

The Importance of Visual Language In Learning Photography

Asep Deni Iskandar, Widyatama University, asepdeni@widyatama.ac.id
Herlinda Putri, Widyatama University, herlindaputri@yahoo.com

Abstract

The development in camera technology seems to grow so fast, and so does the computer. It should improve the creativity of the practitioners so that the issues arising are not in the aspects of technique and the sophisticated tools only – but are in the content represented, so that the “photography art” would not be stagnant. This photography stagnation can be figured out by the appearance of most photo-works, image repetition especially in the naturalist style. The implication of digital camera revolution is in making camera operating easier. Therefore, even a six-year-old kid can compose a photo-work defined as good by the practitioners and photographer. Although it is good that taking photographs has become easier, it seems that content is not an important aspect. One of the elements in photography hardly touched is visual language. It seems to be unimportant in photography area and works. This paradigm does not belong to the photographers but also to the photography subject educators, where as in photography area it cannot be separated due to the picture produced is a result of visual grammar. Thus it is very necessary in learning photography, either the Western which has been globalized since the colonialism era or the special one come from the Indonesia tradition.

Keywords: image, visual language, photography

Preface

Language in cultural study is one of the aspects, or elements, of culture in the society which cannot be separated from other culture elements. It is an important one for every human as an individual, along with other individuals around, for it is used one to another and each other to communicate – so that interaction may happen, in which humans share their mind or send a message using a language or a symbol. The format of the language used can be a sign or symbol which can be interpreted either verbal or non-verbal. Either in expressing their mind or sending the message orally, humans can use intonation or certain pitch in their pronunciation so that there will be a meaning in it. Meanwhile, humans can set the preference of the language or certain symbol in writing format – including preference of word choice to make it more effective.

As well as in communicating, photography used as a message transfer medium (or something to tell), requires its own grammatical – so that sending a message or expressing something can be more effective. Communicating through photography is not only about neither recording nor capturing an image. As a matter of fact, photographers are challenged by their skills to send messages through photography language – as well as sending messages using effective words. The grammars in photography are the elements that compose an image, and are not a reproduction of an object only – so that it can tell a story. A good photograph is not only a clear, sharp, and physically beautiful one. As a representation of an idea or a message, it requires its own imaging that can communicate the idea, concept, or the feeling of the photographer; so others can understand, feel, and get the message implicitly. For making a photograph able to communicate a message, the photographing conducted needs to follow the grammar of an image – so the message can reach others – as Virgil stated that; “*grammar-the part of the study language which deals with the form and structure of words and with their customary arrangement in phrases and sentences. The system of words structures and word arrangement of given language at a given time*”.

What Virgil stated gives an understanding about the using of words structure in a sentence, that it is composed using grammar. Structured written language is easy to understand, so it is formed using grammar and other appropriate arrangements required. The similar ways and purpose is also valid in visual language, in this condition it is for a photograph format. Formatting and composing any object, and the expression order, are the rules in formatting, composing, and ordering images – so that the message can be carried out and sent. In communication, verbal language can use intonation level and voice pitch to strengthen the purpose. Similar reason in photography, there are certain ways to do so.

Stating a certain feeling (for example sad, excitement, happiness) can be conducted by using colors which has much probability in showing a symbol of certain situation and condition.

Visual language Development as Media of Communication

The artifacts of first communication among humans were the visual language used before alphabets were discovered or developed. The images of prehistoric era became one of the media to tell a message in form of information about the history, the culture, the science and knowledge, and other aspects. In the prehistoric era, the message told through an image is usually true – and is able to be minimized if there is any mistakes or untrue part. According to the history, images are then the starting point for the invention and development of the letters and alphabets nowadays. It took so long time for an image, as we finally figured out that there is such a very long distance of time from the prehistoric era to our nowadays, to have a simplification (abstract) to the nowadays letters or alphabets which then became a media of communication; and the function of an image as a non-verbal communication media has been replaced ever since. The technology development of media and the need of interactions media among humans which can be used widely across many countries, seemed to make a backward progress in the usage or function of verbal and non-verbal communication. Texts or words are not the only media to communicate, sometimes images are also inserted into the texts – but even each of them can now be used as a media of communication separately.

