

Visual Design Principles

Ads & Slideware

Learning to build your own Web site . . . or publish your own book makes you more critical of the media you see and read each day.

—Ellen Lupton, author of “D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself”
(Qtd.in *Newsweek* 19 Dec 2005, 84).

VISUAL DESIGN

What is visual design? While visual design is defined in numerous ways depending on discipline and profession, this course emphasizes an approach toward visual design as rhetoric. Web design scholars Patrick J. Lynch and Sarah Horton, for instance, see the primary purpose of visual design in creating visual logic such as clear visual hierarchy and defining functional sections of the web page. While visual logic is also critical in advertising, we are interested in exploring how strategies of adopting a particular “logic” in design will shape the ad’s message. Visual design is “rhetorical” for us in that we reflect on how different audiences may “read” design in different contexts of time, media, or situations. Visual design, then, is the deliberate rhetorical combination of art elements (such as color, line, form, texture, scale) that creates an overall effect in unity, balance, proportion, rhythm, repetition, and focalization. While the effects vary depending on the kind of audience response we wish to elicit, design elements and principles contribute to the clarity and persuasive quality of the visual argument in an ad or PowerPoint slide. The following are art elements in design and design principles, which are significant to this course. Design principles are the rules used to apply art elements.

ELEMENTS OF ART

Color: Although this is not an art class, it is important that you know some practical and rhetorical effect of color on your audience. Color also called hue colors can highlight specific areas of the ad page (or PowerPoint screen). The careful selection of complementary colors allows for easier viewing. Colors help *lend continuity, direct the gaze, provide balance, and give focus*.

For instance, a popular strategy in advertising is to use the company colors in the logo or in the product design throughout the advertisement to subtly reinforce the connection between “idea” in the ad and the product brand/company name (see Symantec ad in Fig. 1). Colors are also a useful strategy in guiding the viewer’s attention

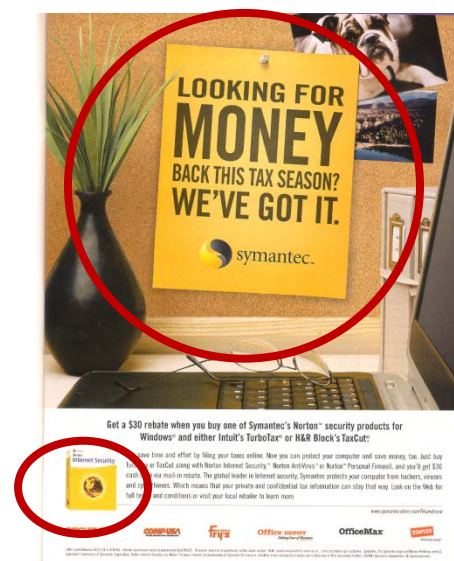


Fig. 1. Symantec Advertisement. *Newsweek*, 14 Feb 2005. Print.

through the maze of the ad and toward the company logo or product.

Line or Vector: The line directs the flow or the movement of the gaze across visual space (in ad or PowerPoint slide). In advertisement, the line is called a “vector.” The line can be literal (linear marks) or it can be “inferred” in the arrangement of pictures and images as well as in the creation of shadows, light, and colors. Lines or vectors are critical in the *arrangement* of ads because it directs the reading audience where and how to look first, second, and last. In PowerPoint presentations, vectors do the same, but it can work more subtly as presenters control the amount of time that viewers look at the screen. The Symantec ad from figure 1 has vectors moving in an unusual direction. While most ad vectors move from upper left corner to



the lower right corner, you’ll notice that the vectors in this ad move in the opposite direction. The posted ad on the corkboard is slightly tilted so that the angle of the ad directs the viewer to the Symantec box at the lower left corner. The angle of the open laptop computer also creates lines toward the lower left. The glasses on the laptop further point our gaze downward toward the Symantec box below.

Texture: Texture refers to the appearance or feel of the surface quality of an object such as glossy or flat paint, smooth or rough surfaces. How does this lend toward visual rhetoric in advertisements? It lends a subtle sense of authenticity. While the primary sense in visual arguments is ocular, our seeing of roughness or smoothness also leads to imagining how it feels, our tactile impression of the object. Ads might use “note” like

paper with rough edges to suggest that it was quickly sketched. Car and cosmetic ads often use texture to suggest the smoothness and shininess of its showcased vehicles or lipstick (so shiny you can almost feel it). Sometimes innovative ads actually add “texture” to the ad page using thick or glossy paper in order to encourage interaction and make the product or ad memorable.

