

# CHAPTER TWO

## Visual literacy

“ I do not take pictures with my lens; I do not take pictures with my eyes. I take pictures with my heart. ”

Rui Assubuji, Gender and Images Workshop May 2003.

### Key issues

- Images convey messages.
- Different people may read different messages into images depending on their backgrounds and experiences.
- Pictures can be framed and manipulated to convey different messages.
- Visual literacy is a skill that must be learned just like reading and writing.



Rui Assubuji.

## What is visual literacy?

Visual images in the media form one of the ways we communicate: they act like a language. Like all languages, we can look at how the different parts of the language work together to create particular meanings. In a verbal language, we look at how the “words” and the “grammar” and sometimes the “tone” affect the message that goes out to audiences. In visual language, we look at images and symbols instead of words; we look at design and structure rather than grammar; we look at lightness, darkness, and texture instead of tone. All of these add to the meaning that the picture conveys. We call this process “visual literacy”.

### Exercise: Portraits of each other

Each participant should talk (in pairs) to the person sitting next to them, ask who they are, what they do, where they come from. After five minutes, the group session resumes. Go around the circle, asking each person to describe how they would photograph the person they have just met and talked to. Remember that as a good photojournalist the “photographer” should include the name of the person with the portrait!



**Training tip:** “Learning by doing” training requires participants to get involved, and to get talking, to each other and to the class, from the very beginning. The first exercise is usually called an “icebreaker”. The main purpose of the icebreaker is to get to know each other, and what each of us is bringing to the workshop. The icebreaker also introduces the main subject of the workshop. This exercise gets participants to start thinking about how pictures can convey different meanings, and how pictures can be true to their subjects, or distort them. To what extent does a portrait really tell you about the person?

### Exercise: What is meant by visual literacy

Follow up the exercise by giving participants a copy of the article by South African photographer Peter Mackenzie in **Handout one**. Ask participants to discuss in smaller groups:

- What does the article say about the impact of images? Do you agree?
- What does the article say about the state of visual literacy in the region? Do you agree?

## Making meaning

When we communicate by making pictures, we attach meaning to the symbols and images that we use in the picture. Most of this meaning comes from common experiences of things and events that we assume other people also experience and accept. The foundation for most meanings that we put into images lies in what we already know, believe, and have experienced.

Much of this assumed meaning depends upon, and changes with, the context in which the picture is viewed. Very often, the picture itself gives us clues to its context: a picture of a bony-thin woman taking off her shirt on a bed in a slum shack could be a picture of a person with AIDS; a picture of a bony-thin woman taking off her shirt on a beach is probably a glamorous model.

We also “get” the context from where the picture appears, and how it is “packaged”. A caption or a headline can tell us directly what the picture’s context is. All of these things tell us what to expect when we look at the image itself – and direct what we understand about what we see.

Other aspects that make up the image also affect how we interpret it. These include “subtle” effects like light and dark, focus, pattern and grain and colours. These all help suggest what is “important” in the picture. These subtle and abstract characteristics can also call upon feelings and understandings that we do not consciously think about when we see the image. We can all remember seeing a picture that “feels” like it is fresh, cold and moving, even though we do not immediately say: “I see, that picture shows rushing water.”

Context and “abstract” characteristics help determine the messages that come across from a picture. But very often these are not explicit; their impact is assumed.



# handout one

## Photos in focus

By Peter Mackenzie\*

Photographers and photographs have traditionally been the most undermined and subsequently misunderstood part of news-gathering and dissemination. Photographs are often badly edited and cropped thereby distorting meaning. The under-representation of female photographers in the newsrooms of Southern Africa has resulted in the absence of an important visual voice that could influence and change the negative and stereotypical portrayal of women.

Research has shown that the average person is bombarded by about 10 000 media images everyday. Subliminal suggestion can be described as “visual messages received below the level of consciousness”. The process of subliminal suggestion has been proved in scientific experiments to be one of the most persuasive ways of shaping people’s attitudes in the short and long term. It can also be used as a dangerous and subversive weapon.

In Southern Africa the effects of “subliminal suggestion” are exacerbated because a largely visually illiterate population consumes the messages. Briefly, visual literacy is the process of observing the elements in a photograph; their relationship to each other and the meaning given to the image by the way the image is constructed, composed and framed.

More advanced readings entail being able to see symbolic or metaphorical meanings in images, understanding context and concept. The photograph can be described as a “two-dimensional representation of reality with a three-dimensional meaning.” This third dimension is enhanced by cultural, political and experiential biases that we bring to photographs: in this instance sexist and gender insensitive attitudes.

