



## CHAPTER 3

# VISUAL LITERACY



*We are a visually illiterate society. ... Three R's are no longer enough. Our world is changing fast—faster than we can keep up with our historical modes of thinking and communicating. Visual literacy—the ability to both read and write visual information; the ability to learn visually; to think and solve problems in the visual domain—will, as the information revolution evolves, become a requirement for success in business and in life.*

—Dave Gray, founder of visual thinking company XPLANE

## Visual Literacy = Reading Pictures

Visual literacy has been defined as the “ability to understand, interpret and evaluate visual messages” (Bristor & Drake, 1994). According to Wikipedia (2011), “Visual literacy is based on the idea that pictures can be ‘read’ and that meaning can be communicated through a process of reading.”

In 1935, photographer Dorothea Lange, while working for the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, snapped a picture of a migrant farm worker and her starving children at a farm in California where the workers were picking peas. Lange was one of a number of photographers who were hired to document conditions of people during the Great Depression. Little did she know that the photo of Florence Owens, known as “Migrant Mother,” and the accompanying news coverage would cause the government to rush food aid to the starving workers.

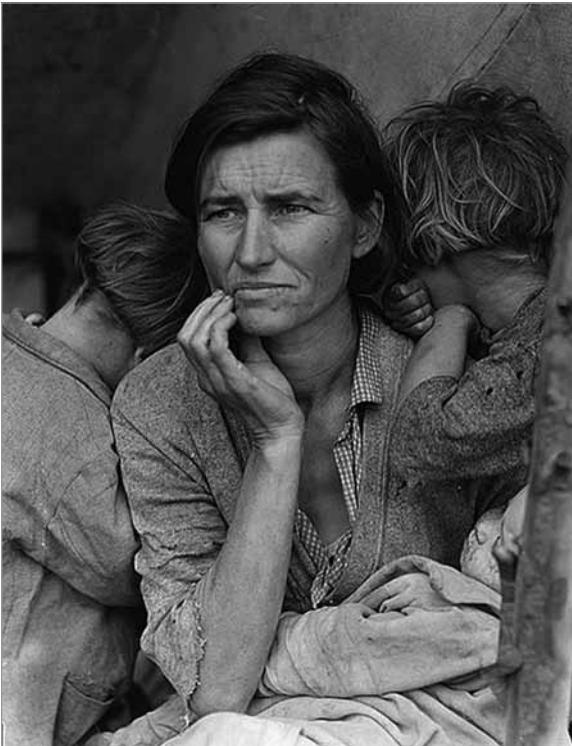


FIGURE 3.1 “Migrant Mother” by Dorothea Lange.

You can read about all of the images Lange took that day at [www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128\\_migm.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html) and at [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/migrantmother.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/migrantmother.htm). A good deconstruction/analysis of the “Migrant Mother” photograph can be found at [http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade-6-8/Migrant\\_Workers.aspx](http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade-6-8/Migrant_Workers.aspx).

In 1945, when America was still involved in WWII, Ansel Adams photographed Mount Williamson, part of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range in California (Figure 3.2). It is a beautiful image: clouds sit atop the mountain range, and the sun’s rays find their way through the clouds, past the mountain to the ground below. In the foreground, large rocks can be seen. It’s a nicely balanced photo and represents one of the best landscape photos ever taken. But, might something else be going on here? Media literacy asks us to consider what is outside the frame; what do we not know?

Unless you have studied Adams and his images, you would not have known that this vista was the view for the Japanese-Americans who were detained during World War II in an internment camp located at Manzanar, California. The internees were



**FIGURE 3.2** Ansel Adams’ photograph of Mount Williamson. Copyright held by the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

allowed outside only to collect smaller rocks for their gardens. Now that you know this, does it change the way you understand or feel about the photograph?