Scale: Scale or size refers to the size of the text or image in relation to its surrounding. This is particularly important in visuals as scale helps the viewer to *prioritize the information* and *focus on an area/idea on the page*. In this course, we discuss scale in terms of **text/image ratio** (size of the text next to the image) as well as looking more globally at the overall size of the image box to the entire ad page. Returning to the Symantec ad, we can see that the ad’s scale of the text (its primary headline “Looking for Money”) and image (the plant in vase, the photographs, the laptop computer) is weighed more toward text: text provides the dominant message while the visuals give the setting or “atmosphere” and helps the



audience identify with the person who is worried enough about the tax season to tack the ad on the corkboard (images tell us that she/he is a traveler, likes dogs, etc.). In terms of the overall size of the image box, we see that the ratio is 2/3 (visual) to 1/3 (text) as my brackets show. You can also observe scale in terms of the size of the object within an image, such as the “flyer” for Symantic within the visual portion of the ad. The size of the flyer (as well as its placement) tells readers what they should visually prioritize.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Now that we’ve been introduced to some basic art elements, we’ll turn to key design principles. For this course, we’ll focus on unity, balance, focalization, and repetition.

Unity: Unity is about the overall style of your visual presentation; it suggests that the various parts of the composition (whether it is written, visual, or oral) seem to fit together. In written composition, unity is provided when you argued clearly for a thesis and its components and then remind readers how your various points of evidence support that thesis. Unity is also created with you provide adequate transitions between that help readers understand the connections between ideas (whether it was a recent idea in the last paragraph or the overarching thesis). In visual composition, unity is created through consistency in theme or a complementary visual scheme. In PowerPoint, for instance, unity might be provided by a consistent background or a consistent use of font type. Other ways to create unity is to use repetition (or variation of an idea), colors, and vectors to hold everything together. Unity through repetition and color is illustrated in figure 2 (Milk advertisement): if you notice, both 1996 Democratic and Republican Presidential candidates (Bill Clinton and Bob Dole) are wearing black jackets, brown ties; both have the same charcoal background for the portrait and both have the milk moustache. This unity works to not only tie the visuals together for the ad but also to symbolically communicate the core message: both Republican and Democratic candidate are part of the same political system in America—in voting (as in drinking milk) one continues to nourish the “backbone” of American democracy.

One must remember, however, that unity does not mean unimaginative repetition or slide monotony (more on that later). Just as in writing an essay, visual unity in PowerPoint considers how the audience will take all your elements in; it does not make the audience work hard to understand what you are communicating. Effective slides in PowerPoint or Prezi (like ads) incorporates

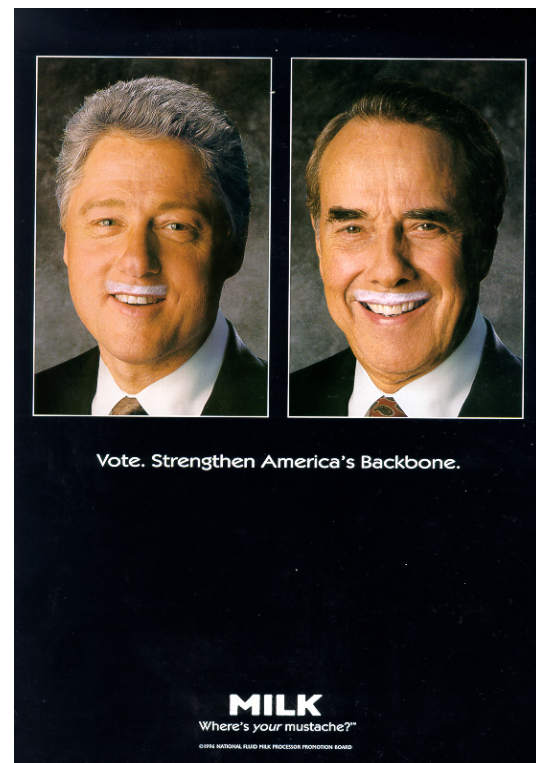


Fig. 2. Milk Advertisement. 1996. Print.

creative ways to make visual design decisions serve a specific purpose in a consistent style.

Balance: In visual studies, balance usually refers visual symmetry, that is, equilibrium of images and colors that attract the eye, providing visual balance and stability. In art, this balance is thought of as a visual equivalent of a scale, where objects, colors, and other visual arrangements on the canvas distribute the “weight” on equal sides of a central axis (horizontal or vertical). There are various types of symmetrical balance. In Figure 2, you see a *vertical symmetrical balance*, a “mirror” image on the left and right.