The ancestor of Indonesian in the prehistoric era had developed their visual language intuitively using their own system; tapped on the rocky ground area or the wall in the caves, on the menhir, and on other artifacts. Special drawing system on the menhir did not belong to them only. By looking at the artifacts on the wall in the caves, we can find many similarities in forms. Hence, it can be said that special drawing system was the only drawing technique developed in the prehistoric society era.

At the next development, it showed no significant change. It can be seen on the monumental artifacts made around 9th century, tapped on the chunks of rock as pieces of reliefs on the ancient temple, as a prove. The carver artists were able to depict the details of each part, though the drawing media were limited. In fact, the limitation they had at the moment showed differences on the images; between the males and the females, among the commoner citizens, the priests, and the aristocrats; by the characteristics of the attributes and the clothes they wore at that time.

Another artifacts as another heritage which used specific visual language can also be seen on *wayang* Beber, which had been developed since 1361 and reached its peak of popularity in 1562 – then declined. The decline was not due to the dislikes of the society but the presence of *wayang kulit* which then became more popular. The depict of *wayang* Beber is in form of serial of images painted on a piece of fabric, which is able to be rolled and is easy to carry everywhere – hence it will be so practical for an uncertain move location show. The serial of the images which are a uniting of several episodes of a story was said to be the ancestor of nowadays comic, as Lombard stated. The use of special visual language by applying the STP (Space Time Plane) system on *wayang* Beber, as well as on the images of the rocky grounds area and of every relief pannel of ancient temple, is a power to describe a story of many occurrences. Images appeared which used this system will show serial of several acts and moving images in a certain place and time so it can tell a story.

The ancient heritage of the special drawing system was slowly but sure replaced by the Western system which is called Naturalist Perspective moment opname (NPM). It was first known during the Renaissance era, which the images depict a perfection; for example, a perfect body is a proportional and athletic one. The colonialism was like a medium for the NPM drawing system to spread all over the world, and made it dominate the visual art concepts – which then became a universal standard, and too mainstream. Its spreading did not only replace the STP system, but also started to make it neglected; and was indirectly cut from the special drawing technique as a heritage from the ancestors. Even the society understand the visual language of the images of the Western ancestors more than their own. The cut, either indirectly or directly, in drawing technique of their own ancestors heritage did not only happen in Indonesia, but almost in every country in the Eastern area.

The change into Western visual art concept, which is assumed and thought to be a modern one, happened due to the presence of assumption (including in Indonesia) that the Eastern visual art is a traditional one – and as a local identity, then it is not updated or even is addressed as ancient. Modernism has become a standard for the developed countries ever since, and hence so many people hold into the Western visual art concept – and meanwhile, leave their own tradition. The very strong effect of this phenomena in the painting development made Eastern painting art hold into the Western; especially in term of technique, the oil paint, perspective, and the cut of the inspiration through view images, portrait, and social reality. After the spreading of visioplastic painting from the West in Indonesia, our (Indonesian) generation started to forget what the ancestors had told and taught; it is "drawing or painting is not like what is seen by the eyes".

When the society themselves left their drawing system, the Western artists did not only take the primitive objects and materials as their inspiration but also stole the special visual language concepts integrated into modern art system. At a big exhibition in *Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)* in 1984-1985 titled "*Primitivism*" in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of Tribal and the Modern*, it is so obvious that the tricky Western artists took the primitive idea to then claim it as a universal art paradigm. Works of Picasso can be the examples, many of them were inspired by the African – or the fact that so many surrealist artists use Eastern special visual art concepts. The run of the exhibition is a depiction about the great achievements of the Western artists in influencing their drawing system, which is claimed universal, by taking the primitive images and calling them *tribal art*. Through those new images, Picasso became a hero – for adding a new knowledge in the Western visual art development.

