# The Visual Age

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Welcome to the Visual Age, a new era of cultural communication, where we examine the state of visuals today in the era of social media and reliance on technology for visual communication. Throughout the history of art, visuals have been made by hand, by machine via mechanical means, and now made digitally. Before mass literacy for reading, visual stories were told through architecture, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, and murals. New forms of storytelling have emerged in the contemporary era which depend heavily on images to evoke emotion and mood. These images are designed to create a connection to brands, lifestyle choices, and ultimately how we perceive the world. Before this new era, it took a certain kind of education, expertise and means to make and distribute images, but now anyone can do so in the Visual Age.

## Visual Literacy

Since the invention of modern photography in France in the 1830's, man has used light to capture what we see. Portraits, still lives, and landscapes were the subject matter back then, no doubt replicating the typical subject matter used in painting. But since then, the histories of both art and photography have mirrored each other with their questioning of how and why we depict certain subjects as well as their value to society. As the technology, science, design, and portability improved for cameras over the last two centuries, we have seen advancements which allowed others beyond professionals to practice photography, such as amateurs and enthusiasts. We have Kodak to thank, as they invented cameras for the masses. And one hundred years after the first successful modern camera, 35mm cameras and film were used widely in the street, during wartime, and within our homes, documenting events around the globe as well as capturing the more mundane yet intimate moments of our lives.

Photography, like everything else, changed greatly with the onset of the digital revolution. We went from photographers having their own cameras as work or hobby to most of us having access to a camera and being able to chronicle every detail of our lives through our smart phones. With this came a rise in visual literacy since images have surpassed text in relevance in the digital age. We all communicate now through images, whether that be through selfies, emojis, Bitmoji, infographics, memes, gifs, and TikToks along with more common photos that catalog life in the 21st century.

We can argue that the Visual Age began when humans first started depicting their surroundings. The earliest depictions are known as the Lascaux cave paintings, prehistoric art found in France and painted 20,000 years ago. The depictions of animals and man in the caves astonishingly show visual depth as a precedent to the fuller use of perspective discovered later in art history. Today, digital technology is used to restore and replicate these cave paintings. This is a great introduction to the Visual Age, where art history literally begins and can be preserved for the future using technology and digital tools to facilitate reproduction of art and life. So, what happens when we reproduce art via photographic means? Is that photo also considered art or perhaps something of value? Philosophers and art historians have been arguing this since photography was invented. Walter Benjamin, a notable cultural critic, has said that photography takes away the work of the hand in the painting and substitutes the work of the eye. The reproduction thus renounces the uniqueness and authenticity of the specific artwork, and thus the original always maintains its value more than a copy. This concept was published in 1935 in Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

Since then, a lot has happened to make us question this. For example, Andy Warhol came along in the 1960s. His genius was seeing the art value in the reproduction. Warhol's stance was that once you reproduce a subject - whether it be a common household object like a soup can or a portrait of someone – like Jacqueline Kennedy, the reproduction has a new context, especially in contemporary society where we consume images through ads on TV and magazines, and now the internet. Warhol spent his earlier working years as an illustrator in advertising, where he learned that repetition of the subject was key to get consumers to focus. However, Warhol also realized that repetition desensitizes a person where the subject could lose all meaning. In much of his work, he commented on the endless news reporting and media

overload that he was feeling in the 1960s. Warhol died before the internet was upon us, but clearly the signs were already present.

## Visual Identity & Fluency

The origins of graffiti and street art begin with Tagging. Tagging is the act of writing your street name with spray paint or markers on public property. Starting in New York in the 1970s, tagging became a way for disenfranchised youth to "make their mark" and be visible, especially when they felt invisible. Tagging has much to do with identity and sense of self-worth. Many created alter egos and developed their own visual language through the expansion of this art form. In the 70s and 80s when graffiti was flourishing, there was no internet and thus no way for people who felt on the fringe of society to express themselves visually to the world. For taggers, practicing this is type of localism, where people make themselves present in their community. As this grew and graffiti became the language of the street into the 90s, street culture has become one of the biggest influencers on music, fashion, and art. One thing to think about it that tagging is not that much different from the cave paintings in France or from the way we use Bitmoji and Avatars today - all are forms of visual communication to let the world know that we exist.

Let's fast forward now to visual communication in today's day and age. Our culture has become image obsessed. The internet is our primary tool for this, and this exploded in the early 2000's when users were finally able to upload their own content to the internet. With faster internet, mobile tech devices, and creative apps, social media developed to become a central repository where brands and users both have a stake in creating relevant content.

Today it is easy to generate visuals using our camera phones and all the apps that create filters, overlays, stickers, and text. People are using their social media accounts as an extension of their IRL lives. These images are vignetted to fit in frames, curated with an edited eye, and much of it looks professionally done. Often, it's hard to discern if a teenager created something on Instagram or a sophisticated advertising agency spent months developing a campaign. This is evidence of our visual fluency. The fact that anyone can create compelling visual content with ease and have it online among professional content is indeed signs of an evolving popular culture. There is a lot of social pressure for people to have highly edited and curated feeds.

