

## Reading Visual Texts: A Bullet for Your Arsenal

Susana Rodriguez

Susana puts her art background and Art History degree to use by deconstructing how images work as visual texts. Using Apple's iPod banners as examples, she unpacks ideas like subject, iconography, color, composition, and perspective into easily digestible tidbits for use in analyzing other images, advertisements, posters, stickers, graffiti, art, and secret valentines.

I like those iPod ad banners. The ones almost every other city skyscraper's wallpapered with in a screaming rainbow of neon colored backgrounds and silhouettes of people rocking out to their music collections like it's 1999. In fact, I really like those silhouettes because they let me pretend I'm cool and can totally tear up my own imaginary dance floor without anyone silently judging just how awkward and out of time my steps actually are. Through Apple, I can be queen—no, *empress* of my own personal disco and no one can say anything against my benign, indie-folk-electro-pop dictatorship. That's what's beautiful about Apple's ad campaign: me, my dog, *anyone* can be those silhouettes—just visually fill in the blanks.

But what are these blanks Apple wants consumers to fill? I can't even tell who those people are or what they're listening to, except that they're some of the hippest kids with their hoodies and fedoras, dreads and pompadours, and is it just me or do they have personal trainers on speed dial because there's definitely less than five to eight percent body fat on all those torsos. I don't know about Apple's corporate heads but I most definitely do *not* fit into these candy colored squares they've drawn out as their idealized customer. I have never been and probably never will be a single digit size,

thanks to my natural, gene-coded Latina curviness and my crippling, hip-splosive love for all things sugar dusted, malted, and whole milked. But I'll be damned if my iPod doesn't make me look like a baller, bobbing my head along to Pitchfork's latest editorial darlings from behind my ten-dollar wayfarer knockoffs. I Pod, therefore I am a lean, mean, dancing machine. I paid through the nose for it, so by definition it should magically envelop me in pure, unadulterated cool.

It's all part of an advertisement's core function: to sell something, be that product or fantasy or, ideally, *both*. What Apple's trying to sell me here isn't just a glorified portable hard drive with a delightful clicking wheel to sort through thousands of songs I might never get the chance to hear in their entirety. They're trying to sell me "cool," "hip," "stylish," and "edgy"—dime store descriptors for Madison Avenue concepts of street fashion couture—neatly packaged with their contemporary handheld boomboxes.

Almost everything people are meant to look at—advertisements, movie posters, even family vacation photos—is a carefully constructed package meant to deliver a controlled idea and meaning to an audience: the viewer. (I know my mom stink-eyed me into smiling very wide and standing very still next to some poor teen sweating for pocket money inside of a Robin Hood costume for our Disney World vacation photos: a composed image of summer Floridian family fun when all I wanted was to ride the teacups again and again to see if I really could throw-up like Cousin Paul said I would. Absolute lies—lies I would only condone by standing still.) Every last commercial, movie, even music video wants a viewer to take something away from it—something that a team of people sat down and discussed, storyboarded, designed, edited, and delivered to the viewer, its passive audience, for consumption. (My mom wanted everyone to "see" we had a grand old time at Disney World, and that never once was she mortified by my six-year old self flailing on the ground in screaming, crying, snot-faced rebellion against posing for pictures. By the power of Kodak, we sure as hell were going to *look* like a nice family having a nice time at the happiest place on earth, so help us Instamatic.)

This isn't to say Apple itself is a shadowy corporate organization with infinite, personal monetary gain but they do have bills to pay, I'm sure.

I try to figure out what exactly that Anonymous Team of Designers (read: Shadowy Corporate Organization with Infinite, Personal, Monetary Gain) had in mind for me by taking apart an image layer by layer: the subject, iconography (if there is any), colors and how they interact with each other, and composition, especially layout and perspective.

First, I consider what the subject of an image is: who or what is being focused on, like the noun of a sentence. A subject can turn into a proper noun for me depending on whether or not there's iconography—signs and

symbols, icons, referencing or alluding to other subjects, places, or things—that give it a deeper meaning or specific identity. I see the iPod ad banners as having two subjects—the iPod and the dancing silhouettes—with the iPod itself becoming an iconographic element because of how much attention it’s given compared to the anonymous silhouette: it’s a symbol of contemporary, luxurious, music technology. The anonymous silhouette holding the iPod then becomes the symbolic proprietor of the icon and the meanings associated with it: modernity, taste, a privileged social class. As a consumer, my owning an iPod associates me with this select group, or at least helps me *look* like I belong.

