Writing
New Media

Theory and
Applications
for Expanding
the Teaching
of Composition

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MATERIALITIES OF SEEING

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS

Because using our eyes is just something we do, seeing can seem a natural thing, unmediated by other practices. It is not. We learn what is worth seeing and what to pay attention to and not, and there is much our eyes do not take in. The purpose of the exercises here is to help us see how seeing is not immediate and depends very much on the larger contexts in which we live; this is a way of becoming alert to the material results of our perceptual practices.

TIME

The activities listed below are fairly short and discrete; they require 15-30 minutes of discussion (after a bit of homework or some other kind of classroom event). These activities can be woven into longer assignments that include readings about sight (see the list of print resources in the back of this book for such readings) and/or the production of research projects on how sight and literacy entwine (for example), but these assignments can also be used as quick and discrete activities to vary a class routine and raise questions that help give broader contexts to the day-to-day work of a writing class.

LEVEL

These various activities work well at all levels because they ask us to consider aspects of seeing and working in the world that we most often don't consider.

EXERCISES

EYE-WITNESSING

This is a quick and usually entertaining—but highly instructive—activity. Arrange ahead of time for someone to interrupt your class in an unexpected way: have someone run in to shout a question ("Where's Kim? Have you seen Kim?") and then run out quickly, or have someone run in and up to a window to shout at someone outside and then just as quickly leave. While this is happening, you as teacher look a little non-plussed, but do not get involved: let the interruption pass and go back to what you were doing before. After 10-15 minutes, ask the class what they saw during the interruption. Ask them to describe what happened, and ask them to describe exactly the people who were involved.

The range of responses will most likely be surprising. When I have done this in class, people will disagree over the gender, age, and race of the interrupters, and over who said what—and can be very insistent on holding to what they saw even though there are such wide differences.

After listing all that everyone saw, ask why there might be such differences. How does what they have observed—that eyewitness accounts can be so different—change their ideas about how they see? About the validity of the eyewitness accounts of others? Why do they think eyewitness accounts—in trials as well as in various kinds of writing—carry the weight they do? (The purpose of this discussion isn't to achieve fixed conclusions about sight but rather to help us understand how sight is not as fixed and easy a sense as we might believe and how, just as with written texts, an audience's responses to the visual aspects of texts cannot be predicted with great certainty.)

THE ATTENTIONS OF A VISUAL WORLD

Ask people in your class to choose a two-hour stretch of a weekend day and to record every visual text they see in that period of time: ask them to write down everything they see that has been designed to catch their eyes and persuade them towards some thought or action (including but certainly not limited to purchasing). (They can do this in their own homes, as they move through the kitchen or bathroom, or they can do this walking across campus or through their town or city; this is not an activity to do while driving.)

When students come back with their written observations, ask them to discuss why they encounter so many things that ask visual attention of them. How do they decide what to be attentive to? What sorts of things draw their attention immediately—and why? What sorts of actions and ways of thinking do they think they learn from this kind of visual environment (for example, do they look carefully at everything they see, or have they learned to make quick judgments about what they see)? How might their actions be different if the visual environment were different (for example, ask them to imagine that magazines or television or Web pages contained no advertising, or that there were simply fewer constructed things to look at)? What changes would they like to make in this visual world to make it easier or smoother or to encourage different kinds of social behaviors?

When I do this activity with a class (as when I do the "Eye-witnessing" activity), I'm not trying to lead the class to definitive conclusions about sight. Instead, I hope this activity helps us see how much visual attentions are called upon in our day-to-day actions, and how the amount of attention asked of us shapes how we see as well as how then we act in the world—and that these conditions could be different.

EXPECTATIONS OF SEEING

For this activity, you need a number of picture postcards. (I have a motley collection that includes old black-and-white photographs of European cities, photographs of old movie stars, photographs of Amish children walking barefoot to school, photographs of Pablo Picasso in his sixties holding up his infant son, and so on. Students who have done this exercise send me postcards when they are on vacation or travels over summer or years later, so that the collection steadily grows.)

THE STICKY EMBRACE OF
beauty

On some formal relations in teaching
about the visual aspects of texts

Anne Frances Wysocki

The avant garde's response to the cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic is quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit. And of course they are absolutely right. Truth is a White House communiqué; morality is the Moral Majority; beauty is a naked woman advertising perfume. Truth, morality, and beauty are too important to be handed over to the political enemy.

Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*

One more "thought"—I have a conviction that the design, registered in the human face thro years of life and work, is more vital for purposes of permanent record, tho it is more subtle, perhaps, than the geometric patterns of lights and shadows that passes in the taking, and serves (so often) as mere photographic jazz.

Lewis Hine

My writing on these pages starts with two compositions.

The first composition is one you'll have to construct inside wherever you do your imaginative constructions, for it's a composition to take from words. My essay's title took shape for me as I was reading one of Carl Hiassen's novels about the political and cultural degradation of Florida's natural environment and beauty: in *Stormy Weather* Hiassen describes a minor (and unsavory) character's inability to escape the "sticky embrace of the BarcaLounger." I'd like for you to have that image of two (apparently) different orders of being—a heavy fleshy body and humanly constructed structure—uneasily and sweatily creased into each other as I shift your attentions to the second composition, one constructed of formed markings on paper:

ciations of this kind were widespread among intellectuals in that fermenting period of Depression and the rise of Fascism in Europe. In Chicago, Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld were in an identical fever of radical world-upheaval. "Politics was everywhere," Rosenfeld recalled, looking back. "One ate and drank it." Trilling was quicker than most to fall away.

But when he advised the liberals of the forties to turn from "agencies, and bureaus, and technicians," and to cultivate instead a "lively sense of contingency and possibility," and when he was troubled by his complacent students of the fifties who glibly accepted antithetical ideas without resistance or perturbation—who were, in fact, bored by the subversive and the antisocial—how could he have foreseen the riotous campus demonstrations of 1968? In connecting politics with literature—"the politics of culture," he called it—he was unwittingly entering the vestibule of the politicization of literature, a commonplace in today's universities. Unwitting or not, Trilling was bemused to see how the impulse of unrestraint that inflamed the modern masters—Conrad, Mann, Lawrence, Kafka, Nietzsche—was beginning to infiltrate, and finally take over, popular thought and style. These writers, he pointed out, with all their relentless counterminings, asked "every question that is forbidden in polite society." By the nineteen-seventies, no question remained that was forbidden in polite society, and no answer, either; there was little left of the concept of polite society altogether. What was liberty for Lawrence became libertinism in the streets. The bold contrariness of the moderns had succeeded so well that Trilling starchily named its dominance in the country at large "the adversary culture." Babbitt and H. L. Mencken's booboisie were routed. Conrad's heart of darkness—the instinctual storm that had once been the esoteric province of modernist high art—had gone public. The Cossacks were astride the politics of culture.

Such were Trilling's ultimate convictions, hidden under the ornate historical scaffolding of "Sincerity and Authenticity," the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures he delivered at Harvard, in 1970. In language grown more and

To the left is a page out of the October 2, 2000 *New Yorker*, showing a column of text (which is working to bring Lionel Trilling back to life), and two advertisements. I'd like to draw your attentions (although I probably don't need to) to the advertisement on the right. When I received this *New Yorker*, I did what I usually do: I flipped through the pages to get a sense of what's going on, what I might want to read—and this page stopped me. I think this advertisement is a lovely piece of work, but it also angers me. When I experience pleasure and offense so mixed, I know I have a good opening into critical work—no matter where it leads me or how strange.

On the following pages I use resources from the fields of visual composition, graphic design, and visual communication to try to work out what gives rise to my seeing beauty and feeling angry. My inability to come to a satisfactory accounting leads me to consider how notions of beauty, developed in the late eighteenth century, have been used in attempts to hold together two different orders of being and—by our time—have failed. I do this not to raise issues of aesthetics for specific consideration, but rather to communicate what I've learned in trying to understand my responses to this layout: I'll be arguing that approaches many of us now use for teaching the visual aspects of texts are incomplete and, in fact, may work against helping students acquire critical and thoughtful agency with the visual, precisely because these approaches cannot account for a lot of what's going on in the Peek composition.

- What I came to understand when I turned to what's already published in the areas of visual composition, graphic design, and visual communication is that these approaches most often only partially explain my pleasure and none of my offense with the Peek composition: not only do these approaches assume a separation of form from content, but they emphasize form in such a way that "content" can be unremarkably disembodied—a very bad thing when the "content" is a particular body.

- Concurrently, by so emphasizing form, they propose that the work of shaping texts visually is to result in objects that stop and hold sight; I would rather that what we make when we shape the visual aspects of texts is *reciprocal communication.*

In my writing space here, then, I'm going to look at some present approaches to teaching the visual aspects of texts in order, grumpily, to argue the existence of the shortcomings I've just described. I will then turn back to eighteenth-century definitions of beauty and aesthetic judgment because they not only help me understand the shortcomings but because they also help me see grounds for shaping how we teach visual composition so that form does not override content, so that form is, in fact, understood as itself part of content, so that, finally, I better understand how to support students (and myself) be generously and questioningly reciprocal in our designings.
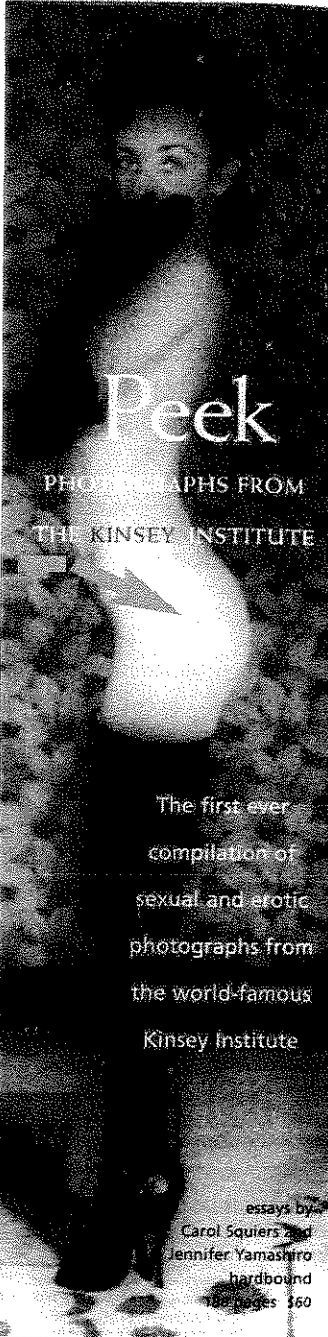
A FIRST FORMALITY

OVERLOOKING BODIES AND
HISTORY

If I were to turn to a very popular little guide for teaching about page arrangement (and one I do use in my teaching), *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, by Robin Williams, I'd find rules for explaining—and explaining pretty well—how my eyes travel through the Peek layout.

Williams offers four "design principles"—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—for visual arrangement. By applying her rules, it is possible to say why (at least in part) my eye starts (or stops) here ▨▨ ▨▨ ▨▨ ▨▨ ▨▨ It is because of contrast: this is the lightest thing in this design and the only large round shape. The principle of repetition, meanwhile, says this design has harmony because the shapes of the text blocks repeat the shapes of the body; the size and proportions of the body repeat in the size of the ad itself, and the tones of grey repeat in photograph and typeface. As for alignment: the line of the body creates the line to which the other elements attach within the overall central alignment of the tall vertical shape of the layout. Proximity is at work here, following Williams' description, because similar words—the ordering information, for example—are all put close together.

Williams's principles allow for the creation of a clear visual hierarchy of elements in this layout, indicating what we are intended to see as most visually important in the layout. These principles do go a long way towards explaining why this layout seems "professional, organized, unified," the values Williams, in the first pages of her book (11), holds up for all layout along with, later, the value of "consistency."

The orderly—analytic and analyzable—arrangement of this layout must certainly contribute to the pleasure I take from it.