It should be noted that not all social media is being used for portraying a curated world. Many people use their social media accounts to document the good, bad, and ugly things in life, as well as the "in between" moments that usually don't get shared. This is where photography becomes more documentary and less editorial, more authentic, and less prescribed. It's no longer enough to try to hold someone's attention visually, the imagery needs to lead to a return – whether that's brand loyalty, sales of products, supporting social causes, or creating community. A major trend we have been seeing is retail brands speaking directly to younger consumers. Now that consumers have become visually sophisticated, retailers are finding that they need more visibility in a very crowded landscape online and with brick-and-mortar shops. To connect with younger Millennial and Gen Z shoppers, brands are communicating directly to the Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram generation, using the same design language of their audience and done in a very vivid and memorable way.

This desire for an all-encompassing strategy to connect with Gen Z has led to the development of the CGI influencer and the Avatar economy. The physical and digital worlds are blending, and Gen Z likes to get their inspiration for purchases online. CGI avatars, like Lil Miquela, are appealing for brands as they can accurately reflect today's youth, physically be present anywhere, and they can be modelled into the needs of the supporting brands as well as the audience.

## The Value of Images

In the 1990s, emoticons were popular, where people started using text elements to convey emotions or actions in pictorial form, like a wink or a smiley face. However, in the late 90s and into the 2000s, technology advanced so that emoticons were able to be replaced by an actual emoji graphic language. The word emoji comes from Japanese: E meaning "picture" and MOJI meaning "character". Once they were added to the operating systems of mobile phones after 2010, emoji have become an important part of popular culture and an essential form of communication.

Emoji – and now personalized versions including Bitmoji and Memoji – have been replacing words in today's fast and constant pace of digital discourse. Today there are over 3000 standardized emoji that hold a universal and reliable meaning, although we know that alternate meanings can be inferred. Emoji and their related versions enable people to express

themselves in ways that are immediate, personal, and become an extension of themselves. And because emoji are graphics, they provide additional info that a word cannot convey such as facial expressions, emotion, humor, sarcasm, gesture, context and even body language. The use of emoji has allowed for all of us to partake in creating and sharing these images with meaning and disseminating them around the world.

With the power of digital communication and the rise of visual literacy, we have seen images become more valuable in popular culture than text. However, words and pictures haven't always been viewed separately. When we read a book or a magazine, images support the text and the author's point of view. The pictures and the words work together to give the reader a sense of context and understanding. But when we see images today in social media, this is no longer the case. Words have become disconnected from text, and images become the focal point. This allows the image to live beyond any sense of context, as it's often removed from a sense of place or time.

We are also seeing evidence of words disconnected from pictures and becoming a type of graphic that is also removed from original context. Hashtags and captions have also taken over instead of formal text. This is no doubt due to the speed and urgency of the internet and the way we live our lives in the digital age. We also use memes, comments in social media feeds, and Slanguage as a newer mode of communication. Slanguage is the practice of using socially driven phrases to mean specific things for different generations. Phrases like "OK Boomer" or "YOLO" are good examples. Most slanguage today is fostered and spread on social media.

## Filter Fluency

With the onset of Instagram, as well as third party apps like VSCO and Snapseed, we have all gotten used to seeing filtered images. This is the practice of applying color filters, overlays, or edits for brightness, contrast, and saturation among other features. Instagram, especially with its built-in filter options, has enabled users to produce professional looking photos that have artistic value and create a mood or vibe. The resulting images have altered lighting effects which has changed today's visual language. Chromo-saturation, infrared lighting, and gradients are now a normal part of photography. Brands are embracing these kinds of visuals borrowed from social media for their own campaigns. This is where we start to see design influenced by Instagram, using

visuals that are recognizable and attention grabbing in an editorial context. Enter the era of Filter Fluency.

Instagram has more than one billion active users each month, and the app has changed how we all see and interact with the world. For starters, Instagram gave us framed views in a square format, upgraded our selfies, and created a space for influencers. But it's also given us something more important to think about human behavior, and that is the "Instagram-able Moment". Why is it no longer enough to simply experience a meal without taking pictures of the food? Or to enjoy sharing a moment with a friend without taking pictures together? We are turning everyday moments into extraordinary moments, elevating what we experience into visuals and storytelling. We are also designing features to become Instagram-able. This has become a social phenomenon, where people will flock to take photos of anything with visual impact. This has shifted into the interior design profession, where clients are asking for spaces that have a wow factor to drive engagement. We have even seen spaces designed only for the function of being Instagram-able, like the Color Factory. Customers are being drawn to these types of spaces – whether they be temporary pop-up spaces, or they have a more permanent design feature. They become photographed, hash-tagged, and go viral, which has become a strategy for business today.