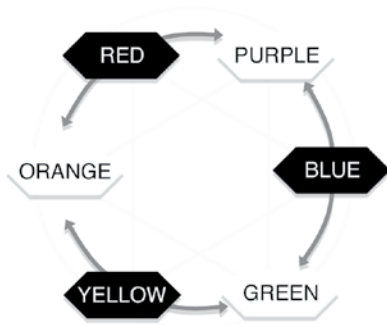


Fig 1 An innocent, helpful color wheel.

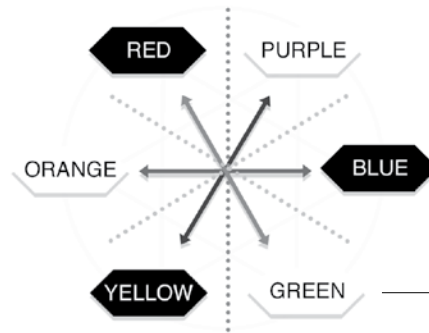


Fig 2 A sinister color wheel of DOOM.

Clearly this color wheel is only slightly evil as it's a budget friendly black-and-white wheel.

Next, I think about colors and how they work to get a good handle on what these ATDs (SCO with IPMG) want me to see/read. Remember the color wheel, and how neatly it shows how to mix the primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—to make secondary colors like orange, green, and purple to fill in coloring books with the whole rainbow, not just bits of it? Yeah, *that's* the rose-colored lens way I thought about it for years because I was a trusting, unassuming, gullible kindergartener when they got to me. But not anymore—at least not now that I've learned how advertisers turn it into something much more evil.

On the left is a standard color wheel with helpful arrows showing how to get from the primaries to the secondaries. On the right is a sinister color wheel revealing hidden design secrets that advertisers have guarded for centuries—*dun-dun-DUUUUUM!* The dotted line cutting into the middle separates the warm colors—red, orange, and yellow—on the left from the cool colors—purple, blue, and green—on the right. The dotted line also helps show analogous color groups: colors next to each other that match easily without clashing. The warm and cool trios make up two simple analogous sets, but really, any three colors side by side can make up a new set like the fainter diagonal crossbars show: red, purple, and blue match as well as orange, yellow, and green do.

Advertisers use this knowledge, to make visually appealing images but to make loud ones by using complementary contrasts—the colors directly across from each other on the color wheel—to draw a lot of attention in the middle of, usually, an analogously composed background. Apple’s early iPod ads skipped all this foreplay and stuck to solid, neon-colored backgrounds that do enough yelling on their own to grab consumer attention, using the silhouettes to highlight the one articulated image in their ads: the iPod with its patented, serpentine earbuds. But sometimes they would stack and grid a bunch of these seemingly simple iPod ads and the solid backgrounds would start playing off of each other to grab consumer attention: a bright pink background next to a lime green one that reinforced each other’s loudness, or an ad grid made up of mostly red, purple, and blue backgrounds with a bright yellow background ad in the middle of them all drawing the most attention to itself based on its proximity to the purple background.

Conspiracy? Not quite. (Yet.)

Apple’s ATDs have gotten really sneaky lately, using this not-particularly-forbidden color knowledge to play with consumer emotions and perceptions. The newer iPod ads have amped up the colors, using swirling chromatics to visually italicize, bold, and underline just how hard the silhouettes are jamming to their handheld idols. An ad could have a nice, warm, inviting color palette with sunshiney yellows, soft pale pinks, and citrusy oranges all splashing around together to entice the senses, leading a viewer’s eye from the edges of the banner towards the middle where they’re wrapping themselves around *WHAM*—a bright, cool lavender silhouette smack in the middle of this calculated color symphony, harshing its orchestrated Zen with a purposely “clashing” dancing figure to tap into baser, consumerist, want-need-must-buy-buy-buy-NOW instincts.

This controlled clashing is something I’ve noticed Apple’s ATDs have turned into a science: combining two or more analogous colors and offsetting them with the one complementary contrast to another in the original set to draw the most attention. They never use more than one set of complementary contrasts in one ad, playing it safe and tasteful by concentrating their efforts on the one combination: either yellow and purple, orange and blue, or red and green together, but never yellow and purple *and* orange and blue or red and green together—that would be tacky. I call this the Lakers/Gators/Christmas Paradox to both remember which ones go together and why two or more should never be in the same picture: it’s like trying to watch a Lakers or Gators game or *both* during the holidays—not gonna happen. It’s near impossible because the yellow and purple together will scream for my

attention as loud as orange and blue will, while red and green will demand I ignore both sets and make me have a bite of Abuelita's buñuelos whether I want to or not.

