

Visual Communication: Introduction

Russ Wills

Pillar College educates, inspires and equips its students for excellent scholarship, service, and leadership. In order to properly equip these students for service in our image-driven culture, Pillar College must take the initiative to teach these students the vital skills associated with visual communication. In addition, I plan to prove that with effective visual communication, Pillar College will have significantly greater success recruiting potential students and meeting its aggressive enrollment goals. Students who are educated with the support of strong visuals will be far more prepared upon graduation. Faculty who use visuals well to communicate will achieve far greater success in the classroom, in turn leading to greater student retention. Conversely, neglecting attention to visual communication will have a detrimental effect on enrollment, learning, and the overall success of the college.

This past spring (2013) I had the privilege of showing photography from my Master of Fine Art thesis project at Pillar College. The project, *Metamorphosis*, consists of a series of abstractions representing our transformation as Christians from death to life. To understand the work, some knowledge of the technical process of creating the photographs is necessary, so I posted a very brief description of the meaning of the series along with the creation process under each photograph.

I am aware that many people outside of the art world do not understand nonrepresentational artwork. I did not expect many viewers to take the time to interpret my work. I learned something very important from the experience, though, that I did not expect. Many of the college's board members, staff and faculty asked me questions about the series that I had never anticipated from this particular audience – questions like, “Is that a painting or a photograph?” “How did you create that?” “Is there a meaning behind this artwork?” In other words, respected members of the faculty, staff and board of trustees of an accredited four-year college were asking me questions that were already answered in a two-paragraph description immediately underneath each photograph in the series. These are people who I know personally and respect as some of the finest educators around.

This experience was vital to my growth as both an artist and an educator. We are completely and overwhelmingly immersed in a visual culture. I am not surprised when students fail to read. I was, on the other hand, surprised when people who advocate reading went out of their way to examine my visual art and ask me questions about the work without reading a short paragraph in plain sight explaining the work. To be clear, the experience is not in any way a reflection on the college faculty, but is a reflection of the degree to which people in this culture absorb images much more readily than text.

Our students are immersed in this extremely visual culture. Even avid readers examine visuals before reading text. Many even look at the visuals without looking at the text at all.

Knowing that our students do not read what we expect them to, and knowing how incredibly visual we are as a culture, why do we continue trying to convey vital information to students and potential students through text while largely ignoring the visual element of communication?

My experience reveals the reason corporations will invest millions of dollars on their visuals. I say “invest” very intentionally; these companies get a financial return on their investment. According to Mike Parkinson in “The Power of Visual Communication,” the US Military spent \$598,000,000 in 2003 to increase brand identity. Nike spent \$269,000,000 in 2001 on its image. Coca-Cola budgeted \$1,400,000,000 for its image in 2001. These successful corporations and organizations understand how vital strong images are to their success. Parkinson also points out that “visuals are processed 60,000 times faster than text, graphics quickly affect our emotions, and our emotions greatly affect our decision-making.”

Consider the following illustration from Asa Berger in *Media And Society: A Critical Perspective*:

During the Iran-Contra hearings that made Oliver North a national celebrity, Democrats learned what it meant to “lose control of the pictures.” Steven Spielberg, the Hollywood director, was visiting Washington during the televised hearings. As he watched the hearings with some Democratic congressmen, he offered them a lesson in camera angles. “Watch this,” Spielberg said, as he turned down the sound then directed the congressmen's attention to North's image on the screen. “The camera on North is shooting up, from about four inches below his eyes. This is the way they shot Gary Cooper in the western, *High Noon*, to make him look like a hero.” When the camera panned to the committee members questioning North, Spielberg pointed out, the lighting was dim. Seen at a distance, they looked sinister. “It doesn't matter what Oliver North says. He has already won the battle, because he looks like the hero and everyone else looks like the villain.” This realization shocked the congressmen.

Images communicate. Images also lie and deceive, intentionally or unintentionally. For example, before reading a paragraph about the effectiveness of a product, most people will pre-judge the product by the appearance of that textual description. What kind of paper is the description printed on? What typeface was used? Is the paper old and crumpled? Is the paper cheap and flimsy? Do the colors or shades of gray make the product look exciting or boring? Elegant or trashy? People do not ask these questions consciously, but the answers to these questions largely determine whether the viewer will take the product seriously. The appearance of a mere description of a product using only text on paper will subconsciously sway a potential buyer one way or another before ever reading the text. Many people, as I learned, will not even read the text. The best product in the world could fail simply because people don't *see* how great the product is.

The articles that will follow in this *Visual Communication* series are designed to support a case for the importance of visual communication, and will provide tips for communicating effectively through image.
