

Imaging Ideology: Posters of the Iranian Revolution

Theory: Kress and van Leeuwen

In *Reading Images*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen draw on a variety of theorists for their analysis of visual communications. Their method attempts to bring to the forefront the various visual elements that are used to produce meanings in images. They argue that traditional analysis has subordinated the visual to the verbal message. As an example of this, they give Roland Barthes' essay "Rhetoric of the Image." In this piece, Barthes examines an advertisement (an image he considers to be "frank" and whose signs are "formed with a view to the optimum reading") and attempts to uncover how different semiotic systems work together. He classifies three distinct but related parts of the system: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message. Because images are "polysemous" and are open to multiple meanings, he argues that the text is used to "fix the floating chain of signifieds" and give the image its meaning.

In this way, the verbal message has traditionally dominated the visual sign.



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Kress and van Leeuwen, however, argue against this theory. They see the visual component as "an independently organized and structured message -- connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; 17). In their approach to "reading images," the authors draw on the work of Michael Halliday and attempt to apply his theoretical notion of "metafunction" to their visual semiotics structure. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the three metafunctions are the *ideational*, which refers to how objects are represented in an image and how they interact with one another; the *interpersonal*, which refers to the relationship among the producer, the receiver, and the image; and the *textual*, which refers to the composition of the image (ibid, 40-41). Taken together, these three metafunctions create the visual meanings for the viewer.

Kress and van Leeuwen offer a detailed "tool kit" for visual analysis that



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functions within the framework of the three metafunctions outlined above. They claim that visual representation can be a narrative or conceptual processes. The narrative represents things in terms of "doing" or "happening" and requires an agent, an object, and an action, reaction, or process of change. In addition, the participants in the narrative structure are connected by an implicit or explicit vector that denotes the direction of the action. The conceptual represents participants in a generalized or timeless state and consists of "classificational, analytical, and symbolic processes" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; 56).

The next part of their theory involves the interaction between the producer and viewer of the image. Images represent these social interactions and relations through the use of the gaze; size of the frame (i.e., close-up, medium shot, and long shot); perspective; and vertical and horizontal angles. Kress and van Leeuwen also include the category of modality, which refers to "the truth value or credibility of...statements about the world" (Kress van Leeuwen 1996; 160). Modality is represented by a complex combination of visual cues or markers that include the use of color saturation, color differentiation, detail, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness.



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The final part of their model that I plan to use in my analysis relates to the compositional makeup of the entire image, which brings together the way the representational and the interactive elements relate to each other and the way they are integrated to create the whole image. In this part of the analysis, the placement of the various elements in the left/right, top/bottom, center/margin area of the image determines their values. Additionally, the salience and framing, which take into account the placement of the elements in the foreground or background, relative size, and differences in detailing and contrast, also serve as an indication of the information value in an image or layout.



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According to Kress and van Leeuwen (and various other theorists), visual communications and language are both socially constructed and culturally determined. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that "[s]ocieties tend to develop ways for talking about codes only with respect to codes that are highly valued, that play a significant role in controlling the common understandings that society needs to function" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; 32). They acknowledge throughout their book that their readings and analysis are based on the visual semiotics of Western cultures and that cultural specificities may require different models for analysis. For the purposes of the close reading that will be conducted in the analysis section, I will use the compositional dimensions of visual



The map of the dimensions of visual space from *Reading Images*.

space outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen, but flip the model on the vertical axis to account for the right to left reading style of Persian and Arabic, the two main languages used in these posters.

This map will be flipped on the vertical axis to account for the languages used in the posters.

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This tool is based on an original model developed by the [Knowledge Media Lab](#) of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Problems? [Report an Error](#).