But Williams gives no grounds for the values she lists. Instead, those adjectives are simply and matter-of-factly stated, and so a reader could take from the book that those adjectives are not contingent, that they are neutral in their effects—that they have no effects other than the creation of organized layout—, that they should apply anywhere at all times, that they are not (that is) values.
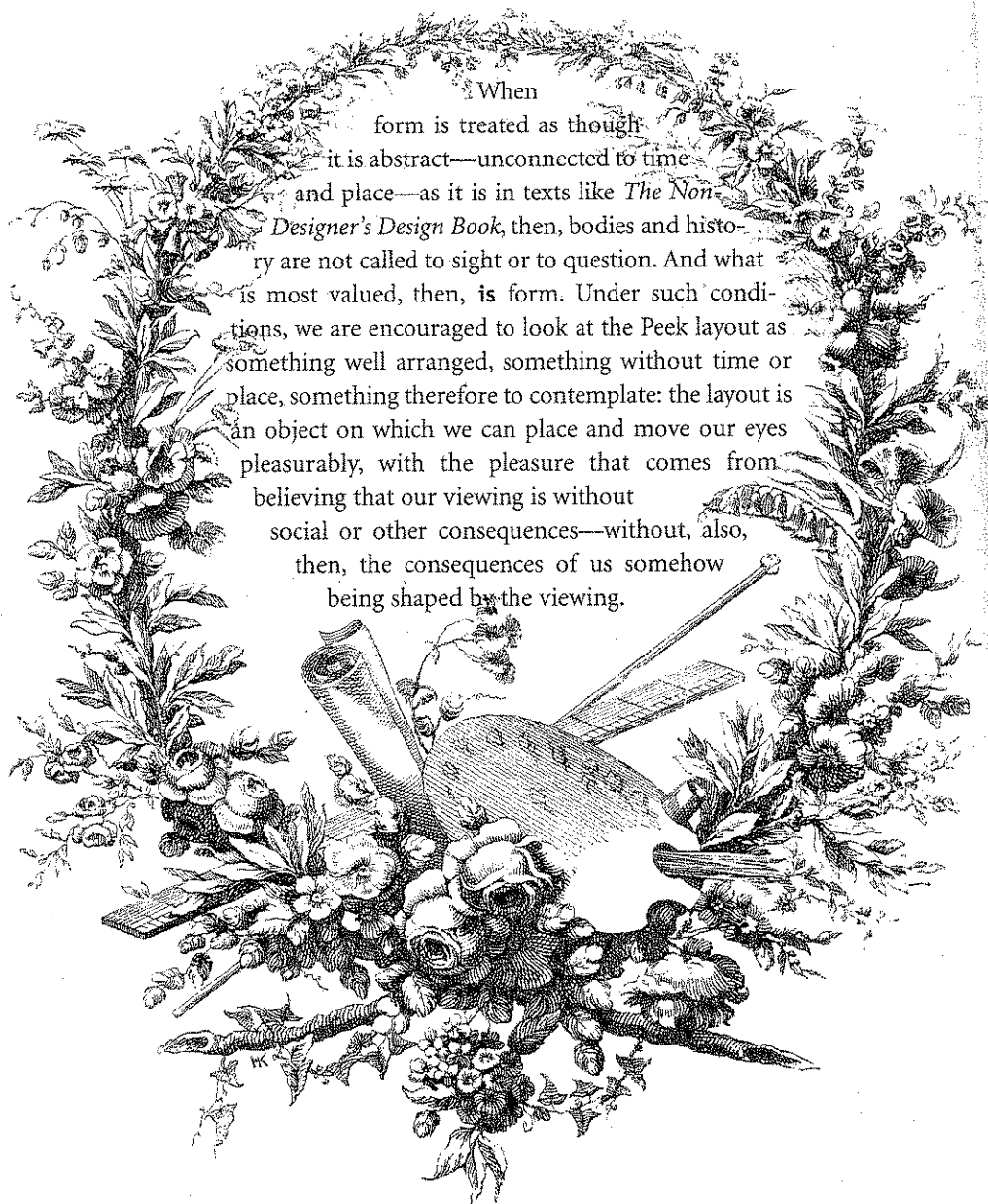
Perhaps it is unreasonable for me to suggest that a thin, inexpensive, introductory handbook for visual composition should be self-critical. After all, the principles given in *The Non-Designer's Design Book* do allow me—and people in the classes I teach—to talk analytically about design; they do help us see how visual layout is not magic but is instead rationally organized and can be formally analyzed. But those principles, because they are presented without context or comment, also make it seem, as I have mentioned, that they are neutral and timeless.

Instead, the values that underlie Williams' principles have both history and consequences.

Johanna Drucker, for example, while describing how the field of graphic design took professional shape in the years and industrialization following World War I in the west, has argued that the values of organization and consistency inherent in most modern design are inseparable from ongoing pushes toward rationalization and standardization in industry, and thus inseparable from pushes toward shaping the standardized workforce necessary for industry to flourish. But rationalization and standardization became worthwhile in this process because something else is more essentially sought: that something else is efficiency—little wasted time or capital—in material production, but also efficiency in the production of workforces and of consumers for the material products. Graphic design, becoming a profession in this setting, gets shaped to be an efficient process for disseminating entwined information and desire. Implicit in Williams' principles and their underlying values, then, is the more essential goal that visual arrangement will make easy one's access to what is most important in a layout, that the arrangement will sieve out what is unnecessary or not to the point and will instead streamline the direction and speed of one's sight to hone in on... a woman's lovely in-soft-focus-so-as-to-almost-glow white ass, in this particular case.

We know from Joel Katz's writing about German memos from World War II some particulars of what can happen when efficiency is the value placed above—or used to mask—all others: it is possible for many people to forget or be unable to see, under such circumstances, that other people are having their lives horribly and finally shaped to destruction through and behind the finely-carved information passing over a desk. It is always a suspect rhetorical move to align one's arguments (especially when they are about such ephemera as a one-time advertisement on thin paper in a weekly magazine) with others that address the horrors of Nazism; I apologize for having made the alignment

here, but it is hard not to think of Katz's arguments whenever efficiency is an unquestioned value at work in one's textual composition. I do believe that teaching Williams' principles "as is" can quietly encourage us to forget—they certainly do not ask us to see—that there is someone's body in this layout. At best, Williams' principles allow us to talk about this body (as I did above) as yet another—as only another—formal aspect of this layout.

When form is treated as though it is abstract—unconnected to time and place—as it is in texts like *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, then, bodies and history are not called to sight or to question. And what is most valued, then, **is** form. Under such conditions, we are encouraged to look at the Peek layout as something well arranged, something without time or place, something therefore to contemplate: the layout is an object on which we can place and move our eyes pleasurably, with the pleasure that comes from believing that our viewing is without social or other consequences—without, also, then, the consequences of us somehow being shaped by the viewing.

We are not encouraged to ask about the woman in the ad as a woman, only as a shape.

Although, as I have written, *The Non-Designer's Design Book* does give us helpful vocabulary for analysis and composition of visual texts, it is—I am arguing—limited and limiting in what it gives us. Its approach does not help or encourage us to think about how we might have visual composition practices that helped us try out other, less abstract, forms, forms that support practices other than those of

> standardly efficient production and consumption.
> It does not help us think about pleasures
> other than those of isolated,
> private
> looking-at-objects.

A SECOND FORMALITY

OVERLOOKING STILL BODIES AND HISTORY

I incorporate other principles for understanding visual composition in my classes to try to flesh out the abstract formality of Williams' ungrounded principles; these additional principles do not allow me yet to explain fully my pleasure and anger with the Peek ad, but they do help me further articulate my concerns about how we help our students learn about the visual aspects of texts. These other approaches come out of the writings of Rudolf Arnheim, who does—almost literally—ground his ways of seeing: Arnheim uses our bodily experiences of moving over the earth to shape principles for analyzing and creating visual compositions. What Arnheim offers helps me talk, in classes, about aspects of visual compositions that Williams' principles do not address; unfortunately, what Arnheim offers me—as with the Williams—only helps me consider part of the pleasures I take from the Peek advertisement.

In his book *The Power of the Center* Arnheim gives these grounds for principles of visual composition:

> When I look at the open landscape before me, my self reaches out to the horizon, which separates the lake from the sky. Turning around I see at a shorter distance the woods and the house, and even more close by the ground beneath my feet. All these sights are experienced as being seen from the seat of my self, and they group themselves around it in all directions.
>
> [...]
>
> The foregoing is a distinctly egocentric way of experiencing the visual environment. It is, however, the primary way suggested spontaneously by what our eyes see. The world we see before our eyes exhibits a particular perspective, centered upon the self. It takes time and effort to learn to compensate for the onesidedness of the egocentric view; and throughout a person's life there persists a tendency to reserve to the self the largest possible share of the power to organize the surroundings around itself at the center. (4-5)

Arnheim's principles of visual arrangement develop, then, out of this sense of a self in a body, a self both looking out from the body and experiencing the body as it is subject to the "cosmic" forces of the universe: "Physically, the world of our daily activities is pervaded by one dominant force, the force of gravity" (10). Arnheim uses these grounding observations to analyze how art—paintings and sculpture—makes meaning, primarily in the west. He thus writes, for examples, that

> To give tangible presence to the reference point of orientation facilitates the task of both draftsman and viewer. Elementary visual logic also dictates that the principal subject be placed in the middle. There it sits clearly, securely, powerfully. At a more advanced level, the central object is promoted to heading a hierarchy.
>
> Through the ages and in most cultures, the central position is used to give visual expression to the divine or some other exalted power. [...] In portrait painting, a pope or emperor is often presented in a central position. More generally, when the portrait of a man shows him in the middle of the framed area, we see him detached from the vicissitudes of his life's history, alone with his own being and his own thoughts. A sense of permanence goes with the central position.
>
> [...]
>
> Since the middle position is the place of greatest importance, the viewer attributes weight to whatever he finds in that position. (72-73)

Before I say more about how I apply Arnheim's observations to the Peek layout, let me add to his writing, by drawing on another book, by a different author, that grows out of a course in "picture structure" (xi) for children and adults as well as out of Arheim's groundings for "visual logic" (the book contains an introduction by Arnheim). Molly Bang's book *Picture This: Perception & Composition* steps a reader through building the story of Little Red Riding Hood by using abstract shapes—triangles, rectangles, circles—and then lays out for the reader "principles" of how we make meaning out of the shape and placement of objects on a flat surface. Bang's principles develop directly out of Arnheim's observations about our sense of body in a gravity-heavy world:

1. Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm.
   [...]

2. Vertical shapes are more exciting and more active. Vertical shapes rebel against the earth's gravity. They imply energy and a reaching toward heights or the heavens. [...]
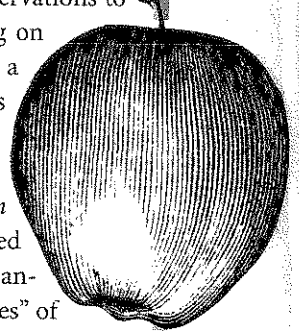
4. The upper half of a picture is a place of freedom, happiness, and triumph; objects placed in the top half often feel more "spiritual" [...]

    The bottom half of a picture feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or more constrained; objects placed in the bottom half also feel more "grounded."✤

    [...]

7. We feel more scared looking at pointed shapes; we feel more secure or comforted looking at rounded shapes or curves. [...]

    What do we know of that is formed from curves? Rolling hills and rolling seas, boulders, rivers—but our earliest and strongest association is with bodies, especially our mothers' bodies, and when we were babies there was no place more secure and full of comfort. (56; 58; 76-78; 98)

What Arnheim and Bang give us, then, are explanations for why elements placed in a visual composition can take on (some of) the meanings they do for us: we experience the world through the effects of directioned gravity on our bodies and so we call upon those experiences when we see them visually recreated on the two-dimensioned space of page (or screen). We can thus understand the black box at the bottom of the Peek ad as making solidly present the ground on which the layout—and the woman—stand. The woman's buttocks are given visual weight not only because of contrast (which is how the principles in *The Non-Designer's Design Book* allow us to talk of them) but also because they are at the center of the layout. The overall visual proportions of the layout, repeated in the upright stance of the woman, "imply energy and

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✤ It is hard not to think here of what Kress and van Leeuwen say, in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, when they speak (for example) of the "information value of top and bottom":

> If, in a visual composition, some of the constituent elements are placed in the upper part, and other different elements in the lower part of the picture space or the page, then what has been placed at the top is presented as the Ideal, what has been placed at the bottom is the Real. (193)

I was surprised when I first read this, for they offer no reasons for attaching these values to particular parts of visual compositions; instead, they analyze a number of examples along this line. I can only assume that their reasons for assigning the values they do align with what Bang and Arnheim argue about our sensational experience; Kress confirms this in his later book, *Literacy in the New Media Age*, when he writes that

> In Western visual tradition, though perhaps much more widely, given our bodies' positioning in space ('feet on the ground,' 'head in the air') and the meanings which attach to that, the meaning-potential of 'bottom of the visual space' and 'top of the visual space' are broadly those of 'grounded,' 'of this earth,' 'the empirical'—meanings which might be characterized as 'real.' (69)

Kress and van Leeuwen do, however, acknowledge the limitations of (some of) these values they assign in the chapter of *Reading Images* in which they present this analysis:

> Directionality as such [...] is a semiotic resource in all cultures. All cultures work with margin and center, left and right, top and bottom, even if they do not all accord the same meanings and values to these spatial dimensions. And the way they use them in their signifying systems will have relations of homology with other cultural systems, whether religious, philosophical, or pratctical. (199)

Even though Kress and van Leeuwen do not often remind their readers of the "other cultural systems" that underlie the terms they offer up as a "grammar" for visual design, their writing in this passage supports what I argue throughout this chapter, that it is always important to question—with our students—what systems we carry forward when we give our students any conceptual tools to use. It is crucial to keep in mind, with these value systems, that they are value systems—that directionality is always valued—as Shirley Ardener, in writing about "The Positionality of Space," reminds us as she examines anthropological recordings, such as this passage she takes from a 1909 text, *The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand*:

> Society and the whole universe have a side which is sacred, noble and precious, and another which is profane and common; a male side, strong and active, and another, female, weak and passive; or, in two words, a right side and a left side. (115)

reaching toward heights"—they give the layout a vitality that would not be present were the woman laying down.

But how well do other of Arnheim's and Bang's observations apply?