Visual Language in photography media

The presence of the two different ways of visual language can actually give their own advantage, or at least there will be possibilities of producing new works which diminish (or even vanish) the gap between the traditional ways and the modern ones. Both drawing techniques can be used and combined into works which have new images, as what Picasso or other artists did – taking those primitive images and combining them into new format in painting, which is then known as surrealist style.

The works in surrealist style, like Salvador Dali or Philips Halsman made in the middle of 20th centry, came up in the recent development of photography. Those surrealist styled photography works were then mostly produced by photography artists, especially as the digital imaging techniques developed. If we search photography sites on the internet, there will be so many illustrative photography works – which have surrealist images.



Picture1. Anton Ismail, Dewi, 2006

Among so many illustrative photography works made, the images depictions are limited to fulfill the need of visual beauty. The photography work that Anton Ismail created, titled "Dewi" – and showed 13 figuers of Dewi Sandra in different gestures and costumes in one drawing media or a sheet of photograpy paper, can be an example of the limitation. The image above shows a various pose of a beautiful female. The image or depiction made by an Anton Ismail seemed to be a trend or a vital role in the photographers' perspective nowadays – especially as the digital imaging techniques has been developed. In the drawing techniques, the image above did reach its perfection – by taking and composing the different styles, poses, gestures, and costumes of the model in such a way.

A depiction of a model which has 13 different styles and poses – and also costumes – in a frame, is limited in showing the beauty in a visual form. The image have not yet shown a whole story, or become a structured description which can state a change of place and time. In communication context, the photographer is not able to depict a message (wanted to be transferred) or a story (wanted to be told). To be able to do so, then photographers need to use visual grammar – as already explained previously – so the placing of the 13 images version of the model may give a certain story. The story in this visual context is not only about putting them in one frame, but about the ability of the changes – the differences – to become a sequenced story of some acts.

Ability appears in an example image, titled *Dance with skull*, below showed the change in places and time. The depiction of twin/multiple images technique in picture 2 had been used by the Indonesian ancestors. The artifacts found on the reliefs of the ancient temples are also found on the *wayang* Beber.



Picture 2. *Dance with skull* (Source : <http://www.wikipedia.com>)

The depiction which picture 2 has, is almost the same with the photography work that an Anton Ismail made – which using twin/multiple images technique – so that the same model can be shown in one frame. Despite the similarity in the photography work of *Dance with skull* it can give certain differences – not only due to the depiction way, but also the story impression given or shown. The difference is also found technically – the first picture was obtained using a digital imaging application, while the latest was obtained using a direct capturing or the multiple exposure technique.

The image of the photography work titled *Dance with skull* can give a strong feeling of the differences in places and time, and the time changing that the model experienced is shown in one frame. The different backgrounds when the object was captured, and the movement of the body position as the change of the long skirt which the model wears, strenghten the impression of the places and time changing. The depiction can give a certain story, about the feeling of the model who misses her lover so much – that it is shown by the model expression, she expressed it by dancing with a skull as a symbol of her dead lover. The dancing movements between the model and the skull, in the same time, become the sign of places and time changing.

As a comparation and to explain more about plural images, which gives effects of much to an object to become a whole complete story, the picture below is another example.



Picture3. Mark Nazaroff, *untitled*, 2009,
(Source: <http://www.photocontest>)

It shows people busy playing card games, and the money on the table explains a message that they are not just playing but also gambling. When we see it slightly, it seems like they are four different people – it can be seen by their gesture and expression. But when we see it more carefully and check the details on their faces, body shapes, costumes, and other signs, it can be figured out that those four men are only a person of four different forms – whether in gesture, expression, and other differences. The depiction that the image has is a technique of plural images – which shows one single person in four different poses and expressions on one single frame. The fourth models presence in the image can obviously and easily be recognized – because they show same body shapes and also faces, which is depicted in a naturalist way.