For further discussion of this photo, check out Ansel Adams and Japanese Internment Camp Photos (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/anseladams>). Some other photos worthy of discussion can be found at 35 Powerful Photos That Tell a Story ([www.noupe.com/photography/35-powerful-photos-that-each-tells-a-story.html](http://www.noupe.com/photography/35-powerful-photos-that-each-tells-a-story.html)).

The first 10 minutes of the 2008 animated feature film *WALL-E* contain no dialogue. There are no words to describe the action; the audience has to interpret what is happening simply by watching and listening to the action on the screen. The action: we meet WALL-E, the garbage-collecting robot whose sole job is to clean up Earth after it has been abandoned by all humans. See a PowerPoint presentation ([www.rickinstrell.co.uk/TeachingWalle.ppt](http://www.rickinstrell.co.uk/TeachingWalle.ppt)) for more information on how *WALL-E* communicates to its audience.

Visual literacy is something that has been primarily confined to our arts classrooms; in the arts, students learn how to look at a painting and how to read, analyze, and deconstruct the techniques used by the artist. Usually they study and become aware of concepts such as lighting, color, composition, and more. Today, the need for visual literacy has spread to other disciplines. Because so much information is communicated visually, it is more important than ever that our students learn what it means to be visually literate. Those who create visual images (such as photographs) do so with a purpose in mind, using certain techniques. In order to “read” or analyze an image, the audience (our students) must be able to understand the purpose and recognize the techniques. Just like media literacy, visual literacy is about analyzing and creating messages. Images can be used to influence and persuade, so it is incumbent upon educators to learn how to teach with and about images and to help our students understand the language of photography.

Whether they are images in a text or a picture book, news photos in the morning’s newspaper, or a digitally altered photo of a fashion model on the cover of a magazine—images are a major part of our world. Most of us now take lots of pictures because our mobile phones include embedded cameras. A recent Pew survey found that 83% of American teens take pictures with their cell phones (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). More students are into photography because of its accessibility. The size and affordability of smaller cameras makes incorporating images into instruction easier than ever. There are also a host of photo-sharing websites where we can upload and share our images with others.

## Standards for Visual Literacy

### **McREL Language Arts Viewing Standards**

The Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning Corporation offers a well-respected set of standards and benchmarks for K–12 education (Kendall, 2011). McREL's extensive Language Arts standards and benchmarks ([www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks](http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks)) include the following:

**Standard 9.** Uses viewing skills and strategies to interpret visual media

#### **Level I (Grades K–2)**

1. Understands the main idea or message in visual media (e.g., graphics, animation, comic books, television)

#### **Level III (Grades 6–8)**

6. Understands how symbols, images, sound, and other conventions are used in visual media (e.g., time lapse in films; set elements that identify a particular time period or culture; short cuts used to construct meaning, such as the scream of brakes and a thud to imply a car crash; sound and image used together; the use of close-ups to convey drama or intimacy; the use of long camera shots to establish setting; sequences or groups of images that emphasize specific meaning, differences between visual and print media)

#### **Level IV (Grades 9–12)**

7. Understands how images and sound convey messages in visual media (e.g., special effects, camera angles, symbols, color, line, texture, shape, headlines, photographs, reaction shots, sequencing of images, sound effects, music, dialogue, narrative, lighting)

Source: Selected standards reprinted by permission of McREL from *Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Education*.

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### Standards for Visual Literacy *(Continued)*

#### ***NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts***

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE/IRA) clearly acknowledges the importance of teaching students to be visually literate. The organization's preface to its standards ([www.ncte.org/standards](http://www.ncte.org/standards)) states:

Being literate ... means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts ... is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum. (NCTE/IRA, 1996, p. 5)

#### ***Other Relevant Standards***

National Standards for Arts Education  
[www.educationworld.com/standards/national/arts](http://www.educationworld.com/standards/national/arts)

The Common Core State Standards Initiative  
[www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards)

The Kennedy Center's ArtsEdge  
<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/standards.aspx>