## Sensory Immersion

It is no longer to enough to merely see, but now the expectation is to experience color in its full spectrum, as well as engage all our senses. Sensory immersion has emerged as an important trend today. Due to over stimulation of our senses from digital technology, especially with sight and sound, our senses have suffered and become dulled. This desensitization from overuse of our senses has caused humans to crave more sensory experience. It's like our eyes, ears, sense of smell, touch, and taste buds are saying "turn it up!". This is what's driving the need for sensory immersion; people want to heighten how they experience the world and yet also transcend their daily lives. As such, we are seeing art and design installations that offer sensorial engagement and elicit a primal sensory response to the delight of Instagrammers and photographers who try to capture it all for social media. Many of the themes evident in these types of projects include luminous spaces that envelop us, using chromo-saturation and the use of color to alter perception.

## Rendered Reality

Architects, industrial designers, and graphic designers are working within two worlds today: the analog and the digital. There is debate in the design field right now about the role of digital technology. How far should we go as an industry to convey the built environment through pixels? This argument is really about the nature of visuals. Should we focus on saving the hand, making, and creating models, sketches, and plans to show design concepts? Or should we be embracing new rendering and visualization tools to create design? Throughout the last two decades, it has been a combination of both methods. However, today we have sophisticated programs that make photorealistic images, enough to fool the eye to think what we are seeing is real. So much so that it is a whole new practice of design, called Phygital, which merges the physical with the digital. Designers are using software to create objects and spaces in what we call "Rendered Reality", where these new forms exist only on screen but look realistic and highly stylized. Many of these designers are taking advantage of this new CGI technology by creating surreal or even fantasy inspired renderings where the product or room could not truly exist as designed, but it looks amazing on screen. There is a place for phygital design, between social media, advertising, and commercial marketing, and or course our own profession where renderings and visualizations aid in the inspiration and understanding of meaning and scope. Color, lighting, and spatial perspective can also be enhanced, giving a hyper real appearance that could be difficult to achieve otherwise. Phygital design is establishing its own design language. We are beginning to see a lot of evidence of rendered reality. Clearly, new ideas are developing about how we can use these digital tools and what resulting designs might look like.

## Altered Images

With photography today, what the camera captures isn't necessarily what we see. Images can be altered using filters, overlays of images and text, or digital manipulation. The original photo or artwork can be changed so that the image becomes distorted. We have seen this a lot in the history of art as well; again, we look to Warhol whose Last Supper is a printed image of Leonardo da Vinci's original and painted over with camouflage.

Camouflage is the use of materials, color, or illumination for concealing. It is an important feature of nature, which allows different species to conceal or disguise themselves for survival. Nature uses several methods, the most prevalent being blending into the environment, and the other using patterns for disguise. These methods rely on color contrast, textural differences, and concealing edges and outlines through light. Animal and human vision has evolved so that we can perceive complex visual cues, which tell our brain what we are seeing and then our bodies react. However, with camouflage, our eyes are deceived and therefore no perception occurs. As we know, camouflage has moved beyond nature, where the military and even transport vehicles, ships and buildings can be disguised. Let's look now at how designers are using camouflage today.

There is another approach to camouflage called Motion Dazzle, which causes visual confusion for the viewer. The target object is still visible but more difficult to identify due to disruption of an identifiable pattern. The name Dazzle comes from World War One, where the Allied navies painted ships in abstract black and white patterns, making it hard for the ship's size, speed, type, etc. to be detected by the enemy. Supposedly Picasso got the idea for Cubism from seeing a dazzled canon on the streets of Paris. CV Dazzle (CV standing for Computer Vision) has emerged over the last decade as a disruptor of face recognition technology. CV Dazzle is not a product, it is a methodology that uses hairstyling and makeup designs along with applied objects to disrupt the depiction of a face – or create what's called in CV Dazzle an "Anti-Face". The goal of CV Dazzle is to block face detection, thereby blocking additional face recognition algorithms. Facial-recognition algorithms work by detecting facial features and spatial relationships between these features (like contours, symmetry, etc.), so CV Dazzle seeks to disrupt this. Facial-recognition technology has become a tool for surveillance by business and government. While it can provide security and transparency, it is also a threat to individual privacy. CV Dazzle was developed by Adam Harvey – an artist focused on privacy from surveillance - and he describes this as working like this: "You can appear recognizable to people but unrecognizable to machines, existing in a dual state of perception".

Clearly, the history of visuals along with the methods for creating them have changed greatly since the advent of digital technology. This is a field that continues to evolve, now with virtual and augmented reality and AI. Someday, all our digital images will seem as quaint and nostalgic as a sepia-tinged photograph from the late 1800s. Welcome to the Visual Age.

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