For example, are we meant to see this layout aligned with the portraits of popes and men of power—and of men in general—that Arnheim discusses, so that we are to see the woman in the Peek ad "alone with [her] own being and [her] own thoughts"? Are we to see her, centered in the layout, as "detached from the vicissitudes of [her] life's history"? Such judgments are only possible if we pull in knowledge and experience that goes beyond how our bodies live with gravity. And given what we know about the articulations among women, sex, nudity, advertising, facial expressions, coffeetable books, and black thigh-high boots, I don't think any of us will judge the Peek ad as being about a woman alone with her own thoughts.

Another response to the possibility that we are meant to see this woman as alone with her thoughts comes from Bang, from her suggestion that I have the pleasure I do in seeing the curves of this woman's body because they are a sweet memory of maternal security and comfort. If we understand the body in the Peek layout through memories of losing ourselves into the curvy maternal body, then we are of course being given a body presented not as thinking or as even present to herself, in contrast to Arnheim's description of how we are likely to understand a centralized male figure. Instead, under this logic, this Peek body exists only for others, an unthinking natural being like the hills and rivers with which Bang associates it. Under this conception, how then can we understand the centrality of the body in the Peek layout as a formal presentation of a person "alone with [her] own being and [her] own thoughts"?

Even so, I do not think the woman in the Peek layout is being presented as an archetypal Mom, which is the only category offered in Bang that at all addresses the use of a gendered body in visual composition. I do not think that it is simply because Bang's book includes children in its audience that Bang does not discuss what is usually counterpointed to the perfect, unspeaking, warmly fleshed Mother, that is, the archetypal Prostitute, even though this latter figure can also be found being celebrated for its warm, generous, and curving comforts. To offer up this other figure would require acknowledging—among other cultural categories and structures with which the figure of the generalized Prostitute articulates—gender and gender relations, sexual orientation, the particularities of culture practice, relations and movements of capital and property, and so on. To offer up this other figure, in addition, with its complexities, would mean also necessarily bringing into this mix the complexities of the notion of Mother: when one body is acknowledged to be the result of multiple articulations, then all must be.

But that also means the body outside the layout, the viewing body on which these principles are based, must also be acknowledged in its complexity. In the passages I have quoted, Arnheim acknowledges that his approach is "egocentric"—and even though he writes that this ego-centeredness can be overcome,

he does not describe in *The Power of the Center* what such an overcoming might entail or look like. Instead, the approaches laid out in that book—presented straightforwardly later as principles in the Bang book—reinforce a notion that anyone who regards the world visually (through a sight that is 'spontaneous') makes sense of the world and of human artifacts primarily by "reserv[ing] to the self the largest possible share of the power to organize the surroundings around itself at the center." And what sort of self is at that center? In the telling of Arnheim and Bang, it is an almost character-less self, looking out from a body whose actions are constrained only by gravity. This is a body without culture, race, class, gender, or age. This is a body with ten fingers and toes, able legs and arms, good strong posture, no genitalia; this is a body born to a mother remembered as nothing but soft and warm curves, a body that simply opens its eyes to see with unmediated understanding. This is the body that so many have written about since the latter part of the twentieth century, the body so many want to complicate and particularize, the body that exists nowhere but in abstraction, the body whose seeing—and understanding of what is seen—is now understood to be as constructed as any other cultural practice.*

A consequence of the generalized body being at the ground for what Arnheim and Bang write is that the pleasures of seeing—of looking at something like the Peek ad—are the pleasures of seeing one's apparently most essential self and experiences made visible. ~~In this telling, form comes from one's egocentric experiences and one takes pleasure in seeing those experiences comfortably inscribed in other objects.~~ I do not deny the physical necessity of gravity, and because, then, the elements of the Peek layout conform to my generalized experience of gravity, I can take some comfort in them: I can find pleasure in the layout's adherence and lack of resistance to a bottom-line physical, experiential, necessity that I experience daily. Following Arnheim and Bang, if I were to diagram my process of looking at the Peek layout, then, the diagram would show an arrow going in one direction: I look at the layout to see if its form matches what I know; the layout certainly does not look back at me, has no effect on me, my thinking, or my habits. I have argued that Williams' principles emphasize the layout as object, as container of abstract efficient form, as something to contemplate that has no effects on us as we contemplate; in parallel, I argue that Arnheim's and Bang's principles emphasize the layout equally as object, but now that object is a container of the form I experience as an abstracted body.

> In neither case is the designed object conceived as something made to establish relations between me and others; in neither case is the object conceived to exist in a circuit of social and cultural relations.

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* The number of books published within the last 20 years on how sight is contructed—and how it has functioned, in a particular configuration, as the shaping sense in the west—is large, so I will name only a few. For a historical/cultural overview, see Jay, or Brennan and Jay; for arguments that show other cultures using other senses to shape world-understanding, see Classen or Howes; for a cognitive perspective, see Hoffman; for a view that merges physiology and culture, see Elkins.

As with Williams' principles, Arnheim's and Bang's principles—based in a conception of the gravity of abstract bodies—*do* help me explain some of my pleasure in the Peek layout, as I have described. I do not, therefore, want to discard immediately the approaches of any of these writers—but it ought to be clear from my inability to use these approaches to speak with any complexity about my responses of pleasure (much less my anger) to the Peek ad, or about the specific body in the layout, or about any relationship between the body or the words printed over her, or about how this layout articulates to wider social and cultural practices, or about how this layout asks me to learn about women or suggests possible relations I have with others, that I am not at all comfortable in using these approaches as they come, by themselves, unchanged.

TURNING TO THE FORM OF BEAUTY...

If it were simply that the formal approaches to the visual I've described so far are neutral, that they don't discuss gender (or race or class or culture or economies or...) because they have nothing to do with the constructions of gender (or race or class or culture or economies or...), I could stop writing here. All I'd need do is recommend that we don't teach students formal vocabulary and principles for visual analysis and production unless we also consider the visual aspects of texts through the lenses of specifically gendered (and so on) material lives. That is, we could teach contrast and repetition and centering and other formal terms that show up in other texts about visual design and visual grammar, and then augment our teaching with texts that help students and us question how photographs (at least) teach us about gender and race and class and...There are certainly plenty of such texts available.✪

But the principles and guidelines that I've discussed for analyzing and giving visual form to texts are not neutral or universal, as I've started to argue in my initial discussions of them. They too arise out of and then in turn help shape our senses of who we are and what we are capable of doing (or not) in the world. They too need to be examined as choices, as actions that we take—when we produce texts that have any visual component—to build shaping relations with others and our selves. Several pages earlier I sketched out an argument about the development of graphic design in the twentieth century, for example, an argument that aligns the values behind many of the formal principles taught in the texts I've discussed (values such as unity, efficiency, and coherence) with the political and economic structures of industrialization, structures many of us find problematic. How, for example, do the evenly repeated—and endlessly repeated—regularly and rectangularly structured lines of the academic page function both to reflect and to teach us the visual pattern of (and so taste for) standardized linear order, such as we find on

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✪ For teaching purposes, texts and readers in visual culture provide access to the cultural take on painted and photographic visual representations of race, gender, class, and other constructing categories. For an introductory text, see for example, Rose, or Sturken and Cartwright; for rich collections of articles that indicate the broad shape of this area, see Mirzoeff, or Bryson, Holly, and Moxey.

assembly lines, in parking lots, and in the rows of desks in classrooms? All these are sites for the production of regulated and disciplined workforces—sites to which I would then add the standard academic page.

I need to argue then that teaching about the visual aspects of texts in our classrooms can't be a simple matter of teaching about form (teaching the Williams or the Bang or the Arnheim, for example) supplemented by teaching about content (gendered and raced bodies, for example). ~~Form is itself always a set of structuring principles, with different forms growing out of and reproducing different but specific values~~.

I want to make that last claim more specific now by turning to a point in our academic history when the separation of form from content was given a specific—and specifically gendered—inflection. I want—and need—now to turn back to the writings and judgments of Kant, to show how the separation of form from content can be, <u>has been</u>, gendered and abstracted. It is this particular way of constructing what form and content are, and how they relate, that leads particularly to my pleasure—and anger—in response to the beauty of the Peek ad but that also leads generally to recommendations I want to make for how we can teach carefully critical approaches to the analysis and production of visual texts of all kinds.

... A VERY FORMAL BEAUTY

KANT'S *CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT*

I turn to Kant's aesthetics because his approach has been the dominant conceptual ground for the aesthetic conceptualizing of painters, designers, and other philosophers and theorists in the last two centuries; it has been the ground for understanding how our material bodily sensations entwine with our conceptual abilities, as in the sections I have quoted from Arnheim. I am not, obviously, going to do justice by Kant in these few pages (or in any number of pages or amount of hubris) but I turn to Kant because it is the structural—formal—nature of his analysis of knowledge, and so of beauty, that I believe has given rise, over the past two centuries, to the abstract approaches to visual composition, to the specific separation of form from content, about which I have been grumbling. But I also believe that Kant's analysis of what gives rise to judgments of beauty can be taken in other directions, directions that could give rise to alternative, less abstract and more socially-tied, understandings of the pleasures and complexities of visual compositions.

I will then, first lay out my understanding of the development of Kant's aesthetics—based primarily on the terminology and explanations in the *Critique of Judgment*—and then show the line of thought coming out of the form of the aesthetic that gives rise to what I've been discussing up to now in this chapter. Then I will lay out an alternative line of thought, in order to talk, finally, of different, more reflexive and reciprocal, approaches to visual composition.

Kant's aesthetics are integral to his understanding of the objects of philosophic inquiry, and so I need to sketch his understanding of the divisions of philosophy in order to show how aesthetic judgment serves an overarching function. Kant gives three divisions to the proper study of philosophy, corresponding to the three divisions—the cognitive, the ethical, and the aesthetic—used by Eagleton in the quotation that heads my essay: there are for Kant

> the study of nature
>
> the study of morals
>
> the study of taste or aesthetics

Kant's first major work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, considers how we can know Nature—the first area of human inquiry for him—and Kant builds a three-part structure of explanation:

understanding

sensation   **concepts**
categories used by the understanding
to shape sensation
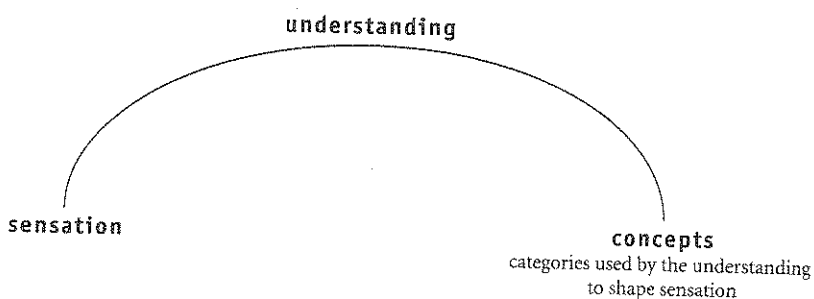
On the one side are the formless sensations we have from being bodies in Nature; think back, for example, to Arnheim's descriptions of our sensations of gravity. On the other side are the categories or concepts that provide shape from inside us to the formless sensations. It is the faculty of the understanding that brings the sensations and the formal categories together, allowing us to have thoughts about the world at all: sensations without concepts to shape them have no form, and hence cannot be discussed, considered, or even thought; to have concepts without sensations to apply them to is like having a pair of scissors but nothing that can be cut.

What is important for me to note here is the role of form: we cannot control having *sensations*—the having of sensations is simply a given, <u>necessary because humans are in Nature</u>—but for Kant we exercise what is most human in us when, as our faculty of understanding functions, we apply formal conceptual categories to the sensations so that they can have any meaning at all.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant structures our <u>moral faculties</u> following the formal structure from the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

reason

sense of duty   **concept of freedom**
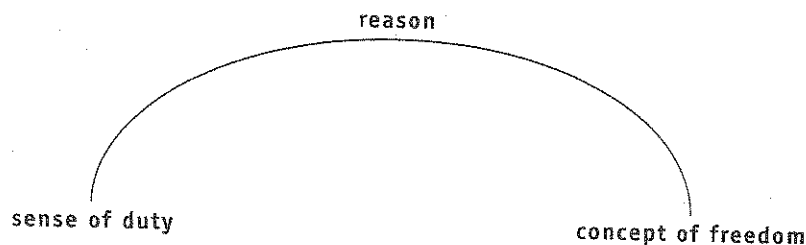
Here, in parallel to the bodily sensations that function in the understanding, Kant works with a sense of duty that he believes is inherent in us: when, for example, we see an older person struggling to cross a street, we (Kant believes) naturally sense that we might do something. But what gives shape to the observation—what allows us to form the sensation into a reasonable action— is for Kant the concept of freedom: in the same way that the concepts of the understanding are structures—such as causality or quantity—that shape inchoate sensation so that we can think about and act on what comes to us through our bodies, so the concept of freedom contains "morally practical precepts" (9) that allow us "to extend the sphere of the determination of the will" (7). As with the structures of understanding, what is most human for Kant within the structures of reason, and hence most important, is our ability to give reason-full shape to what comes to us necessarily out of our nature.

