The Art and Design of Information  
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“The medium is the massage/message.”
Marshall McLuhan

Visual images usually have more information in them than we can see and process at first glance, but that information is taken in by our brains—often without our permission. We all consume and create media. As we all consume more and more visual media in this age of ubiquitous social media, we need to understand how mediated images work and how they affect us. Media literacy is essential for young people who are especially vulnerable to media’s persuasive effects. Seductive visual media pervades our culture and young people need to learn how to decode the messages embedded in all mediated images. We will tackle this by breaking media down into two parts: form and content. Form is physically what it looks like and content is what it is trying to communicate.

The seminar begins with an introduction to semiotics—the study of signs. Semiotics is the bridge between form and content. The language of visual semiotics provides terms for identifying and explaining certain visual devices that are in use in all media as a kind of visual shorthand that we have all learned to read by living in the culture. Encoded signs are everywhere and their ubiquity encourages people to accept them at face value, without critical evaluation. Teachers will learn how to introduce the theory of semiotics in a way that is understandable to young people—using images from their contemporary visual culture.

The next topic is to learn about specific media and processes (photography, print graphic design, typography, film, television, and social media) and how each has its own way of presenting information. The 1960’s media theorist Marshall McLuhan was the first to offer the idea that the way an image or idea is presented (through what medium) has a huge effect on how it is perceived. In addition to a bit of theory, we will touch on the basic principles of art and design and how they affect perception of visual information. Here we will talk about form in a more specific way and identify how visual elements like shape, form, line, and color affect our reception of images.

Social and cultural issues are always part of any media. In a cultural environment that is sensitive about discussing diversity and difference, teachers will learn how to comfortably bring these issues into the process of analyzing and appreciating media. The ultimate goal is to teach students how to actively, critically, and confidently engage in the sophisticated media environment that can seem intimidating and potentially dangerous. They will gain greater and deeper understanding of the media they encounter and the ability to critically assess embedded messages.

Giving students, especially young people, tools to navigate the complicated media landscape will help them feel empowered in an overwhelming visual environment. These are life skills they will never forget and will continue to reference as they encounter new visual material and even future media forms as they develop. Communication and visual culture are huge international industries that continue to grow. Many of the students in our classrooms will work creating visual culture in some form. They need to understand how media works. Whether students eventually become creators or consumers of media, having the skills to fully understand how visual culture works in contemporary life is a super power.