

## Contemporary Image Analysis Essay

One of the most interesting, but at the same time worst things that public figures gain with their popularity is the fact that their life is closely examined by a huge group of people – their audience. With social media being a crucial part of our everyday life, sharing personal information, especially through visual communication (Instagram and TikTok are extremely good at it) is taken for granted, even though the privacy information concerns are becoming more and more common. Obviously, famous people's publicity requires a drastically different level of disclosure compared to the average social media user. This specificity involves many aspects and perspectives with one particularity having the biggest impact on the social networks as primary means of communication regardless of its type. The amazing privilege I'm talking about is the ability to reach a wide audience through visual communication simply by making an effective argument that fits the rhetorical situation. Angelina Jolie is one of the most recognizable persons all over the world who uses her publicity as an effective way of estimating the importance of humanitarian work in modern society. One of the fields she covers is helping children, especially those who suffer from hunger or become victims of wars. I argue that the image of *Angelina Jolie hugging a tied up African kid* works as an extremely effective example of how the understanding of context of rhetorical situations can become a key aspect that influences the effectiveness of the overall argument visual communication makes. The implication of the image is that through rope, Angelina Jolie's posture, hug, and boy's skin color, this picture establishes the importance of being empathetic and willing to help other people as well as the understanding that equality leads to a better society.

*Angelina Jolie hugging a tied up African kid, by Per-Anders Pattersson*

For this assignment I decided to choose the image of Angelina Jolie hugging a tied up African kid primarily because of the controversy it had when it just appeared. The difference of interpretation of this photo was caused by a pole that ties up the child's ankle: many people believed that it was done specifically for the photo, so Angelina Jolie's true intentions were just to show off her fake empathy. It was the main version of society until its breakdown as soon as important details about this photo were revealed. Such a situation proves that context defines the truth and influences people's perception. Even though Angelina Jolie had proved many times that she cares about children who need help not only by being a dedicated humanitarian, but also by donating millions of dollars to improve suffering people's lives, society still thought that this truth should be questioned based on what they saw in this photo. I believe that this image is important to study, because it is a great example of how effectively visual communication can function with understanding of the context, and how it loses its rhetorical significance while working without any basis.

Angelina Jolie is famous mostly for her acting and filmmaking success, but in fact she spends most of her time on humanitarian work. There is a huge list of what she does to make this world better, but some of them include: being a Goodwill Ambassador for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, and creating the Maddox-Jolie Foundation and Jolie-Pitt Foundation (Sisavat). Moreover, in spite of the fact that she is "not initially associated with any clear political expression or affiliation, her 'globalized' sensibility would become apparent through her adoption of three children: Maddox, from Cambodia, Zahara, from Ethiopia, and Pax, from Vietnam" (Barron 216).

This photo was taken on February 27 in Chad during Angelina Jolie's two-day mission to a refugee camp in eastern Chad as the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador. The camps were housing more than 230,000 refugees from Sudan's troubled Darfur region where she was amazed at the sense of hope all these people had and their will to come back home despite the danger. Angelina Jolie adds that as soon as he came back home, she had nothing to do but to donate millions of dollars to help these people (Conway). Moreover, the angle of this picture suggests the feeling of frustration and big loss, because we normally don't look at people like that.

The boy in the photo is seven years old. Angelina Jolie found him sitting on his own near his family's tent, naked and tied by a rope at the ankle. In her interview for Christopher Dickey, Angelina Jolie explained that there were strong reasons for him to be in such conditions and there was no other decision, but only to tie him up. When the kid was only three years old, he disappeared for two days after a plane dropped a bomb on his neighbor's house. Consequently, he saw endless numbers of deaths and a lot of inappropriate things for such a small child which all together caused severe brain damage. Angelina Jolie adds that as soon as he is untied and left alone, he starts to wander, disappears or bangs himself, which is something everybody tries to save him from. Unfortunately, his mother has four other kids and can't provide him with as much attention as he needs, so the only way to save this kid in addition to therapists' constant visits is to tie him to a tent pole even though it seems like a cruel decision (Dickey).

Each period of history influences not only social and cultural state, but also visual communication. This picture is not an exception and has postmodernity traits like most of the photos done in the late twentieth and the twenty first century. Postmodernity itself appeared

in the late 1900s right after modernity, but its origins are unclear. Among many characteristics, principal elements of postmodernity are the subjectivity and constant questioning of the truth as something that can be very relative. This photo is a great example of postmodernity, because while looking at this picture many people may ask: “is a decision to tie up a kid can be right regardless of circumstances?” and they would be right to challenge this decision. The only clear solution for defining the truth is understanding the context and the rhetorical situation.

In all means of communication, rhetorical situations invite a particular response. People get to decide whether or not the response fits the rhetorical situation and make a conclusion of what is true for them in this context. Dickinson states that “a major characteristic of the contemporary moment is the deep difficulty we have "locating" ourselves in time and in space” and adds that “this difficulty is even more troubling because of the interconnected problems of subjectivity” (Dickinson 7). The fast-changing environment that erases the boundaries between real life and digital space makes the sense of identity very fluid, and “since the two realms are so intertwined, the embodied practice of space on mobile networks strongly reinforces our sense of embodiment in the material sphere” (Hess 1630).