It is easy to make such an image, as shown on the third picture. There is computer software to do it. Though it is easy doing it until the final touch, by the help of so many types of computer software available nowadays, the photographing process in the studio in fact may get much difficulties. The difficulty level is especially there at the light setting, and at the way to show the gestures followed by the expression of the models – so that four different images, like shown on the picture, can be obtained.

Technically, an image is obtained well on it; let it say by the light setting, poses or styles, and composition and arrangement which combine those four different ones. The success of the photography work shown in picture 3 is not only by the technical value but also by each expression and gesture of the model which form unity of story. The image does not only show a human card-gambling, but also show tricky atmosphere. The bending body pose and sticking out hand on the back, completed with hidden cards, can explain that something tricky is happening. The gesture and the mimics of other models strengthen the meaning, and it becomes a whole complete story of what is happening on the gambling table – though there is only a single model.

The main object which will be depicted on the picture is shown on the one placed at the outer set, though most of his body part shown is only his back. In visual language, this kind of depicting is a way to express and state that the back is an important part. This impression is strengthen and shown more visibly by the part of sticking out hand lower to pass another card hidden. This is also the point of story, about the tricky presence. An impression of the importance is shown by the different gestures among others, so that it became so striking or a focus of interest, though his back is turned on audience who see it. The bending body with the turning head showed an impression of the presence of a dialog – as a trick to alter the attention. On the background, it is shown clearly – a wall completed with details of the corners; so it gives an impression that the gambling activities shown on the picture is happening in a room. The wall which became the background, also gives a sign of the object presence – or it is as an identification of the room.

In visual language, characteristics or plural images way or methods, as discussed previously, was said by Primadi as a sequence depicting. It is on drawing media, presented on the artifacts like on the

94th panel of archery competition – the story of Lalitavistara Borobudur. In photography context, it is a camera recording or a serial of several scenes – the images are captured and saved in a format of film or softcopy file. The scenes serial depicting in separated frames is due to the limitation of the camera in capturing images in a single frame or a photo-paper only. To unity the serial of the scenes, like the drawing way on the panel reliefs of archery competition story, there are various special techniques available. If the camera has the facilities of frame rolling holder to make capturing process able to keep in the same frame, then multiple scenes in one single frame can be obtained. It is called ‘multiple exposures’ technique, and is considered to be difficult enough to do; for doing it requires carefulness to avoid an accumulation of images. As the digital imaging and other similar software of computer developed fast, doing it then becomes easier.

In the context of image projecting for the serial of scenes in photography, it is well known as a term of ‘sequence’ and ‘photo essay’. Both terms, also ways of image projection, are able to be valued as a narrative text – for the way it shows the whole scenes orderly and gives an impression of continuous story as a serial of images among all. Hence, it shows a photography work as a story in a visual language.

The visual language shown on a photography work implies a pictorial communication media in telling a story or a particular event. The presence of a sequence of portraits seri is sometimes important to explain the things happening. There impression that the audience receive when the images are shown in an essay way can be different from when images are shown in a single portrait.

The excess of images obtained by camera capturing is a visual reality which has such a high precision – and it can impact more to the impression that the audience may receive; as getting a news by the portrait seen on the newspapers.

When, in 1998, there was a portrait of a female student demonstrating, lied on the street while the police officers ran over here and there ignoring her, the impression can give a bad impact for the police institution image – which was already bad at the moment for being harshness and doing arbitrarily acts to the demonstrators so many times. It was Julian Sihombing made it and was published on Kompas in topic of Trisakti events – and infuriated the society as the audience. This infuriating impact would not happen when they see the other portraits at a collaboration exhibition or made by other journalists, because on another portrait it was shown that finally she was helped and was leant by several police officers.

