

Lesson 2 — Analyzing Visual Primary Sources

Exercise 1 The Power of the Visual Image

Visual primary sources can be real aids to understanding past historical periods. **Many visual sources are dramatic and thought-provoking.** Often, in fact, a visual seems much more “real” than mere words on a page. But this power of the visual image can also cause problems. As we will see in this lesson, visuals do not show you the world as it “really” is. All of them leave things out or distort things in one way or another. That means that their powerful appeal can fool you — as can their ability to call out strong feelings.

Each visual primary source document in this lesson will call forth some kind of emotional response from each viewer. That is, each image will cause you to react to or feel something about the subject matter illustrated. In the spaces below, jot down some notes on the kind of emotional response you think each visual source for this lesson is meant to call forth. Then briefly answer the questions at the bottom of this worksheet. As a class, discuss your results.

Doc. 1

Doc. 2

Doc. 3

Doc. 4

Doc. 5

Doc. 6

Doc. 7

Doc. 8

Doc. 9

Doc. 10

Which image calls forth the strongest emotional reaction, positive or negative? Why?

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Exercise 2

The Visual Image: Always a Selective View

Visual primary sources may seem to offer a direct view of what things were “really like” in the past. However, no image, not even a crisp photograph, is a simple “window” showing you reality itself. Any visual gives you only a partial and sometimes distorted view of its subject. **Most visuals images are carefully arranged, and all of them are highly selective views of reality.** That is, every visual image “selects” certain features to include or emphasize and leaves out other features.

For example, documents 5-9 for this lesson are all about either World War I or World War II. But they offer very different views of the warfare in these two great conflicts of the 20th century. Pretend you are to teach a group of younger students about the nature of total war in the 20th century. But also pretend that you can only use three of these five visuals in your lesson. Which three would you use? Make your choices. Then write a paragraph answering each of the two questions below. Share your ideas in a class discussion about the selective views provided by these five visual primary sources.

1. From Documents 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, I would use Documents _____, _____ and _____ in a lesson on warfare in World War I and World War II. I would use these three documents because ...

2. From Documents 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, I would NOT use Documents _____ and _____ in a lesson on warfare in World War I and World War II. I would NOT use these two documents because ...

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Exercise 3

Visual Sources: You “See” What You Know

It's hard to interpret primary sources of any kind without knowing something about their historical time period. This may be even more true of visual primary sources than others. In spite of the famous saying, a picture is often NOT “worth a thousand words.” If anything, a thousand words of background information may be needed to make sense of a picture. That is, **your background knowledge deeply affects how you make sense of any visual image you seek to understand.** Or to put it another way, what you see is shaped by what you already know.

This exercise gives you a simple way to prove this to yourself. Block out the information provided above the cartoon labeled **Document 4** for this lesson. Now show the cartoon separately to two friends or family members. Ask them to describe fully what they see and their reactions to it. Don't give them any hints about it! In the spaces provided below, take notes on what these two people say. Then complete the assignment at the bottom of the page. (You do not need to identify the two people by name, if they prefer to be anonymous. Just write down “friend,” “relative” or some other general term.)

Doc. 4 Shown to _____

Notes on discussion

Doc. 4 Shown to _____

Notes on discussion

Based on the notes above, write a brief report to share in class on how these two individuals interpreted Document 4 and how their own background knowledge seemed to affect their interpretation.

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Exercise 4

Interpreting Visual Sources: Think About Form as Well as Content

When you look at a photo or other visual image, you usually pay attention to the subject or the scene in it. That is, you pay attention to its “content.” **Yet the real impact of an image often comes from its form not its content.** By “form” we mean all the features that affect how the content is presented. For example, in a photo this means the composition of objects in the image, lighting, dress, cropping, color, camera angle, sharpness or softness of focus, gestures or expressions of subjects, etc. In a poster, painting or political cartoon, form means composition, artistic style, visual symbols, shape and size distortions of various objects, shading and coloring, etc. **All these “formal” features add information to the image.** They can be very important in interpreting a visual primary source. In answering a DBQ, you may even want to spend more time on these aspects of the image than on the content itself.

Even a simple image of a single person can express a great deal about its times and the attitudes of people then. You can prove this to yourself with this exercise. Do both steps of the exercise. Then, as a class, discuss the paragraphs you have written.