According to Dickinson, “as space and time become fragmented and seemingly discontinuous, the subject also becomes fragmented and discontinuous” (Dickinson 7). To understand how this image functions rhetorically, we should take into consideration the prosperity of the idea that each persons’ own identity can be easily changed in order to fit the rhetorical situation. Furthermore, Killoran states that “different versions of ourselves tend to be composed on different social media venues, as an indication that we respond to their

distinct rhetorical situation” (Killoran 281). With it said, the subjectivity that was caused by fluid identity and a fragmentation of the body through technological, cultural and ideological constructions became a driving factor for people to question Angelina Jolie’s true intentions and sincerity with her audience.

Foss states that “human experiences that are spatially oriented, nonlinear, multidimensional, and dynamic often can be communicated only through visual imagery or other non discursive symbols” (Foss 143). He states that there are three main types of symbols he defines: linguistic (text), symbolic (coded message) and literal (non-coded message). This picture presents only symbolic and literal and lacks any linguistic signs. Through its form, if the picture lacks linguistic signs, visual communication is structured to invite people to make the very first conclusions based on the literal signs they see as soon as they look at any picture. Because decoding a message often requires knowledge beyond the context of the picture, which may include cultural, historical, literary, and more other perspectives, the combination of all these factors together greatly influences each person’s understanding of the message.

The first and the most ambiguous symbol with a pretty straightforward literal meaning is a rope that ties up an African child. The process of decoding a message which goes along with subjectivity and a matter of interpretation divided this symbol in two main groups: 1. The rope is something that limits the child’s freedom, so it needs to be removed as soon as possible and 2. The rope is something that saves the child from danger and shouldn’t be removed despite any circumstances. The peculiarity of this split of opinion was caused by a simple and obvious factor that influences people’s perception of the sign – it is the awareness of the context. In the modern world, the rope itself is often associated with something that is

used primarily for animals, but it is rarely (supposedly never) associated with an exemplification of a power that controls people. The historical context of the rope use in relation to humans refers to the time when slavery, racism and white skin privilege were normalized concepts that framed the social structure. Such interpretation of this sign especially with the US modern concerns and movements like “Black Lives Matter” fully excludes the probability of the rope being an instrument to help, rather than to harm. However, people outside the US who had never encountered problems like these, would probably interpret this sign drastically differently because of their cultural and historical backgrounds.

The second sign is Angelina Jolie’s posture. She squats to be on the same level with the kid. The implication of the sign can be that her posture was a direct way to appeal to a small kid like to somebody whose voice matters and who is valued in this society. Even though it is obvious that they have different social status as well as the environments they live in. Angelina Jolie expresses her respect and shows that despite these relative differences between them, they both are still humans who have the same needs despite their social status: they need to be respected, to be loved and to be heard. Such a simple change in a body position guarantees a kid that his needs are understood and valued the same way as “privileged” people’s.

The next sign is a hug. Even though it may seem simple, it requires a lot of aspects to work together, so the person feels comfortable hugging others. The African kid had a really bad experience not only by seeing deaths, but also by being abused by others. He encountered cruelty every day of his life as a norm that can’t be avoided. This resulted in mistrust and fear of people. The fact that he allowed Angelina Jolie to touch him means a lot. It gives a hope

that the therapist sessions he has each week can lead to a trust and the forgiveness of society for its mistakes. The process of hugging is one of the ways of interconnection through which people nonverbally communicate. Because it primarily depends on the level of trust people have in each other, it proves that we are all equal and we are strong together.

The last sign that I want to discuss is a boy's skin color. Based on all the movements and changes going on in the world, the problem of racism must be one of the most concerning issues especially for Americans. The kid has not only black skin color, but also, he is raised in Chad (Afrika) which is considered as one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the world. Nowadays, these facts together place him into the minority group and take his voice away from him. According to Guzmán and Valdivia "decades of research on ethnic, racial, and feminist media studies demonstrate that there exists the tendency to racialize and genderize media representations" (Guzmán and Valdivia 206). However, this photo carries a drastically different message and fully avoids racialization. Moreover, it forces this tendency to be switched and redirected from racism to equality and respect as to those values that protect each member of society and provide everybody with the most pleasant conditions. So, the implication of this sign can be that the positioning people with different skin colors on the same level of the same picture leads to the idea that even though the problem of racism still exists, there is a long path of how to make the world better and stop discriminating any group of society.

The photo of *Angelina Jolie hugging a tied up African kid* is an amazing example of how context can define the further meaning of the whole visual argument. When it was first released, this photo got a huge number of interpretations and led to the split of opinion because of the different backgrounds everybody had. The ideologies of postmodernity which

appeared in the late 1900s led to the subjective attitude towards many spheres of our life such as modern art, science, visual communication etc. Moreover, it made questioning the truth the only one right way to make sure you can trust the information and resulted in normalization of the fact that each person can easily change their identity. The main concern that people had with this photo is whether or not the rope should tie up the child's ankle. Unfortunately, this problem was fully resolved only after the context was revealed, which proves that the rhetorical situation invites the response, not vice-versa.

I believe that this photo definitely contributes to our understanding of images specifically from the perspective of context, because without explaining the rhetorical situation, this photo loses any significance that this message carries. Moreover, it shows the power that public figures have in making their arguments and touching a huge audience to make changes in the world. This photo should be referred to as a positive contribution, because through symbolic and literal signs, it positions empathy and equality to the worldwide level and explains that society should be on the side of these values in order to become better. Lastly, it pushes humanitarian work to a higher level that suggests that despite people's social status, helping others is an important step each person can and should make.



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