In Figure 3, the Sky Vodka ad also presents a clear example of vertical balance, although in contrasts. While the colors, figures, and textures are opposite (straight lines with the guy; curves with the girl), the “weight” is evenly distributed on either side of the vertical axis. This draws the eye to both left and right, inviting a comparison on either side (although one could argue that the “glossy” texture, colors, and the model’s body weigh the right side of the ad a bit more—with a blue Skyy bottle tipping the scale).

Fig. 3. Sky Vodka Advertisement. GQ. June 2005. Print.



Fig. 4. Lexis Advertisement. *New Yorker* 4 April 2005. Print.

Asymmetrical balance. In contrast to the Skyy advertisement, the Lexis advertisement plays against our expectations of balance and equilibrium. The two page Lexis “Great Equalizer” ad from April 2005 is an example of vertical asymmetrical balance. Unlike symmetrical balance, asymmetrical balance provides “balance” by re-distributing the “weight” around a fulcrum point with different size objects or graphic design decisions that distribute weight through space and color. For instance, in the Lexis ad, half the car (first page) is frozen in a giant ice cube; the other half (2nd page) is not—illustrating the air conditioning technology in the car. The second (right) side of the ad weighs evenly with the large weight of the ice cube because it includes a long column of copy text and the Lexus logo in the lower right corner.



Fig. 5. Comparison of balance and the absence of balance.

If the copy text and the logo were placed on the left side (see figure 5 comparison), the advertisement would be unbalanced. When there is no balance, the image lacks stability in composition: the piece (ad, art, photo) “tips” to a particular side and is visually lopsided.

Focalization: Focalization (sometimes called “dominance” in the art world) refers to visual features or shapes on the ad page or PowerPoint slide, which are to be the main focus of the viewer’s eyes. These features are placed along lines or vectors because the eye is usually forced along straight or curved lines. Straight lines create strong focalization and curved lines create softer focalization. Soft focalization might be desired when the features and the message are meant to be more subtle and less direct.



Fig. 7 & 8. Ferragamo Advertisement and Burberry advertisement, *New Yorker* 14-21 February, 2005. Ferragamo ad presents hard focalization. Burberry ad presents soft focalization.

For example, compare the strategy of using strong and soft focalization in the following two fashion ads by Ferragamo and Burberry which appeared in the February 2005 issue of *The New Yorker* (see figures 7 and 8).

The focus in both ads is the bag. We are lead to focus on the bags through visual design. The Ferragamo ad is an example of *strong focalization* because of sharper color contrasts and straight lines that frame the objects of interest (bag, coat, shoes). In the Ferragamo ad, color frames the desired image (browns, white, grays, metallic gold, olive colors outside the car vs. black color inside the car). Sharp diagonal vectors from the upper right corner of the vehicle window also frame the woman and her bag. Moreover, the straight angle of her leg leads the viewer to look at the focal point, the bag. Finally, the photograph gives the impression that object of the viewer's voyeuristic interest is the bag: the model's face is only half-shown so that the focus is the bag, not the model.

The Burberry ad, in contrast, is an example of *soft focalization* where the model competes equally with the bag. Burberry's visual strategy is to reveal the bag through exploration of the photograph. First, unlike the Ferragamo ad, the entire page is black and white so that the bag does not jump out of the page. The balance here is horizontal, the face of British model Kate Moss, set against horizontal branches of trees, is aligned with the Burberry bag at the bottom of the page, set against horizontal shadows on the grass. The vectors here are generally softer but still direct us to the focal point, the Burberry bag. We follow the healthy tone of her bare skin, from her face down the curve of her neck and breasts to the bag; we also follow the curve of her crossed leg to her bag. In the Burberry photograph (in the fashion of portrait shots of Herb Ritts), the bag is a prominent but implicit visual object of focus: it shares visual space with Kate Moss, a complement to a glamorous lifestyle.



Repetition: Repetition of form, color, image, lines is often used in ads and PowerPoint to lend balance, focalization, and unity in visual design. For example, the Burberry ad includes repetition of curved lines (the strong lines in the ad are curved such as the branches of the tree, the shadow on the grass, her posture). Strategic repetition can be seen in the use of color (or variation of shades of color) as in the Ferragamo ad. Repetition may appear with or without variation: however, when variation is introduced, repetition may help reinforce an idea and make it more interesting—encouraging the viewer to gaze at an image longer.

QUIZ

The following are from the June 2005 issue of GQ.

Identify at least one art element (color, vectors/lines, texture, scale) and one key visual design principle (unity, balance, focalization, and repetition) for the ads below. Please provide a brief rationale.

Example 1. Hummer advertisement (2 pages of a 6-page spread)



Element of Art:

Visual Design:

Example 2. Sector advertisement

Element of art:

Visual design:

