

7. Inside Images

Cameras don't take great pictures. Artists take great pictures. And no two artists see the same things the same way.

—Nan Goldin

Elliot Eisner reminds us that “the arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know. The limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition.” I know that many students can communicate what they understand through their bodies in movement or through a tableau, drawing, or sculpture. Students can communicate very complex feelings and ideas through the arts. Literacy goes beyond the written word.

Students live in a visual world. They are saturated with images on the computer, on the Internet, on TV, and in films as well as sophisticated advertising. These images are powerful and can affect students in many different ways.

As teachers, we need to help students recognize how images are being used to influence them in all of the contexts where they meet them. Students need to be aware of how images are juxtaposed so that they can begin to “see” their historical and cultural significance and thereby deconstruct how the messages are being conveyed. Once students can interpret visual messages, they have control over the information and can be critically, visually literate.

Start with Art—Deconstructing Magazine Ads

One of the best ways to start with art is to have students look hard and deeply at pictures of advertisements in magazines. Advertisers design ads very carefully by composing the elements in a picture to generate certain effects. Often, they overlay words to work with the image to influence the reader.

“Taking a Critical Look at Pictures and Texts” raises some questions I use when I work with students. (See page 66.) You might want to adopt the questions for your students.

Taking a Critical Look at Pictures and Texts

When looking at a media advertisement, be sure to consider these questions:

- What are all of the objects or props that are included in the picture? How are they used?
- What kinds of actors are chosen to represent the product? Who “speaks” and who is silent? What kind of body language is being used? How do the facial expressions influence the viewer?
- Take a look at the camera angles. Are there close-ups? long shots? medium-distance shots? What details are included? What is left out? What has been foregrounded and why? What is in the background? If the photographer has taken a picture from above the subject, how might that influence our feelings about the subject? How might we be influenced by the positioning of objects and people?
- Lighting is a photographer’s most powerful resource. Putting the subject in front of the light source can produce a silhouette, highlighting shapes rather than detail. What is lit? What is in shadow? What does that say? How do the text and images come together to give a message?
- Sometimes, photographers blur details and outlines in a photo. How does the photographer use sharp and soft focus? What effect might that have on us?
- Look at the text. How many words? How are the words positioned in the ad? Are they in **bold** type, *italicized* type, or small case?
- What other kinds of technology and artistic devices were used in the ad to influence the reader? How effective are they?
- Why were all of these decisions made? What is overtly stated? What is inferred? Do you feel manipulated? Do you think others would feel manipulated?