If you were to take the two diagrams I have used to lay out the formal structure the first two *Critiques*, and put them next to each other, I hope you can see how they repeat the structures of the individual critiques. In each of the *Critiques* what is given by nature is subordinated to what (for Kant) are universal concepts of human thought (through, first, understanding and, then, reason); the result, for Kant, is that in each of the two *Critiques* "nature is harmonized with our design" (23): in each of the *Critiques*, particular sensations are brought under the realm of universal thought. But the first *Critique* concerns, overall, "the realm of natural concepts" (15) whereas the second concerns, overall, human moral decision-making—so, again, there is Nature on the one hand and the forms of human intellectual work on the other. Kant thus needs, formally and conceptually, a third critique that can show how the natural focus of the first critique is brought in alignment with the free workings of reason in the second critique so that, once again and overall, nature is harmonized with human intellectual design. This is where judgment—taste, an appreciation of beauty—enters, to take on this general structure:

judgment

understanding   **reason**
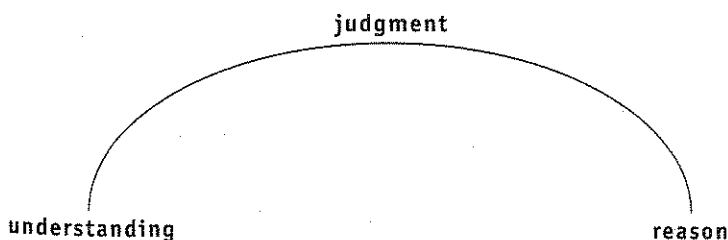
In the third critique, then, the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that, when we have a sense of pleasure, the faculty of judgment is what allows us to join the pleasure to the realm of universal design. This is not to say that we somehow judge or reshape the pleasure to make it fit the design; instead, "the attainment of that design is bound up with the feeling of pleasure" (23): when we see what gives us pleasure, the pleasure, for Kant, comes when we recognize—judge—that the feeling is showing us how the particulars of our experience fit what is universal:

something in our judgments upon nature [...] makes us attentive to its purposiveness for our understanding—an endeavor to bring, wherever possible, its dissimilar laws under higher ones [...] —and thus, if successful, makes us feel pleasure in that harmony of these with our cognitive faculty... (24).

Let me put this another way, using the words of Ernst Cassirer, who places this movement on Kant's part—what may seem to us an odd move from reason and understanding to aesthetics—in the context of the "concrete historical origins of metaphysics" (275). Cassirer steps from Socrates to Plato to Aristotle to Plotinus, tracing through those thinkers morphing notions of relations between the particular to the universal, the real to the ideal, with the end result, in Neoplatonism, being that (if we consider this relation from the perspective of a working artist):

> the IDEA, which originally is encountered only as something mental and thus an indivisible unity, is extended into the material world; the mental archetype carried by the artist within himself commands matter and turns it into a reflection of the unity of the FORM. The more perfectly this is carried out, the more purely the appearance of the Beautiful is actualized. (278)

That is, under this telling, the Beautiful is (to quote Cassirer again) a "resonance of the whole in the particular and singular" (318), and the aesthetic is then "a type of contemplation that participates equally in the principle of empirical explanation of nature and in the principle of ethical judgment" (286). Aesthetic judgment is thus the awareness of a harmonious and interpenetrating relation between the parts of Kant's analysis, between the necessity of nature and the freedom of reason. For Kant, **nature and the laws by which we think and act are not separate, and when we see an object in which nature and law are harmonized, it is beautiful. When we see an object that is formed according to universal structures, then the particular and the universal are harmonized, and beauty is created.**

The faculty of judgment can thus, I think, be schematized more finely:

judgment of beauty

feeling of pleasure　　　　　　　　　**concept of the purposiveness of Nature**
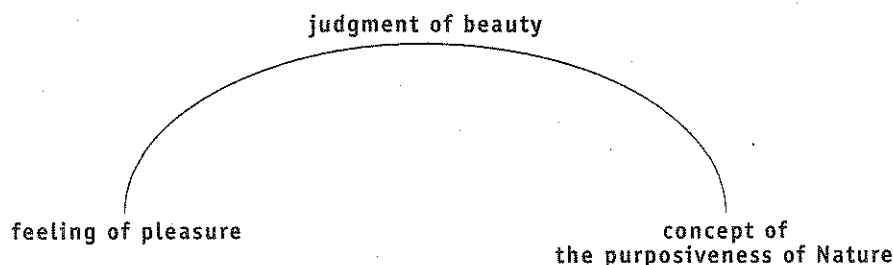
There are several aspects to such judgments of beauty that I want to emphasize here. Notice, first, that what gives rise to a judgment of beauty—whatever the object is (and Kant discusses people, buildings, music, animals, clothing, gardens, poetry)—is implied in this structure: a judgment of beauty starts with the object, but quickly moves to an appreciation of the formal relations suggested by the object.

Second, when (in Kant's view) we make judgments of beauty, they are not personal. Instead, judgments of beauty apply universally. Kant writes that

> it would be laughable if a man who imagined anything to his own taste thought to justify himself by saying: "This object (the house we see, the coat that person wears, the concert we hear, the poem submitted to our judgment) is beautiful *for me*." For he must not call it *beautiful* if it merely pleases him. Many things may have for him charm and pleasantness—no one troubles himself that—but if he gives out anything as beautiful, he supposes in others the same satisfaction; he judges not merely for himself, but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things... (45, emphasis in the original)

Or, as Kant puts it later, "the *beautiful* is that which pleases universally" (54)—because, if a judgment of beauty is a judgment that finds universal design in a particular object, the quality recognized in the object must necessarily be universal. Eagleton describes Kant's position in this way:

> Given the nature of our immutable faculties, Kant holds, it is necessary that certain subjective judgments elicit the universal consent of others, since these judgments arise from the sheer formal workings of capacities we have in common. (96)

Because, that is, we all (for Kant) think in the same formal ways, we will find beautiful objects in which the forms of our thinking are made visible.

Finally, for similar reasons for Kant, anyone who makes a judgment of beauty must be disinterested in the judgment. Although the feeling one finds in a judgment of beauty brings what Kant calls "satisfaction," such satisfaction cannot make the judger lose himself in the object of the judgment. Instead, one must not care whether the beautiful object exists:

> We easily see that, in saying it is *beautiful* and in showing that I have taste, I am concerned, not with that in which I depend on the existence of the object, but with that which I make out of the representation in myself. Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty, in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and is not a pure judgment of taste. (39, emphasis in the original)

A judgment of beauty for Kant, then, is a disinterested and universal judgment that finds universal form in the form of some particular object or person.

A FORMAL DISCONNECTION

Here is one way to summarize what I have just laid out about the structures of beauty in Kant's approaches to knowledge:

- For Kant, we are always to shape the particulars of emotion and bodily sensation according to universal principles.

- When we shape emotion and bodily sensation in accord with those principles, our motivations are not directed towards ourselves or others; instead, we are to act with disinterest, to act on judgments that could be (ought to be) made by everyone, everywhere.

- When we judge something to be beautiful, it is because beauty is formally inherent in the object.

In *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*, Wendy Steiner examines these statements within the context of Kant's time; she argues that Kant's approach to aesthetics has led us to conditions in our time that we might want to work against, conditions inseparable from the approaches to visual composition I have earlier described.

Steiner's arguments implicitly ask us to acknowledge that Kant's own philosophizing cannot be disinterested, in at least one way: from the beginning and throughout, Kant's philosophizing is gendered. That is, Kant's philosophizing—his certainty in the possibility of universal intellectual conditions—cannot be separated from how his sense of the world and its functioning grew out of his ability as a man of his time and place to look upon his experiences as being, necessarily, the experiences of all others. None of that, of course, enters Kant's *Critiques*. Steiner shows, however, how those conditions are stated explicitly by others: for example, she cites Arthur Schopenhauer stating that "Women are, and remain, thoroughgoing philistines, and quite incurable" (22). In Schopenhauer's thinking women are by nature incapable of true aesthetic feeling, just as they are incapable of the rigors of philosophic thought: because they are so tied to their bodies and emotion, they cannot approach the world intellectually, they cannot have the universal judgments Kant describes. Against such a cultural understanding of what a woman is and is capable of doing, it is not difficult to see Kant's philosophizing—the act of philosophizing as well as his philosophy's continual emphasis on formal abstract thought over what comes to us through our particular bodies—as a turn against aspects of life that have been and still often are culturally read as womanly.

Steiner quotes Mary Wollstonecraft's arguments that these womanly incapacities and inferiorities are not natural or inherent but rather the result of the limited lives, educations, actions, and positions that were (and are still) given to women; these inferiorities, Steiner writes, are what, "according to Mary Wollstonecraft, made women slaves to sensation" (23) because they had little or no access to the education that leads to abilities to perform (or a taste for) Kantian abstract intellectualizing. But precisely because Kant's philosophizing works continually to place and universalize understanding, reason, and judgment over bodily and other sensation, it abstracts body and sensation: body and sensation must be the same for all if thinking is to be the same—and so if someone appears incapable of thinking in the ways Kant has described thinking (as understanding, reasoning, and judging universally) it must because she is inherently incapable; there is no place in this structure for seeing, much less taking into consideration, how the particularities of one's material conditions shape one's structures of experience and thinking.

Against this background of necessary universals, Steiner delineates a reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a response to Kant's aesthetics. For Steiner, Shelley's writing—Frankenstein's monster and all that he wreaks—is a

detailed teasing out of what happens when one acts with the disinterest required of the Kantian moral actor; the book is a way for Shelley to point out (according to Steiner) the "irony" in the aesthetics: "that in providing supposedly the most human of mental states, freedom, it utterly disregards love and family and pleasure, which have at least as much claim as freedom to define 'the human'" (13). But such disregard is never neutral; when we wish to indicate that something is not worthy of regard, when we diss what we regard, we make it so by making it not worthy of our sights. And so Steiner writes that

> If Kant wanted to detach aesthetic experience from self-concern, [Shelley] shows that this detachment leads to a devaluation and indeed dehumanization of the feminine and the domestic leading to the direst of consequences: war and political oppression. (14)

How are war and oppression—and all the deaths of women and children in *Frankenstein*—a result for Shelley of Kant's particular form of aesthetics? In a Kantian aesthetic judgment a particular sensation is brought under the form of the universal, and away from any truck with one's own self or body; one is thus distanced from the embodied object that gave rise to the judgment. Steiner thus writes that "the purity of Kantian beauty is a deprivation that inevitably evokes the enmity of the perceiver, who wants to punish it for its inaccessibility and distance," and so, "When woman is the embodiment of that beauty, she is at risk" (17).

Steiner carries her arguments out of *Frankenstein* and through late nineteenth and into twentieth century art and literary practices. She does this by quoting, for example, Leo Tolstoy's writing about the beauty of women as they live their lives, have children, and age—

> is this "beauty" real beauty? Of what use is it? [... T]hin and grizzled hair, toothless, wrinkles, tainted breath; even long before the end all becomes ugly and repellent; visible paint, sweat, foulness, hideousness. Where then is the god of my idolatry? Where is beauty? (36)

—to argue that Tolstoy found women "disastrous as symbols of artistic beauty, which must be universal, transcendent, safe from vicissitude and death" (36). She quotes Georges Braques saying, in 1910, that because he was incapable of depicting the full beauty of women he must

> create a new sort of beauty, the beauty that appears to me in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight, and through that beauty interpret my subjective impression. [...] I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious woman. (44)

She quotes Apollinaire, who writes that "the modern school of painting"

> wants to visualize beauty disengaged from whatever charm woman has for man, and until now, no European artist has dared attempt this. The new artists demand an ideal beauty, which will be, not merely the proud expression of the species, but the expression of the universe, to the degree that it has been humanized by light. (48)

Steiner also quotes Pound, Mayakovsky, D.H. Lawrence, Marinetti, and Joyce, and she concludes that

As the avant-garde dodged the pathos of existence with their Promethean abstraction, they denounced sentiment and sensuality and stressed the purity of form and the self-containment of the aesthetic experience. (48)

[...]

In short, modernist artists turned the viewer's attention from subject matter to form, and symbolized this switch by subverting or eliminating the image of woman. In the process, they made the work a fetish, valuable in itself, compelling, a formal compensation for a problematic reality. (55)

Willem de Kooning, *Woman at Clearwater Beach*. Gift of Lee V. Eastman and John L. Eastman, Image copyright 2004 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

If we agree with Steiner's arguments—if they help us make sense of, for example, paintings of women by de Kooning or Picasso (two more of Steiner's many examples)—then we have this as one possible legacy of a Kantian notion of beauty:

we receive in our time a notion of form that considers itself timeless and universal and disinterested, inhering in objects for us to look at rather than placed there by our learned habits and tastes. We receive a notion that form is about pulling away from what is "factitious," what is particular, what is messy and domestic and emotional and bodily and coughs and sweats and bloats and wants to talk back and even sometimes touch. We receive a notion of form that not only allows to pull away from all that, but that expects us to pull away, that instructs us—visually, by what it emphasizes—that we are supposed to pull away, be distant, be in our selves away from others, from Others.