Almost lastly, I look at an image's composition, or layout—how figures and objects are placed to make up the picture—to help develop even more meaning. I think about how a story can be told through where things are placed either up close in the foreground, in the midground, or background of an image to illustrate the scene: is the focus on the subject or where the subject's placed, and does that focus on the setting say something more about the subject than the subject alone can? Other things I consider are the angles and patterns created through object placement: does everything fall into a horizontal line to create a connection between elements, are there vertical lines created to draw my attention up or down to other things I'm supposed to notice (or not) within the image, or are there diagonal lines made to communicate action or movement? Apple keeps it simple by drawing consumer eyes in with the loud neon colored backgrounds that their dancing silhouettes are contrasted against, which in turn draws attention to the more often than not diagonal lines created by the dancing figures to bring the most attention to the foreground where the iPod's placed ever so closest to the image's heart and, not coincidentally, the viewer, i.e. my shriveling savings account.

Accident? My pockets think not.

Lastly-lastly, I look at perspective—where the viewer stands in relation to an image—and how it can create an imaginary relationship between the ATDs' fantasy and my reality. Angles that make a viewer look up at a subject—whether created within the image's composition or its placement high up on a wall far and away from my blinding little eyes—create a visual metaphor of admiration on the viewer's part while angles looking down on the image emphasize the viewer's superiority or advantage over the subject's placement. Eye level perspectives, where the viewer and image stand on even ground, create a (false) sense of equality between the subject and observer.

Depending on where I've seen Apple's iconic iPod ads, the perspective can shift dramatically. In magazine print ads, I'm usually eye-to-eye with the images, making an intimate "I'm just like you, you should totally own an iPod too because we're just as cool as each other" connection between us. Even in stores the ads tend to be viewer-sized and viewer-leveled to highlight that friendly connection between image and viewer, giving me more reason to steer clear of Apple stores at the mall so I don't fall into abject poverty sooner than my college education would like.

Not that my Abuelita's buñuelos are a bad thing—I love buñuelos! It's delicious! Please don't stop sending me buñuelo care packages with pocket money to help me buy groceries every month! I love you, Abuelita!

But it's out on the town where I've seen it gets to be two very different kinds of weird that can be funny (or scary) when looking at street level paste-up ads and building-sized banners. The street level paste-up ads tend to be stuck up on the sides of a building wall at pedestrian level, but the fact that they're often pasted up and around and on top of each other to form a grid makes the ads look like they tower over the viewer, which tends to work against me and my slight-but-usually-almost-totally-negligible fear of people, places, and things trying to sell me things by subjecting their self-imposed taste-authority over my freedom to choose what I like and buy for myself, thank you very much, Apple. The building-sized banners do this too, although it seems by accident: they're usually placed on buildings by highways to be seen from cars, and from inside a car at a distance away they seem viewer-sized when I'm zipping by. But on the street from a pedestrian's perspective, the building-sized banners are massive and high up from the sidewalk, making the street-level viewer crane their neck to look up at the giant dancing silhouettes above them. It makes me end up feeling like the tiniest, insignificant little thing meant to worship the two-dimensional technology gods high up above me.

Who am I kidding?

Poorly thought out ad placement that interrupts a friendly, equalizing, eye level perspective pattern? Or, maybe, another attempt by Apple's ATDs to suck my pockets dryer than a Hoover?

MAYBE!

Maybe.

## References

- Apple Inc. Apple iPod Advertisements. New York: TBWA\Chiat\Day, 2001-2011. Print.
- Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. New York: Pearson, 2005. Print.
- Tucker, Amy. *Visual Literacy*. Boston: McGraw, 2002. Print.



**Susana** is a first year PhD student in English Studies. She currently only has 12,088 songs on her iPod, much to her audiophile heart's dismay. She hopes one day she'll meet the Ned the Piemaker to her Chuck Charles who'll win her heart with the scope of his own musical tastes found on his own equally overloaded modern boombox and his penchant for delightful, old timey romantic gestures. When she graduates, she hopes to use her hard-earned academic wisdom to live a nomadic life, traveling from city to state to country and back again by sailboat with Ponyboy, her puppy and tiny household dictator. Ponyboy hopes Susana's education ensures he'll be kept belly deep in rawhides and chew toys as befits the lifestyle he's grown accustomed to.