is realistic to say that etymology is like a bundle of yarn. To fully grasp the concept with a single image, it's a must that one understands that what is seen at face value is not all there is. As one continues to dissect, it becomes unraveled allowing one to be aware of the wide range of potential meanings that it can produce. However, during a period of grief and misunderstanding, lost meanings can be discovered and rediscovered. For all of its negative impacts on people's way of life, the coronavirus has shown us what social norms were lost, what changed, and what needs to be protected.

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