Pablo Picasso, *Woman with a Book*. The Norton Simon Foundation, Image copyright 2004 Estate of Pablo Picasso/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

What results, in this telling, are the two connected consequences I described earlier in response to Williams and to Bang and Arnheim.

- On the one hand, the object of art and design is formalized to abstraction, to the point where when I see it I can look at it as though it has no other qualities than the formal: beauty is contained in it, but only as form.

- On the other hand, my sense of my self is also reduced as I am separated from what gives me (formal) pleasure; in the telling of Arnheim, for example, a self is important here solely because its experience is guided by gravity, that most Newtonian and formal of forces.

> *Such a formal beauty has nothing to do with me*
> *or with you.*

YES, BUT... IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ART TO GIVE PLEASURE

But the Peek layout isn't art, you may say: that body has not been taken over by rough lines as in the de Kooning drawing; it has not been made into several circles hanging off a thin stem. But, well, hasn't it? Isn't the body on the Peek layout dissolving into abstract shape? The body is softly focused, fading into the background: we are not being shown this body so as to see any dry and flaking skin on its elbows or to see any monthly bloating or any scars. Instead, we see unblemished flat white skin abstractly rounded—as though the body were a blank page on which we can put what we want: the gloves and boots are like paper-doll or refrigerator-magnet-doll clothing, pieces to take on and off at whim. We see the body as shapes made to be in tune with the shapes of type and with the layout itself, as I wrote earlier when I applied the principles of Williams and Arnheim and Bang to the layout.

I want to argue that the body in the Peek layout <u>has</u> been made into form, has been departicularized: when we see this body, we are seeing a body only through the distant, universalized, formality that I have argued is well-seated in Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment and that we have inherited in much of our uncritical and uncriticized practices with and around the visual. And certainly my pleasure in looking at the body is, to some extent, formal, as I have written earlier: it must necessarily be so, because I have grown up into these formal approaches, I have been trained into—learned the vocabularies and the ways of seeing of (whether I can articulate them out loud or not)—this formal approach to beauty. I find pleasure in the Peek layout precisely because it is all abstracted, perfected, pulled out of the day-to-day, formalized.

And the anger that I feel, the anger I have been trying to understand since first seeing the layout, is inseparable from the pleasures I have been describing.

I've not spoken so far specifically of that anger, except to mention it at the beginning of this chapter, because I can only articulate it now, after having tried to understand my pleasure and how my pleasure is tied to Kant's formal aesthetics. It is easy to articulate a particular and well-known kind of anger about the Peek layout, about the layout being just one more in the endless pile of painted, photographed, and drawn representations of women shown as only sexual and also now used for selling, so that we all—men and women—are pushed to see women only as sexual objects, as objects serving as the means to the ends of others. **But what my analysis here shows me is that we should see this objectification—and the violence against women that can follow from it—as inseparable from the formal approaches we have learned for analyzing and making visual presentations of all kinds.**

The particular approach to form we have acquired through Kant asks us to think of form as separate from the content of the senses. It then asks, as we work with anything we wish to see or make as aesthetic, for form to take what is messy and particular and to abstract it and generalize it and universalize it. We have learned to think that form should do this, and we have learned to expect that form should do this, whether we are working with visual representations such as photographs or with the visualities of type on a page. When we see what is not so formally ordered, when we see what does not have beauty as an apparently inherent quality and that does not therefore live up to our formal expectations, we denigrate it, or try to lay (or force) perfect form upon it, or try to erase it.

And a result of this formal approach, then, is that women—like anyone else subject to this formalizing—are "at risk," as Steiner claims and as her quotations from artists demonstrate: first, when women and other Others are subjected to this aesthetic formalizing, they are made distant, objects to be observed, not people to live with; then, when we see them in all their particularities and compare them to aestheticized representations, they are judged as lacking of that form and so in need of being perfected (often through self-discipline—think anorexia or Michael Jackson) or of being taken out of the realms of formal judgment, sometimes violently.

My anger is that I see the Peek ad, and the woman in the Peek ad, as beautiful only because I cannot see the particularities of either. The Kantian formal conceptions of good form into which I—probably just like you—have grown up teach me to see in a way that doesn't value the particular and the messy. It isn't that I learn to objectify and simplify women simply because I see so many magazine covers or advertisements or movies or TV shows with abstractly perfected, airbrushed women; it is also that I have learned to believe that what is well-formed must be formally abstracted and perfected. **My very (learned) idea of what is beautiful, of what is well-formed, is dangerous for women and any**

aestheticized Others.

This desire for abstract formality we have learned—the Kantian universal formalism embodied in the layout of the Peek ad as well as in the vocabularies of Williams, Arnheim, and Bang—separate us from our histories and places, and hence from each other. If we believe that to be human is to be tied to place and time and messiness and complexity, then, by so abstracting us, this desire dehumanizes us and our work and how we see each other. This is dangerous.

We should look on these formal approaches with anger, and we should be working to change them.

STRETCHING TO FIND, THEREFORE, PARTICULAR BEAUTY

If we want to change how we see women, then, or if we want to change how we see any group of people who are treated unfairly by our visual practices, it is therefore not enough to push for magazine covers and advertisements and catalogues and TV commercials that show (for example) women with fleshy and round and imperfect and aged flesh. We also have to to criticize and rethink the formal categories we have inherited for making the visual arrangements that we do; we need to try new and different formal relations in our layouts and we need to learn to appreciate formal arrangements and practices that do not abstract and universalize.

Steiner, for example, in response to the analysis I've summarized on earlier pages, writes that perhaps "our aesthetic socialization is a good thing, every touch with beauty amounting to an all too rare experience of community and shared values" (xvii), but this is possible only if we see beauty

> as a kind of communication. We often speak as if beauty were a property of objects: Some people or artworks "have it" and some do not. [... Instead,] Beauty is an unstable property because it is not a property at all. It is the name of a particular interaction between two beings, a "self" and an "Other": "I find an Other beautiful." (xx-xxi) ⁊

And

> In our gratitude toward what moves us so, we attribute to it the *property* of beauty, but what we are actually experiencing is a special *relation* between it and ourselves. We discover it as valuable, meaningful, pleasurable *to us*. (xxiii, emphasis hers)

If we see beauty as a quality we build, rather than one we expect to discover, then we can potentially see beauty—and other aesthetic qualities like coherence or unity or balance—as shared values we can both celebrate and question. These are the values (and there could be others) that shape the material communication we build for each other and that thus shape how we see each other through what we build.

What if we were to build communications that, instead of seeking after the universal and abstract, sought after the particular? What if, instead of formal

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⁊ Kaja Silverman argues for similar constructions of a loving approach to others, through sight, in *The Threshold of the Visible*.

distance from others, we worked to figure out what visual forms might embody generosity toward others, or patience, or pleasure in the particular, or ...? What if, that is, we were to conceive as form as itself particular and temporal, tied to where and when and how we live, a set of structures for both representing and shaping how we see and experience each other?

ONE WAY TOWARD
A FORMAL RECONNECTION

How then might we develop a taste for the different—the particular—sense of beauty I've just suggested? How might we develop senses of beauty and pleasure that allow us to see that beauty is something we construct together, that it is a way we can reciprocally share with each other the pleasures of being with in the world together, of appreciating what is particular about our lives?

I am going to present here one approach that might help us understand judgments of beauty as the recognition of reciprocal relationship instead of as distancing; I am trying to build (and to test through my teaching) approaches that see form as this kind of recognition, tying us to others and to our times and places. To do that I am going to return, quickly, to Kant, in order to tell an alternate lineage for the aesthetic's ability to articulate the particular and the universal, necessity and freedom; I want to bring necessity and freedom more closely together than Kant's formal search for universals allowed, so that we see them necessarily entwined, not separable and separated. In order to do this, I need to move in my own way from Kant into the 20th century, as necessity becomes social and freedom gets strange.

I do not think I am limb-walking when I say that Kant's notion of the mediation of the senses gets socialized, in some lines of thinking, beginning in the late 19th and through the last century. For Kant, we have no immediate access to the real; there is instead always the mediation of the intellectual categories between us and our sensations—and those intellectual categories are, for Kant, as I've described, universal, the same categories for everyone everywhere. That is, with Kant, we are to understand our bodily responses and tastes as being the same as everyone else's because the categories we use for creating understanding out of sensation are not tied to time or place. But if we look at this structure of understanding through Bourdieu, for example, I think we can understand Bourdieu's notions of *habitus* and *taste* as giving social groundings to the categories of the understanding: that is, what is "necessary" in Kant's schematism of the aesthetic—in our time—becomes (through Bourdieu) what we have learned to take for granted by having grown up into our particular times and places and the shared values that Steiner argues we can see when we are moved by or attracted to a composition. When we experience gravity, that is, we can only experience it because we have a term "gravity," which carries with it whatever we have learned (or not) about Newton, the apple, and the solar system. When we experience weight, a result of gravity, we only experience it

through the value-weighted forms gendered bodies can take in our time and place. In all those Kantian schema I laid out several pages ago, then, we can understand what Kant labels as necessary—our bodily sensations—as being social before we ever can experience them. The web of social and cultural practices in which we move give us the words and concepts, as well as the tastes, for understanding what we sense. This is the necessary—and necessarily social—grounding structure of the day-to-day, of all that we share as we move in our particular circles and lives.

How then might we learn to appreciate—see the beauty of, take rich pleasure in—the particularities of our experiences and those of others within this shared day-to-day? I believe that various particularities can be made at least temporarily special, can be made to stand out against but still (necessarily) within the background of the day-to-day. This is one way to consider how freedom could function in those Kantian schema I presented on earlier pages, if we look at freedom through the Russian formalists and Brecht, through their appeals to "strangeness"—or through Heidegger's naming of the *uncanny*: freedom could be manifest in that part of any aesthetic experience that encourages us, momentarily and pleasurably, to see and understand how the shared, necessary, quotidian rhythms of our lives are built out of numberless and necessary particularities. Victor Shklovsky, for example, argues that

> art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. [...] The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar."
> [...] Art removes objects from the automatism of perception. (12-13; emphasis his)

There are problems with this approach, which can do exactly what Steiner describes by putting our attention not on the full particularity of what stands out aesthetically but by instead putting our attention on "strangeness" itself. If we learn to recognize, however, that what is strange can only be so within the context of the shared day-to-day, then the strange and the social stay linked; the social does not get forgotten so that the strange then seems to possess some inherent, universal property.

It is possible then to understand that the existence of the strange—our ability to make things strange so that they can stand out as worthy of thoughtful and respectful attention—both heightens our awareness of the necessity of the day-to-day as well as shows us the freedom we have relative to it: the one is not possible without the other. Something like this is at work in Sonja Foss's arguments about "the construction of visual appeal in images":

> A novel technical aspect of the image violates viewers' expectations; the violation functions both to sustain interest in the image and to decontextualize it. Connotations commonly associated with the technical aspect then provide an unexpected but familiar context in which to interpret the image. (215)

For my purposes here it is not important to focus on Foss's use of "technical," but it is important for me to state that I think her arguments go beyond "images": what Foss describes—what Shklovsky describes—is a process by

which we can change relations we build with each other through the communications we make for each other. If we think of beauty (which I have now made strange) as what can result when some expected day-to-day particular is made to stand out against the background of the larger realm of steady social practices, then we can develop not only strategies for teaching about it but also for how we might go about making change in the formal approaches to lives and detached bodies about which I have been—am—angry.

I flip Cassirer's explication of Kant here, a bit, because I'm speaking of the "resonance of the particular and singular in the whole" for this beautiful strangeness, but Kant's basic structure is still at work—although I have attached new words to the structure. Under what I am arguing, aesthetic experiences allow us to participate equally in the necessity of the social and in the freedom of pushing against—making strange—that social so that we can appreciate its particularities. We can create aesthetic experiences—visual compositions, for the purposes of my teaching—for each other where we use the expected social constructions of form just enough to hold onto what audiences expect, but where we can then also make visible the particularities of our own lives and experience and hence make visible the limitations of the forms we have been asked to grow into but, if we are to be safe and fully respected, cannot.

WHAT THEN IS NEEDED

If we think of the experience of beauty as coming out of the day-to-day necessities of our social existence—an "experience of community and shared values" to use Steiner's words—when particularities of that existence are made to stand out, then I think we can see direct strategies of approach for teaching. There is no question that there is a certain necessity to effective visual composition because a design must fit a viewer's expectations if it is to make sense… but if design is to have any sense of possibility—of freedom—to it, then it must also push against the conventions, the horizons, of those expectations.

I want people in my classes, then, to learn the social and temporal expectations of visual composition so that they can, eventually, perhaps, change some of the results of those expectations. I do not start my teaching with design principles, then, but rather by asking people in classes to collect and sort through and categorize compositions of all kinds, to try to pull "principles" out of those compositions and their experiences. One result is that, after looking closely at telephone book ads for lawyers, for example, they can see the limitations and contingencies of (for example) Williams's design principles: an accident-and-injury lawyer who wants to come across as strong and willing to do everything on your behalf does not do well presented through rules aimed at harmony, clarity, and restraint. But, also, when people in these classes then make their own visual compositions, they understand that there are principles and why they need to follow them (in order to fit with the learned expectations

of their audiences, not because there are universal, neutral forms) but they are also then aware that they can—and often should—push against the principles. They see how the visual compositions they make embody particular aspects of themselves, that what they make are not objects for contemplation by others but rather reciprocal communications, shaping both composer and reader and establishing relationships among them.

But there is more to our discussions than how to make compositions for narrowly specific rhetorical situations: as students make their collections, we talk about how different compositional strategies shape us by asking us to view, read, and respond in the terms of the form on the page or screen. When students are the audiences of design, they see how designs work to shape and naturalize the necessity of their day-to-day worlds. When they produce their own compositions, they consider their visual strategies as having real and expansive effects—because they see their work as fitting into, reproducing but also trying to make strange, the necessary but contingent principles that underlie how we live with each other. They see the work as reciprocal, shaping themselves as well as those for whom the work is made. They also then see the stickiness of beauty as it—like any other value giving form to what they make—binds form and content, composer and audience, together.

We come to see visual composition as rhetorical, as a series of choices that have much broader consequences and articulations than visual principles (as I've argued here) suggest. After such a course of activities students see themselves able to compose effectively with the visual elements of different texts for different rhetorical circumstances... but I also hope that they see themselves capable of making change, of composing work that not only fits its circumstances but that also helps its audiences—and its makers—re-vision themselves and try out new and more thoughtful relations between each other.

Anne Frances Wysocki

1 The activities that follow tend to focus on students analyzing and composing texts on paper—but I use the same approaches (starting with collection exercises, asking students initially to pull design principles from what they see and from experience rather than from writing on design, and so on) when I teach about texts on screen. To make the exercises that follow work for onscreen texts, just replace "paper" with "onscreen" in the following pages—with one caveat.

In classes where we work along the lines of the exercises that follow, discussions about the (material and other) constraints of the communication technology we are using weave throughout our talk. With paper, for example, we discuss the economics of color reproduction and of page size; we discuss the different page-size standards in different areas of the world, the portability of paper, the technical issues with getting crisp contrast in a printed photograph to be xeroxed, and the ethics of getting others to notice your single-page flyer when it is up on the typical college wall with 3000 others. When we compose documents for the Web, on the other hand, we discuss the economics and access issues of standard monitor and browser window sizes, as well as of bandwidth and download times; we discuss how and why to compose using HTML or an editor and the different views that different editors ask you to take of what is possible online.

In either case, we start with intense and focused looking at as many examples of texts as possible made within the technological setting we are discussing, so that we see—we understand by seeing—how design principles (and our tastes) take shape, as well as how we might then work within and against and around those principles to achieve what we value, to achieve the visual relations we desire with others.

ACTIVITY 1

RHETORICAL OBSERVATIONS

TEACHER NOTES

DESCRIPTION

Students amass a collection of visual compositions, and through looking closely at similarities and differences in the collection, they draw up tentative principles for assigning the pieces to different categories of design, categories they name based on their observations. They use their principles for analyzing other layouts and for considering the uses—and strengths and shortcomings—of published design principles.

GOALS

In the course of this activity, students:

- Strengthen their abilities to pick out the varied details that are placed together to make a single composition.

- See how compositions designed for different audiences and purposes use different design principles.

- Gain confidence in talking about how visual compositions function.

TIME

This activity sequence is most effective when spread out over 6-8 class periods, if all the steps are followed.

LEVEL

I have used this activity sequence with first-year students and with graduate students: the activity is straightforward enough for the newer students but has many openings for graduate students to apply their theory-leanings. *What is required for this to work is that the students have little experience working with the visual aspects of texts.*

SEQUENCE

1 Students do the "Collecting Visual Designs" assignment described on the homework handout following this sequence description.

2 In class, students pair up to compare their collections. I ask them to spread their layouts out on the floor, and then to categorize their layouts (the shared set) following any scheme they can see. Some categories that students have used in the past include liquor ads, academic journal pages, pages with women who are smiling, pages that are supposed to make you frightened so that you will use the financial service being advertised, layouts with babies.

Once the groups of two have finished their categorizing, I ask each group to pair up with another, and to repeat the categorizing—but now they are working with the collections of four students.

3   As homework, students repeat the "Collecting Exercise"—so that they have a collection of 50 layouts. In class, they repeat step 2, with their larger collections: they see new and different categories, and how categories ebb and flow into each other.

When students have finished their categorizing a second time, we discuss why the categories might exist. This discussion brings up many issues: we talk about:

- *the prevalence of visual design in our culture, tied to advertising.*
- *how different categories of visual composition use different visual strategies to make different kinds of appeals: for example, layouts for nonprofit organizations often show a single person—and often with a full body—who looks directly at the viewer with a serious expression so as to evoke one-to-one connection and empathy, and these layouts frequently use little color; layouts for liquor very often have a large colorful photograph that bleeds off the page and that shows men and women at parties or moving happily on the street—and there is often a picture of the liquor bottle on the lower right of the page.*
- *how layouts in their various categories tend to simplify the audiences they address, focusing on one or two characteristics shared by the target audience.*
- *how what we see in all the layouts gives us a sense of—teaches us— what makes an exciting Friday night or a good body or appropriate behavior toward children.*

4   After this discussion, I ask students to write up their observations of the compositional strategies used in one of the categories they've identified. The "Comparing and Categorizing Designs" handout helps them do this, and that helps them start making explicit connections among compositional strategies, audiences, and design purposes.

5   In class, students compare their lists of strategies observed, so that their lists of strategies are as full as possible. This helps students continue to see the rich complexity of strategies they have available to them as they make their own work—and also gives them meat for discussing how and why other designers would make the strategic choices they do.

6   For homework, students apply their observations to compositions outside the categories they have looked at most closely: the "Design Analysis" handout for this asks them to analyze why a composer would make different design choices for different audiences.

7   Given the wealth of observation they have now accumulated, I now ask students to read an "official" set of design principles (such as I have

described earlier in this essay), and to see how well the principles hold up to their observations. There is a handout—"Other Categories for Design"—to help them do this. This leads to considerable class discussion about the functions of such guidelines, and about how they can make layouts that others will still judge as "professional-looking" even if they do not follow "official" guidelines. The emphasis of our discussions is on the rhetoricality of design—on learning about your audience and its (visual) expectations—and about how the choices a composer makes in constructing a visual layout cannot always follow "official" design guidelines if the layout is to work within its context.

Anne Frances Wysocki

COLLECTING VISUAL DESIGNS

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment will start you building a repertoire of the visual designs of others, so that you can start making observations about the kinds of designs—or design tastes—that are prevalent now, and so that you can start making decisions about the kinds of designs you want to make. This exercise helps you start to see the sorts of visual expectations held by the audiences for whom you'll be designing.

Such collecting is also a practice followed by many professional designers: their collections not only help designers develop a sense of what they need to do to work with an audience's expectations, but these collections are like idea-wells to which you can turn when you want a new strategy to try... or when you want to work against audience expectations.

WHAT TO DO

Collect 25 design samples. (And by "design," I mean here a mix of words and images on paper that you can tell was intended by the designer to stand alone, to serve some particular purpose. Do not bring in photographs or drawings that have no words. You can bring in designs that are made solely of words and have no photographs or drawings—but, please, no photographs or drawings without words.) (And do not think solely of advertising here, either, please...: look at the pages of your textbooks and the novels you read and the placemat under a fastfood breakfast...)

- Only collect designs that fit onto one, unfolded 8.5" x 11" page or smaller. (This is to make our task a little easier...)
- Make copies of the designs if you cannot bring in the original.
- To find these designs, look in the newspaper. Look in magazines in the library or in your bathroom. Look in the other places I suggested above.
- Bring the designs to class in a large envelope, so you have a way to hold onto them. Try not to fold them. Write your name on the back of each layout so you can hold onto your collection. (You'll be mixing your collections with others to make some observations, and then taking them back.)

RHETORICAL OBSERVATIONS
HOMEWORK

COMPARING &
CATEGORIZING DESIGNS

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment asks you to put into words many of the observations you have been making in class over the last several days.

By putting your observations into words on paper, you will be able to use them both to make and to critique other designs.

WHAT TO DO

Pick one of the categories of design you've been using over the last several days, and separate out all the designs you have that fit into that category.

Write down any design strategies you see the designs in this category sharing. (Not all the designs have to have the characteristics you note, only a majority in your collection.)

Anything you see that these designs have in common is worth noting, but here are some categories to help you get going:

- Are there kinds or amounts of colors or of typefaces that the designs have in common? Are placements of elements similar?

- Are the colors or uses of grey that these designs have in common? Are the same ranges of colors/greys used? Are colors used in the same places (in a photograph, say, or in type)?

- Do the designs use photographs or illustrations or drawings or...?

- Do the designs use similar kinds of photographs or illustrations?

- Do the designs use similar amounts of 'white space'? (And just because white space is called *white* space doesn't mean the space has to be white; rather, this term refers to *open space*, to space in the layout that has intentionally been left 'empty' so that your attentions can be directed to and focused on other parts of the layout.)

- When you look at the amount of space that is placed between elements (like between a photograph and a line of text, or between lines of text), does there seem to be a consistent kind of spacing across the different designs?

- Are similar kinds of words—that make similar kinds of promises or describe similar kinds of things—used?

- Is there a similar proportion of words to other elements?

- Are words treated graphically or not, across the designs?

These are certainly not all the questions you can ask, so any more you can address will be good. But these should start to give you an idea of the number of details to which designers are attentive.

Now, type up what you have done—being attentive to your own layout. (Format your layout in any way, using any typefaces, that you think encourages a reader to understand well your observations. If you want to scan and include a sample layout to represent your category, that would be fine.)

Be sure you carefully describe the category of design you observed, so that someone else who doesn't know you can easily understand what you are doing, and then add the list of observations you made about the category.

Finally, add a paragraph in which you speculate why this category of design has these particular set of design strategies in common. Is it because these layouts are trying to appeal to a specific audience, or create a certain emotion in an audience, or make the audience feel particularly smart (or poor or lacking)?

What you have typed up is a preliminary set of design guidelines for someone who would want to make a layout that fit into this category. (Start thinking about how you could make a layout that fit into this category but that nonetheless stood out in some way.)

Here are some categories others noted when they did this exercise in the past. See if you can add to this list:

If there are people in a layout:

- What is the facial expression?
- Where is the person looking?
- How many people?
- What sort of person: strong and tough looking, healthy, beautiful, no skin blemishes, tall, young?
- How much skin/hair/legs is/are shown?
- Is there some kind of innuendo in the layout or photo?
- What's the race of the person?

Other things to note:

- What is the quality of color: hard, soft, bright?
- What is the main visual focus of the layout?
- What kind of word choice is there?
- How much text is there?
- Is humor used?
- How much visual ambiguity is used in the layout or concerning the product? (Can you tell what the product is, in other words?)
- What kind of typeface is used?
- What's the background of the layout? A photo or illustration, or a color? Is the background realistic or unnatural or fantasy?
- Are metaphors used in the layout?
- Is there a headline? A slogan?
- Is the main textual information at the bottom?

A DESIGN ANALYSIS, USING YOUR DESIGN GUIDELINES

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

Now I want you to start applying the design guidelines you generated by using them to analyze other layouts. By applying your guidelines—through analyzing how the guidelines apply to different layouts—you'll be thinking about how and why visual designers make some of the design choices they do.

WHAT TO DO

Find 2 new layouts: the first is to be from the same category for which you have developed design guidelines; the second is to be from any other category.

Use the design guidelines that you wrote for the previous class to help you look closely at the two layouts. Your observations should be typed—try to use a page layout application (like InDesign or Quark), and be sure to think of your page(s) as a design.

For EACH layout, do the following in your writing:

- Describe, first, how the layout follows the guidelines you've written, and then describe how the layout deviates from those guidelines.

- Then speculate about the audience for whom the layout is intended. As you describe the kind of audience for whom you think the layout is intended, use the evidence of the layout to support your argument: that is, use not only the evidence of what is in the layout (the product being presented) but also the layout itself: *What kind of audience (for example) would be drawn by the kind of typefaces used in the layout?* or *What kind of audience would be drawn by the strong central (or curvy) alignment of the layout?* Whatever evidence you can see to support your contention for the audience for whom the layout is intended, write it up.

- After you have written about both layouts, write up some observations about why you think the one category of design uses certain visual strategies while the other doesn't. Is it because of different audiences, or different products, or attempting to evoke different relationships between audience and product...?

RHETORICAL OBSERVATIONS
HOMEWORK

OTHER CATEGORIES FOR DESIGN

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

You've done a lot of looking at categories of layouts in the last couple of weeks. Now we'll look at someone else's categories to see what you think, what you can learn, what you can teach...

WHAT TO DO

[Here I ask students to read someone else's design principles: for example, this is where I would ask students to read the section of Robin Williams's and John Tollett's *Robin Williams Design Workbook* on categories of design.]

Please write approximately 500 words in response to the reading, using the following questions to guide your writing:

- *Do [this writer's] categories agree with what you have observed? Where are the agreements and disagreements? How do you explain the differences and agreements?*

- *How do the categories help you think (or not) about the design work you see yourself doing in the future?*

Please be sure your name is on your writing—and please be sure your writing doesn't have the default settings and lack-of-choice choices of usual academic writing; instead, please present your writing so that you cannot separate form from content. Thanks!

HOW DOES DESIGN WORK

ELSEWHERE?

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS

In the course of this activity, students:

- See how effective design strategies are tied to place and time.

- See how different design strategies encourage different values in the relations among audience, composition, and composer.

- Acquire a wider range of compositional strategies than were they to look only at designs from their immediate surroundings.

TIME

This activity can take 20-30 minutes for discussion of one example; there is then homework.

LEVEL

This is an activity I have used with first-year and with graduate students.

SEQUENCE

1   Pass around copies (or project or show on computer screens) a layout from the Victorian era or from Japan this year (or, depending on your class and purposes, from a very hip Web site or from an academic journal with which students are familiar—this latter instance often surprises students, since we have been taught not to think of academic pages as having visual aspects). There are some samples on the next pages.

2   Ask students to throw out adjectives that describe the overall tone of the layout. (To get discussion going, I will list adjectives that are drastically opposite to what we see: for example, when discussing a layout full of bright blues and pinks, I'll ask, "Is this depressing? Is this how you felt after your last thermodynamics exam?" This helps students say what may seem obvious, but it brings up an opening.

3   After students have given several adjectives, ask them "Why?" "Why [for example] does a layout seem cheery or serious or threatening?" They will often start with describing color, but encourage them to talk about how the objects in the composition are placed, what photographs are used, the use of photographs, and so on.

As they describe what is going on in the composition, ask them also to describe why they think they link the compositional strategies they see with the meanings they take from the layout.

4   If you have worked through the Rhetorical Observation activity on the previous pages, ask students how the layout they are now seeing is different from what they have previously been observing.

Ask them to try to explain the differences: how, for example, does this layout ask an audience's eyes to move through the layout, as compared with what they have been observing. Does this layout use strategies that ask our eyes to linger or move slowly, or does it use strategies that ask us to be quick and brisk in our looking?

5   Ask students to write down any visual strategies they see that are new to them—and to write down how those strategies encourage different responses or meanings than they have previously observed. How might they use these strategies in the future? Could they use these strategies without modification for the audiences they know?

6   For homework, give students a visual composition from another place or time, and ask them to use similar visual strategies as are in the layout—but now to rework the strategies so that they support a line of thinking or acting connected to students' present lives.

I have included on the following pages examples of such reworkings off the Web (from the "Institute of Official Cheer" Web site, http://www.lileks.com/institute/instsplash/index.html; but also see the Adbusters Web site, http://www.adbusters.org/), examples that I think are particularly effective in pointing out how disruptive—strange and perhaps beautiful—it can be to see something familiar shown so differently: when we look at these layouts off the Web in class, students first look and say, oh yeah, that's from the thirties—but then they look again, and start laughing—and good discussion about why they laugh (and how they can bring on that laughter in others) results.

Looking at this work off the Web, or students' own compositions, is thus a direct opening into talking about the expectations we pick up from our day-to-day social movements and how those expectations can set us up not to look closely—or can set us up to look even more closely and question what we take for granted.
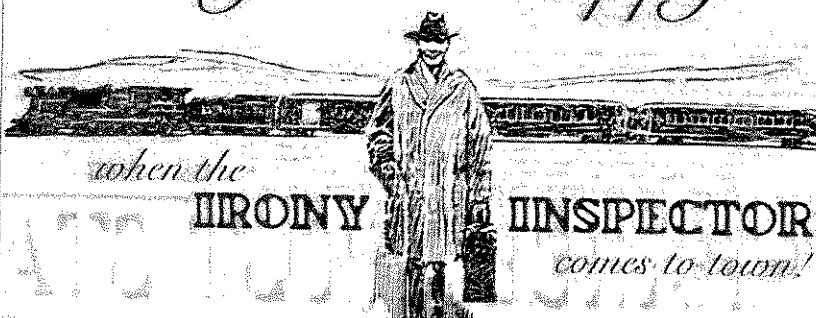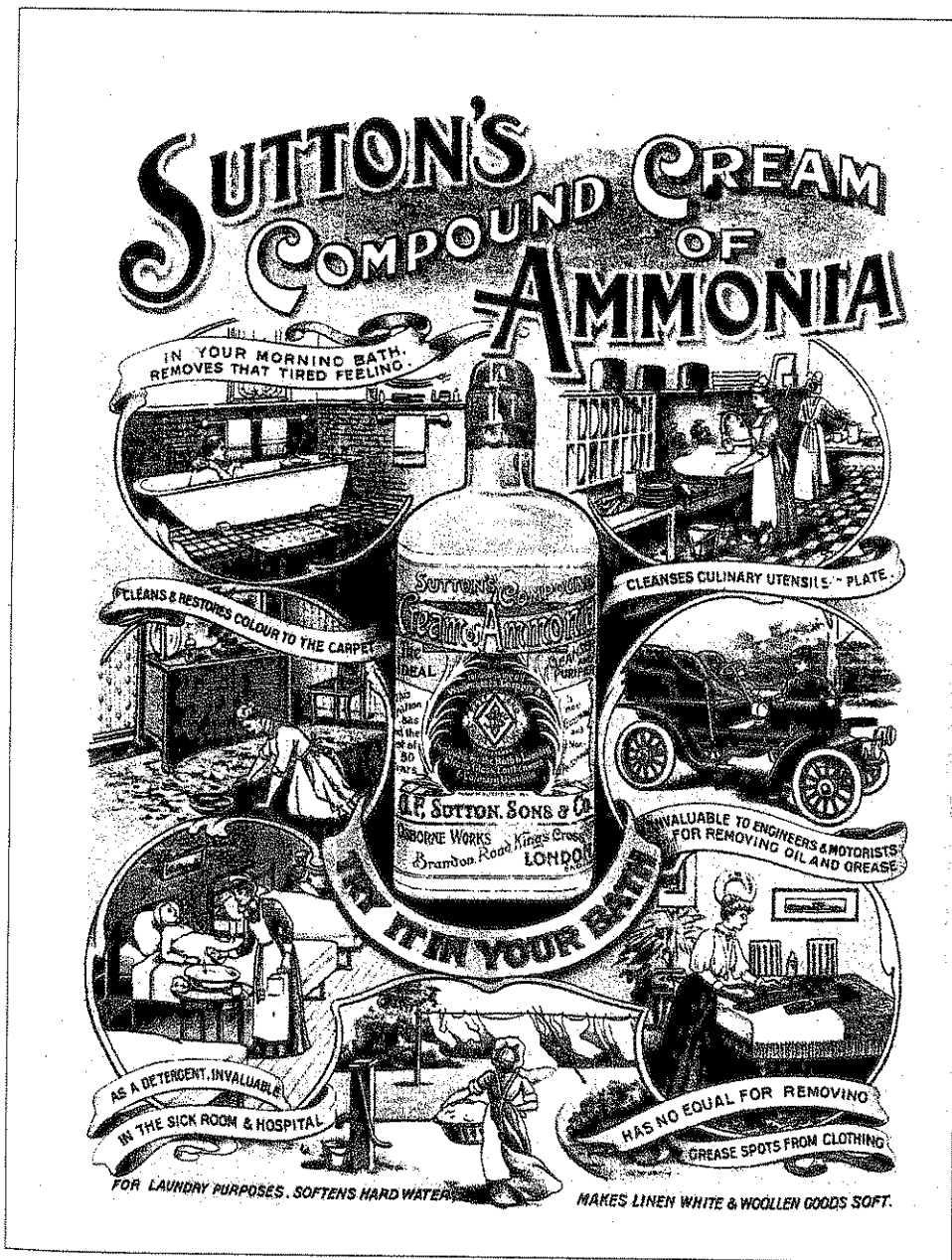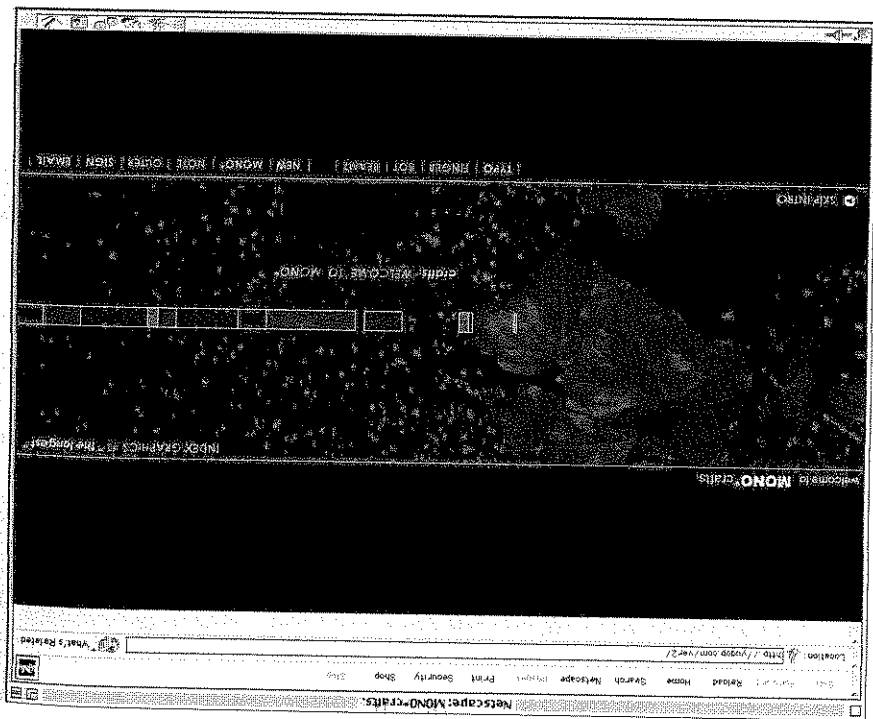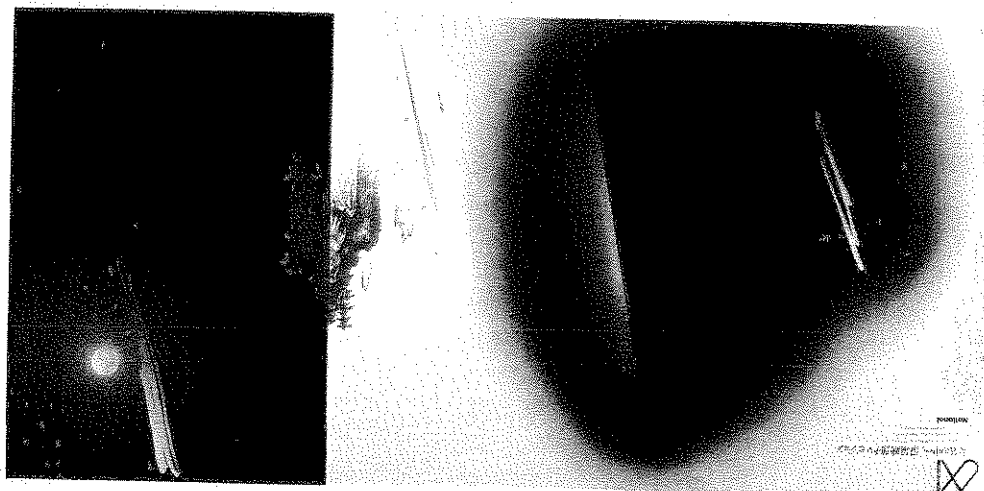
On this page and the next are three samples—an advertisment from 1907 and a web page and an ad for a computer monitor from Japan—to help students see how the values of visual composition vary over time and place.
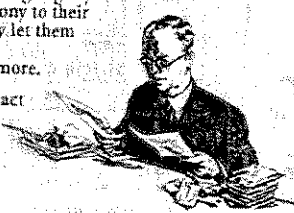
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Anne Frances Wysocki

Everyone's Happy

when the

IRONY INSPECTOR

comes to town!

Have you noticed? It's everywhere to-day. It's on the radio, the newspaper, the "breezy" novels and smart-set stories. It's a certain tone that seems to suggest the OPPOSITE of what it means. Is it sarcasm? Or is it irony? And how's a fella supposed to know the difference?

The 20th century has brought many marvels, but some come at a price. In "the good old days" you could be sure that what a man said was what a man meant - but nowadays he might mean something slightly different. There are people - powerful people - who use irony to their advantage, leading to confusion and irritated bowels. Why let them have the advantage? WHY? Become a FREE-LANCE IRONY INSPECTOR, and see how life can be simple once more.
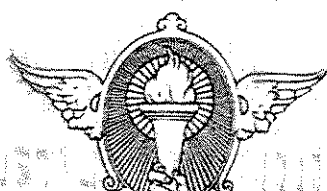
It's easy - our patented course helps you identify and extract irony from any source. Cartoons, woodcuts, burlesques, photoplays, even jazz. You'll learn how to render mystifying, Bolshevistic arguments into black-and-white lessons. You'll learn the SECRETS of turning strange, bitter modern literature into a "good read." Even stubborn Cubism can be a flavorful, satisfying experience - once you know the secrets of irony extraction.

AN INSTITUTE GRADUATE CAN MAKE UP TO $2 A WEEK.

RELAX as the mystifying subtleties of Yiddish parables are INSTANTLY converted to amusing "Hebe" jokes. WATCH with amazement as the racial paradoxes of "blackface" routines are dissolved into digestible stereotypes. PICTURE the merry faces of the townspeople as they crowd the train platform, waiting for the Irony Inspector to visit their town.

Territories are still available. Act now! Rosicrucians not admitted.

THE INSTITUTE of OFFICIAL CHEER

Box 47, New York City, New York, America

On this page and the next are two visual compositions (there are more) from the "Institute of Official Cheer" website—
http://www.lileks.com/institute/instsplash/index.html—
that show how putting present "content" into form from another place or time can help make present—and past—practices strange.

is *irony*

/tearing your family apart?

Does your husband laugh with joyless derision when he pages through a magazine full of things he can't afford? Does your child laugh at Fred Allen's radio programs in a way unbecoming his age? Do YOU wonder why the happy pictures in your Hollywood magazines strike you as idiotic and false? Are your domestic "spats" laced with bitter, cutting remarks that have their roots in subtle, pervasive economic worries?

YOU could all be suffering from Irony-Rich Blood.

Only **IROLINE** is formulated to calm, soothe and relieve the dread of existential awareness. Rub it on – feel its healing warmth – *relax* as things start to look sunny again. Great as a cake frosting, too!

Available at fine non-Rosicrucian-staffed drugstores everywhere.

IROLINE

The Black & White Worldview in the Blue & White Tube

IROLINE
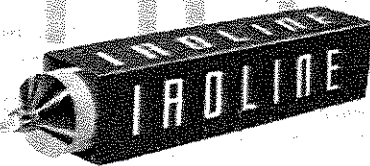
ACTIVITY 3

ANALYZING A COMPOSITION

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS
In the course of this activity, students analyze a visual composition of their own.

TIME
This is a homework activity.

LEVEL
The style of this assignment is aimed at undergraduates.

HOMEWORK

ANALYZING YOUR OWN COMPOSITION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT
Competent, thoughtful designers—especially those whose work supports the values they consciously wish to spread in the world—are able to describe why they have made the design decisions they have. They are able to look at layouts and say why the layouts work and how they could be better. This requires practice, both practice in looking but also practice in using the vocabularies we have been developing together this semester and practice in thinking about how you build a relationship between your composition and its audience.

WHAT TO DO
From all the layouts you have made so far this semester, pick one you particularly like or think is particularly effective for the rhetorical situation in which it was designed.

Write a 750 word analysis of your layout. I want you, in this writing, to aim at describing as fully as possible how your set of chosen design strategies asks your particular audience to respond to your composition. You'll need to describe your audience and your compositional strategies in as much detail as possible. What kinds of looking or acting does your composition encourage in your audience, do you think?

You might start out by saying "I think this layout works well for [insert audience description here] because I believe such audiences would be drawn to clear, straightforward, and geometrically ordered pages. My layout asks them to see the elements of my layout in a slow, thoughtful, and orderly manner…" You would then give your reasons why you think the particular audience

you describe should be drawn to such strategies, and then argue how the various elements of your layout come together to create the order you have described.

Use terms that we have discussed this semester: there's contrast and repetition, balance, and alignment, and there's descriptions of typefaces, but also think about visual hierarchy, the shapes that are made on a page, colors, the size of a page and its orientation, the emotional appeal that arrangements of elements create and why, the sense of the designer that you get from a layout and why, and so on—we have been discussing these issues (and their meaning-making all semester—pull out your notes). All these elements come together to create the effect a page has.

> *Consider your own layout of this writing, as you compose. I am not going to accept pages that use 'standard' academic format, since that is a format rarely questioned in its effects and history; instead, I want you to present this page in a way that demonstrates your serious and thoughtful attentions.*

ACTIVITY 4

DESIGNING TO HELP OTHERS FEEL SMART

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS
In the course of this activity, students:

- Examine concrete examples of visual composition that encourages or discourages learning.

- Get practice in compositional practices that consider the relationships (visual) texts build with audiences.

TIME
This activity takes place over 3 class meetings.

LEVEL
This is an activity for advanced undergraduates or graduate students.

SEQUENCE

1   I ask people to bring in to the following class "textbooks or manuals they think suck—or that they love." I don't have to say more than that: as soon as I say that, eyes light up, and people in class start talking about a thermodynamics or grammar text with which they have had to fight—or with which they are fighting in a current class.

2   In that following class session, I ask people to talk about the textbooks or manuals they have brought in. I ask them to describe what about the books supports them—or not—in their learning. The discussion weaves quality of writing back and forth through layout and visual presentation.

People in class question why so much information is crammed onto so few pages, why there is so little use of color, why charts and graphs and other illustrations are not on the page where they are discussed, etc.— which brings up issues of the economics and planning and (non)testing of design.

People who bring in texts or manuals they like talk about feeling respected by design, how design can encourage them to feel that they are competent as they approach a subject or appliance.

3   People in class pair up, and then as an assignment choose 4 representative pages from one of the textbooks or manuals that has been criticized in class, and redesign those pages together.

(I recommend that people who have a text in a current class that is giving them trouble redesign the text—I have seen this been a very useful way to study: people in class learn that you design cannot be separated from understanding… and this will bring up in class discussion of why textbooks writers have not 'traditionally' designed their own texts.)

4   In the next class, we put all the redesigns up on the wall and discuss them. People in class then rework their redesigns based on feedback.

5   The last part of the assignment is that people in class write up guidelines for "Designing to Help People Feel Smart": they summarize the strategies and approaches they have observed and used that go into making design that is responsive to and respectful of audiences. I encourage them to focus on the design process as well as on the design product, so that they consider incorporating audience into the design and testing of any materials they make.

ACTIVITY 5

MAKING AN UGLY WEB PAGE

TEACHER NOTES

Use this assignment early-on as students are learning to design Web pages.

GOALS

In the course of this activity, students:

- Enjoy breaking many rules
- Come to understand that qualities like "ugliness" or "unfriendliness" do not inhere in texts but are the results of a text's contexts.

TIME

This activity starts with a homework assignment and then requires a full class for discussion and reflection.

LEVEL

This is an activity for advanced undergraduates or graduate students who know how to build even the most basic Web pages.

SEQUENCE

1 Give students the following assignment:

THE UGLIEST WEBPAGE

I want this assignment to help you think about the relationships you establish with your audience through the shapes of what you make online. In this case, I want you to make something that turns its back on its audience—if not screams at them—as a way of starting to determine, by negation, what design strategies—and why—help your audiences see that you are a designer to be trusted and respected.

As homework—using whatever Web page building strategies you know— build a Web page that you think will completely alienate your audience (which in this case is the class). The topic of the page can be anything.

2 In class, look together at all the pages, and keep a running list of the various strategies people use to make their pages ugly.

3 Go back through the list item by item and ask students to imagine cases in which the strategy would be rhetorically useful, that is, would help them achieve some particular purpose with a particular audience. For example, bright clashing colors or no contrast between text and background can make text hard to read but sometimes (as with the warning messages on the sides of cigarette packages) a text's creators need for text to be present but not necessarily readable.

Anne Frances Wysocki

OBSERVING & ANALYZING WEB PAGES AS A STRATEGY FOR DESIGNING FOR PARTICULAR AUDIENCES

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS

In the course of this activity, students:

- Develop their own lists of design guidelines for Web pages for particular audiences and purposes, based on observation of other Web pages for that audience and purpose.
- Learn that appropriate design guidelines can be developed—and modified—through observation.

TIME

The homework assignment described below required a weekend; the assignment was part of a larger activity—designing Web sites for faculty members—that took place over 2 months (for a process of initial discussion, preliminary design, feedback, revision, further feedback, and students teaching the faculty how to update their Web pages).

LEVEL

This is an activity for advanced undergraduates or graduate students who know how to build even the most basic Web pages.

NOTE

What is below is an assignment almost exactly as I presented it to a particular class who were just learning to build Web pages; in the context of the class and our school, it made sense for students to build very straightforward Web pages for faculty in our department who did not yet have Web pages. You can, obviously, modify this assignment so that students observe and build pages to teach elementary school students basic science principles (for example) or observe and build pages for Web essays.

The assignment below is pretty much as the students received it, on a course Web page. After students drew up their lists of observations, and we discussed in class why the observations they made might be pertinent for the audiences and contexts they described, we developed together a list of considerations they should keep in mind as they designed.

Only after developing these lists did students meet with the faculty members for whom they were designing. They discussed with the faculty what the facul-

ty had in mind for their Web pages, and they also showed faculty their obser-
vational lists, which helped some faculty better define what they wanted. Then
students went through a reiterative process of design, showing thumbnail
sketched to faculty for feedback, and only then starting to work developing
pages. Most faculty were quite pleased with the process and with the results.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENT

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT

You are going to build a Web page for a faculty member within the next
few weeks. The intention of this assignment is to help you determine
what makes an effective Web page for a faculty member—in general, as
well as for faculty in a particular discipline.

WHAT YOU'LL BE DOING

First, I'm asking you to do a bit of thinking about why a university's
faculty members would have individual Web pages. Then you're going
to go out on the Web and look at lots of different Web sites for faculty
members in lots of different disciplines in many different schools. Then
I'm going to ask you to write about what you have observed, how your
initial thoughts about faculty Web pages have changed, and to draw up
a preliminary set of guidelines for building an effective Web page for
someone who teaches at a university like ours.

WHAT TO DO ...

FIRST, write a little bit, informally: In class, we talked a bit about the
purposes of faculty Web pages. I want you to write up a list of the
different kinds of audiences a faculty Web page must address, and the
sorts of expectations those different audiences will bring to looking at
a faculty member's Web page. Describe to yourself, in words on a page,
in as much detail as possible, what you think should be on a faculty
member's Web page and how that page should look and function—and
why.

SECOND, look... a lot, and closely: Now spend some time looking at
faculty Web pages. As you look, test your expectations against the pages
you see. Which pages meet your expectations, and how? Which pages
disrupt your expectations—but in good directions? Which disrupt your
expectations in not so good ways? (Another way to think of this: Which
faculty members look as though they really know what they teach?
Which faculty members look like people from whom you'd want to take
classes? Which faculty members look as though they're attached to
schools you'd want to attend? In each of these cases—figure out WHY.)

In each case, note as many details as you can about what on the site
worked to satisfy, exceed, or fail your expectations. Be attentive to the
overall presentation of a page, how the page is arranged, what you learn
from the page, and so on.

I want you to look at the Web pages for at least 12 faculty members from different departments and different schools. As part of that 12, you can look at 8 sites linked below—but you need to find at least 4 other sites on your own. (Please list the sites you observe—and be sure you look at sites of people who teach the same kinds of things as the faculty member with whom you'll be working. You can learn about your faculty members by reading about them on the Humanities Department's Faculty pages.)

Start by checking out how faculty in MTU's Humanities Department present themselves (go to http://www.hu.mtu.edu/, and then click the "Faculty & Staff" link at the top right). Then check out the links for these college faculty:

[here there was a listing—with links to actual Web sites—of approximately 40 different Web sites from faculty across a wide range of Humanities disciplines]

THIRD, write up what you have observed...

Look back at what you wrote before you looked at faculty Web sites, and at all the notes you took while looking. By analyzing what you've observed and written, draw up guidelines to help you make the most effective Web site possible for the faculty member with whom you'll be working.

You can present your guidelines in any way you like, as long as someone else in class will be able to understand them easily (without you hanging over their shoulder to explain what you've written). Your guidelines should make specific reference to sites you observed, so that you use the sites as examples to support your reasoning. Be sure also, as you make recommendations for faculty Web pages, that you explain your recommendations: just what purpose is your recommendation to serve, and for what audience? (And do not feel you have to make recommendations for "conservative" Web sites: if you can give solid reasons for recommending something "unusual", then please do so.)

Be as detailed as you can: address color choice as well as whether you think photographs should be included, and how much and what text, and how elements should be aligned, and what sorts of links, and what kinds of typefaces, and so on, and so on. The more details to which you attend, the easier your job will be in working with your faculty member.

And as you write, keep in mind our conversations about interest, fascination, and delight.

It will probably take you a minimum of three typed pages to do enough analysis and make enough supported recommendations to be useful.

DESIGNING OTHER VALUES

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS

In the course of this activity, students:

• Consider how to vary the values that design shapes.

TIME

This activity is, minimally, a homework assignment followed by class discussion. It can be broadened to spread over several classes of revision, discussion, and reflection.

LEVEL

This is an activity for students who have some familiarity with Web page or page-layout software.

NOTE

This activity works best at the end of a course that has considered how the material shapes of the communications we give each other take part in shaping the values we take from texts.

ACTIVITY

After you have done any activities that ask students to identify values they see at work in the design of pages (on screen or on paper), ask them to identify values they don't see (values that rarely show up in page or screen design are, for example, generosity, sharing, humility, justice, and quiet). Ask them, as part of a final paper or project for class, to design a text that visually and interactively incorporates one (or more) of the missing values they identified.