Negative gender images on billboards, newspapers, television and magazines can significantly contribute to sexist attitudes and behaviour. In addition to these media images, sexist attitudes and behaviour that men display toward women in everyday situations, even physical abuse in the form of violent beatings, are part of our everyday visual consumption.

This “psychology of seeing” by readers is of particular importance to photographers, to sensitise them into framing images in ways that are not harmful but also challenge the stereotypical images of women. Sub-editors and editors also need to be particularly aware of the powerful influence that images in the media can have.

In the newsrooms of the region it is alarming to discover how some of even the most experienced practitioners have inadequate visual literacy skills. The task of discerning gender “images that injure” becomes that much more difficult. Coupled with the male domination of newsrooms a very bleak and out-of-focus picture emerges.

Here are some tips for trainers in discussions on this issue:

- Use of ethical guidelines and principles is very important in photojournalism generally, but in reference to gender in particular.
- The issues raised underscore the need to bring diverse voices into decision-making in the newsroom.
- Photographers and writers should work more closely together. In particular, the photographer needs to part of planning and shaping the story, so that appropriate images are captured and reinforce, rather than detract from the message.

*\*Peter Mackenzie is a Johannesburg-based freelance photographer and trainer who has covered the SADC region extensively.*

### Exercise: My favourite picture

Buzz (talk to your neighbours) about their favourite photograph. Suggest that this could be a picture of their father or mother on the wall in their parents' house; of a pop star in a poster; or the President of their country; or of their own children or their wedding. Ask who took the picture (if they know). Where did they (the participant) see it first? Ask them to talk about why they like that particular picture.

After five or 10 minutes "buzzing", resume as the full group. Ask the group what kinds of pictures people considered their "favourites". Were most of the pictures described of men or women – or both? Were they of "an important person" – in your personal life, in your country, in your ideas? Did you know who took the picture? How many of these "favourite pictures" showed men? How many showed women?



**Training tip:** This exercise aims at getting participants talking about what kind of photographic images we see, and the role they play in our awareness. It should highlight the importance of images that speak to our own experience, often taken by people we know and about people we know. Very often, these pictures become a defining "model" for what we like or care for. Often, they help define what we would want to be ourselves.

### Visual literacy and culture

Most of us learn how to interpret imagery in our earliest experiences. These meanings are deeply entrenched. Learning meaning in images is very much like learning to speak in your "mother tongue" – what you learn first, in your own home and community and language, often lies beneath and colours more recent experiences.

For instance: photographer Margaret Waller took pictures of a young male AIDS orphan in Zimbabwe, seated alone on a side of the hut with other (older, female) members of the house grouped across the room from him. Many people reacted to the photograph by saying that it showed his exclusion by the relatives that looked after him. But when Waller asked the adults what this separation implied, they answered that it actually showed their respect for the child as the only male present – that they were giving him his full status as the man in the house.

### Exercise: What do you see here?

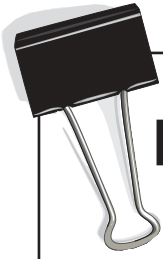
Distribute a variety of current pictures from different situations in your country, uncaptioned. Ask at least three participants to write a caption of the same photo. What are the differences in what participants see? You may also want to distribute the Media Institute in Southern Africa (MISA) poster, "Find out what she thinks", in **Handout two** and ask participants what they think about it.



**Training tip:** This exercise always yields fascinating differences in what people see. Although the image is the same, different people will read different meanings into it, depending on their background and orientation. The MISA poster is part of a campaign to increase the extent to which women are accessed as sources of news. Where GL has used this poster with media practitioners, they all tend to understand this meaning, although many feel that the poster is too wordy and some question why the poster does not depict an older, rural woman, as these tend to be the most "invisible" of all sources of news. Yet when this poster was used with a group of gender activists, they read a completely different meaning into it. Not recognising the tiny machine in the corner to be a video recorder, they thought it was a gift being offered to the woman, with the caption "find out what she thinks"! This of course distorts the meaning completely. The message here is that if the poster is intended both for the media and the general public, there must be no ambiguity in what the symbols convey.

### What picture to take?

Of the many different aspects and subtleties of experience around us, the photographer, the reporter, the editor, and even the audience choose which subjects get photographed, how these subjects are imaged, produced, and reproduced, and which aspects get lost along the way.



## handout two

# Find out what she thinks

Just before the Beijing Conference in 1995, 71 countries took part in the first global media-monitoring project organised by Media Watch Canada. Five years later, before the New York Beijing Plus Five Conference, 70 countries took part in the Global Media Monitoring Project 2000 called "Who Makes the News?" that examined how men and women are reflected in the media on one chosen day.

The 1995 study found that women constituted 17 percent of news sources. Five years later, this figure had gone up by a mere one percent to 18 percent. In southern Africa, women comprise some 20 percent of journalists and less than 5 percent of media managers.

*Promoting media diversity, pluralism, self-sufficiency and independence*

**MISA** *Media Institute of Southern Africa*  
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The range of “acceptable” manipulation and intervention used to “make” a picture varies in different aspects of photojournalism: a “fashion shoot” is conceived of as inventing the story, and finding appropriate scenery, props, and models to make the images “real”. On the other hand, photographers covering war news or HIV/AIDS generally claim they are solely recording what they see, with no deliberate manipulation. Actual interventions usually fall somewhere in between these extremes.

The photojournalist, in making pictures, creates meaning, through concrete and practical decisions about what to photograph, when and how.

### Exercise: Photographing each other

Using digital cameras, interview and then take photos of each other. Mix around and repeat the exercise. Compare two images of the same person taken by different photographers. How do they differ?



**Training tip:** This exercise can be done with the first interview exercise to save time. It is an interesting study in how people see themselves, how others see them, and how there may be differences in the way others see them. Use concrete examples to draw out this discussion and link it to visual literacy.

### Framing the picture

Why this picture and not another? What is included – or what is left out? What will the audience know or assume about the picture?

Every two-dimensional image that attempts to capture an act or event must be in some way taken out of time, out of the flux of change and scene. Often, the photographer deliberately takes a large number of “snap-shots”, one image after the other, hoping that one of them will “work”. The photographer’s choice also tends to avoid “ill defined” areas. Often, this means ignoring – or rather failing to photograph – precisely those scenes and symbols which do not fit the photographer’s preconceptions, or what the photographer thinks of as the expected audience’s preconceptions.

### Exercise: Choosing which picture to use

The three photographs in **Handout three** were taken of the same woman worker during the workshop to produce this manual. Each is just a little different. Which one would you use, and why?



**Training tip:** These photos were taken at a factory during the workshop to produce this manual. Each of the three photos shows a little more detail than the next of the materials that she is working with. But each photo also shows less and less of the face of the person working with the materials. This is a useful springboard for a discussion on what is it that you actually want to emphasise in a picture. Another approach to this exercise is to get participants to bring with them, or take a sequence of photos during the workshop, and then ask them which they would use and why. You could also think of different types of publications and situations, and see if this would make a difference to which photo you would use and why.

### Timing

The French documentary photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson first used the phrase “**the defining moment**” to describe picking the image which, out of the many and changing perspectives and scenes around us, tells the viewer precisely what the photographer means to tell them.

### Exercise:

Analyse the image in **Handout four**, titled “Freeze there, woman!” in terms of the gender dimensions of choice of subject and timing.



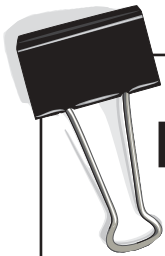
**Training tip:** While this particular image may well be true, the choice of timing and subject answers to all the stereotypes around men, strength, violence and war, and of women and children being vulnerable victims. It says nothing about the courage and endurance often shown by women and children, or indeed the fear that may be felt by men.



## handout three

Same person, different story?





## handout four

Freeze there woman!



# Freeze there woman!

An Israeli soldier raises his weapon as a Palestinian woman pulls her children along a road in the divided West Bank city of Hebron Wednesday. Israeli forces killed four Palestinians on Wednesday, including a militant targeted in a missile strike, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair began a regional peace shuttle with a rebuff from Syria. – *Reuters*



## Determining emphasis, importance and focus of images

Determining emphasis includes making choices that are viewed as inevitable, necessary, and positive, such as adjusting focus, cutting and editing. But often, it can involve choice-making which may be seen as “negative” manipulation, leading to charges of faking, staging and altering pictures. The lines between these practices are unclear and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 11 on Gender, images and ethics.

### Spin

Pictures almost always include unstated implications. Most often, these unstated implications grow out of basic, unquestioned assumptions – both of the photographer, and of the audience. For instance, an image of men protesting the bombings in Baghdad may imply that women are not present or not protesting.



*The Star*, Thursday March 27 2003.

**In sum:** Even slight differences, in picture content (from a changed expression, to an out-of-focus movement) to abstract elements (such as shadows or relative size), can significantly change the impact of a picture. So when we talk about how to construct a picture to give a gender balanced and sensitive image, we have to ask ourselves what all of these things will say. We have to ask how we can make them say what we want.