Visual Language learning and Its Problems

The fact that visual language was on the first place before the nowadays language, or what we addressed as verbal language – using the alphabets or letters, and contain words and sometime within form of sentences – seems to be beyond the materials in learning photography. As long as the technique are mastered, especially when the sophisticated tools (the camera and all its parts) are there to do the photo work, then any good photo work is possible to be obtained.

The way a camera work follows human eyes’ operation. Each of our eyes can give different effect and impact, which sometime also develop certain different feeling or thought. Thus, the importance of content represented on the photo work should be in mind – beauty and the esthetics that has been subconsciously developed as good do not always follow it.

There is a quote stated “a picture is worth a thousand words”. This is in the same line of the purpose of content consideration, that a single photo work can be explained in several paragraphs or even pages.

Therefore, it is the visual language area which has a large scope of knowledge to help us to get a better understanding – which later be so much helpful to create a picture that really is worth thousand words.

Technique is exercises. Sophisticated tools are between the help of money (surely to buy them) and technology development. Meanwhile visual language is the foundation to combine good technique and less money to obtain a photo-work-with-content.

Conclusion

Indonesian tradition art generally has its own characteristic, and is very different to the STP system developed in the Western paradigm. It can be said that this system which had been developed in Indonesia is older than the Western developed. The presence of two visual languages system (NPM and STP), is not supposed to be neither challenged nor debated – of which one is better than another. Both of them can be good and can have similarities, as they can be required for either now or in the future – for choosing one of them, or even using both of them, can depend on the necessity. They can be combined to form a work, like the work of surrealist style painting, photography, and graphic design. Nowadays television advertising is part of those who use a combination of both systems. The phenomenon can be seen on an advertising of a wall paint brand and Tukul Arwana as a model, another advertising of floor cleaner which shows five figures of Ira Wibowo as the model in one show, and many other examples of similar one.

In photography field, the image which uses such a combination, has been used for a long time by the photographers in Germany – pioneered by Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch during the era of World War I through a new style using ‘photo montage’ technique. Technically, it is about combining separated scenes on one single paper – and nowadays it is what the camera can do; such as *multiple exposure*, *montage*, and *assembling*. Although it has the useful ability to do it technically, the presence of photography media limitation makes it unable to do all things – especially the perspective distortion, which can only be vanished directly. Plural image, as described previously, is only a part of the whole visual language context. There are many ways can be conducted in term of visual language, in the making of a work.

Hopefully it will be a progress to the knowledge of the photographers, especially in terms of visual – by the examples on various media and analysis to the photography work model given and explained. Another hope is that no more assumption of a clear and sharp photograph – obtained by the very latest up to date camera – as the best one, as well as diminishing continuous discussion about technique. The digital camera revolution gives a direct impact of the using of camera – it becomes so easy to use. Everyone, even a six year old child, can now make a photography work – which is claimed to be a good one by the practitioners and the adults.

Visual language in photography, as a science, is often said to be a new knowledge – though it has been applied in practice by the photographer artists. As the presence of imaginative works in the digital era, the science of visual language is still developing among the researchers. The bulky works using new styles in the photography area is one of phenomenon that needs to be read, dig, and researched as a portrait of culture discourse which later can give a meaning to support the spirit in keeping the local genius and the local wisdom. Hence, the institutions will no longer teaching and developing about neither technique nor visible beauty in visual only.

Reference:

- Aldrich, C. Virgil, (1963). *Philosophy of Art*, New York, Prentice Hall Inc.
Holt, Claire. (2000). *Melacak Jejak Perkembangan Seni di Indonesia*, Bandung: MSPI.
Lombard, (2005). *Nusa Jawa: Batas-batas Pembaratan*, Jakarta: Gramedia.
Piliang, Yasraf A., (2002). *Budaya rupa: Membaca Masa Lalu untuk Menulis Masa Depan*, makalah seminar, Bandung: ITB.
Primadi, 2005. *Bahasa Rupa*, Bandung: Kelir.