

SUPPORTING MULTIMODAL LITERACY: SUPPLEMENT 3

Reading Texts as Signs

When reading a multimodal text, we often need to consider what each aspect of the multimodal text means in order to come up with a logical, debatable argument about what the modes mean together. One way to do this is to consider multimodal elements as signs or symbols representative of the culture or situation for whom the text was created.

Reading multimodal texts as signs can be considered similar to a close reading of a text from a book or an article. Just as you look for symbols and metaphors and consider word choice in written texts, you can analyze modes and media elements to understand the deeper meaning in multimodal texts.

The examples below provide two models for reading visuals signs using the language of design and rhetoric.

Figure 1



Figure 2



The Apple as a Sign

Both figure 1 and 2 feature an apple. An apple is an image with many connotative meanings in our culture, and as these images were found on American websites, the context allows the reader to analyze these apples based on American ideas about the apple. The apple can symbolize health, school or teachers, the Christian religion (the garden of Eden), technology (Apple computers), agriculture, New York City (the Big Apple), or the fairy tale Snow White, among other meanings. In order to know which of these symbolic meanings of apple these images project, we need to analyze each image separately.

Analyzing Figure 1

The apple is strongly emphasized and is aligned to the left leaving a great deal of negative space to the right. The apple has been bitten into and is partially cropped out of the page, which

may indicate that this is an imperfect or incomplete view of an apple. Since the apple in the Garden of Eden was bitten by Eve, and this bite represented a loss of innocence, the bite might also allude to this message. The negative space is black, which could indicate a darkness or void. The contrast between light and shadow is also very strong, which also suggests dramatic emotional mood. The lack of humans or any other objects also heightens the sense of isolation. Based on these factors, one might argue that this apple more likely suggests a religious overtone than any of the other symbolic meanings listed above. One could even go further and argue that based on the elements of design used here, this image of the apple implies that the loss of innocence has led to a sense of isolation. There is evidence for this argument, but it is also debatable.

Analyzing Figure 2

Though the apple is again emphasized based on its placement in the center of the image and the focus of the camera, the other elements in the composition create different implications. The apple exists in close proximity (touching) to a human hand, and the gesture of the hand suggests the apple is being held up for display, so there is no sense of isolation here. Instead, we can assume this is about the relationship between the apple and the human. Though we assume Eve in the Garden of Eden story also held up an apple to take a bite, the background of this image creates different implications, as it seems to be a farm setting which is cultivated with repeating hay bales and mown grass. These factors shift the meaning of the apple to be more closely related to agriculture. Perhaps this is an apple that was freshly picked from the field and this apple is meant to symbolize a sense of pride in cultivation, or even, one might argue, control over nature. Again, this claim can be supported by evidence, but it also debatable.

Summary

Combining the implications suggested by signs found in an overall composition allows a reader to arrive at a complex understanding of the message. Though we don't have solid proof that the meanings presented above were the intention of the authors, we have enough evidence to make an argument about the implied meanings. This method can work for any media, not just still images, though different media, such as film or dance, might also require additional language in order to discuss the specific aspects of the composition.

Further Activities

- What other meanings can you find in these photographs? Can you argue for a different meaning than the ones above?
- Select a different multimodal text such as a song or a video and see if you can locate the signs in these texts. What do the multimodal elements represent to the culture for which the text was created?
- Can you think of other common symbols in your culture that have multiple meanings like the apple? Find another photograph online that features a common symbol and see if you can determine what the symbol means in context.