1. Take some notes on the “formal” features you notice in each of the following images:

French Poster: Document 5

French Poster: Document 7

2. Using these two images only, write a one-paragraph answer to this question:

What do these images show about changing views in France toward “The Great War” of 1914-1918?

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Exercise 5

Interpreting Editorial Cartoons: Symbol & Metaphor: Exaggeration & Distortion

Editorial cartoons are a unique art form in which images express concepts, ideas and strong opinions, usually about major social and political issues. Editorial cartoons use a kind of “language” of their own to convey ideas in visual form. Symbols, metaphors, exaggeration and distortion are key elements of this language. Use the definitions of these terms provided here to help you analyze **Document 8** and **Document 10** for this lesson. In the spaces provided below, take notes on what you find. Discuss your analysis with the class.

Symbol & Metaphor: A symbol in a cartoon is any object or design that stands for something else — for another object, a group of people, an attitude or idea. For example, the figure of Uncle Sam is often used as a symbol for the United States. Symbols work as a kind of shorthand. They make it easy to pack a lot of meaning into a cartoon. Often a single visual symbol can call attention to several aspects of an issue, problem or public figure. To recognize these various meanings, note how the symbol is drawn, the feelings or emotions it evokes, and the ideas associated with it. In a metaphor, two totally different things are equated on the basis of some common aspect — for example, a huge alligator might be used as a metaphor for a powerful but clumsy government.

Exaggeration & Distortion: Cartoonists frequently exaggerate or understate the sizes of the objects they draw. They do this to stress the power or weakness, importance or unimportance, dangerousness or helplessness of some person, group, or social force. Distorting shapes of objects can also be a way to call attention to different aspects of the idea or issue being represented. The distorted images in a cartoon can have a powerful emotional impact — and they often reveal the artist’s unstated beliefs or assumptions.

Doc. 8 **Symbol & Metaphor**

Exaggeration & Distortion

Doc. 10 **Symbol & Metaphor**

Exaggeration & Distortion

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Exercise 6

Interpreting Editorial Cartoons: Using a Checklist

Below is a checklist that should help you to interpret just about any editorial cartoon, historical or current. Save this checklist and use it on a regular basis each time you are asked to discuss or analyze an editorial cartoon.

For this exercise, choose any one of the cartoon documents. Using the checklist, write a brief essay analyzing in detail the cartoon you chose. Sum up by explaining how the cartoon could best be used in an historical essay on changing images of war in modern world history.

The MindSparks Editorial Cartoon Checklist

THE ISSUE Editorial cartoons are NOT just like other comics. They may be funny. But their main purpose is to offer an opinion or point of view about some issue or problem in the news. First try to decide what the issue or problem is in the cartoon you are studying?

SYMBOLS A symbol is any object or design that stands for some other thing, person, or idea. For example, a huge thug may stand for the problem of crime. Describe objects in the cartoon that are symbols.

EXAGGERATION & DISTORTION Which features in the cartoon are exaggerated? That is, which appear much larger or smaller than they actually are? Changes in size or shape of this sort often add to the cartoon's point. Distorting an object means changing it in some way to make it look funny, ugly, etc. What symbols or other objects in the cartoon are distorted, and how does this add to the cartoon's point?

STEREOTYPES A stereotype is a simplistic view of some group. It is often insulting. But it can also help the cartoon make its point quickly. What stereotypes are used in the cartoon? Are they used unfairly, or are they used just to help the cartoon make its point?

CARICATURE Caricature is a portrayal of an individual's features in an exaggerated or distorted way. Is caricature used in the cartoon? If so, does it help to make an important point about the person portrayed?

HUMOR AND IRONY Humor is important in many editorial cartoons. Irony is one kind of humor. In it, a viewpoint is expressed in such an odd way as to make that view actually seem ridiculous. Is the cartoon you are studying funny or ironic? If so, does the humor add to the cartoon's point? Does the humor present an unfair or highly exaggerated idea of the other side's point of view?

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE A reader usually must know certain things about an issue in order to understand an editorial cartoon on that issue. What kinds of background knowledge do you need in order to make sense of the cartoon you are studying? Where might you get that knowledge if you do not already have it?

THE ARGUMENT Slogans tell us what to do or think. "Smoking Kills," or "Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute," are slogans. A good editorial cartoon is NOT just a slogan. It gives reasons for its opinion. In other words, it is an argument. What point of view does your cartoon present, and what argument does it offer? How do its symbols, distortions, stereotypes, caricature or other features help it to make a good argument for its point of view?
