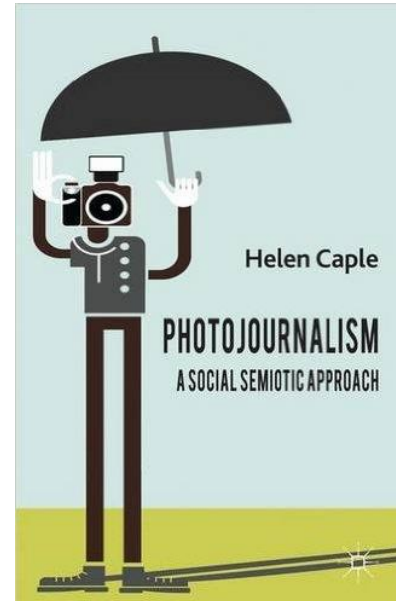


Helen Caple, **Photojournalism: A Social Semiotic Approach**, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 237 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover).

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It is an age of visual culture. Every day we are bombarded with pictures, images, videos, and all kinds of footage. With the development of new media technologies and the emphasis on the visual image in today's digital world, press photography is playing an increasingly important role in producing and disseminating the news. So how do we understand images in the news? How can we study press photography? **Photojournalism: A Social Semiotic Approach** provides timely answers to these questions. Adopting a social semiotic approach to press photography, Helen Caple offers us a particular theoretical lens through which we can understand the meanings constructed by press photographs deployed in print and online news stories. The book also offers some analytical frameworks and tools for those interested in exploring the form and function of press photographs and the words accompanying them.



As both photographer and social semiotician, Helen Caple represents one of the most compelling voices in advocating for a social semiotic approach to press photography and multisemiotic news stories. Drawing on a data set of print and online news stories, in particular a corpus of 1,000 image-nuclear news stories (which Caple labels the INN-SC) from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (an Australian broadsheet newspaper) and some examples of press photographs from three working press photographers (see, for example, Figure 1), *Photojournalism* offers us a comprehensive picture of Caple's theoretical model on press photography, which seamlessly combines the study of multisemiotic news stories with social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics.

This book consists of eight chapters. In addition to introducing the aims, motivations, and structure of the book, the first chapter reviews critically previous studies on news and photojournalism and argues that historically "the verbal text has been privileged over the visual representation of news, with images being labelled supplemental to the news" (p. 4; as cited in Becker, 1992, p. 130). But Caple points out that the status of visual images has been enhanced in recent years due to the development of multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotic studies, such as Kress and van Leeuwen's pioneer work, *Reading Images* (2006). Chapter 2 discusses news values in press photography. Drawing on Bednarek and Caple's (2012) discursive approach, Caple illustrates how news values (such as negativity and superlativeness) are construed in press photographs. She suggests that we consider two factors that may influence the construal of news values. One is contextualization, which concerns the denotative meaning of the represented participants. The other factor involves technical considerations such as shutter speed, lens, and the angle of the shot that affect the connotative meaning of the represented participants.

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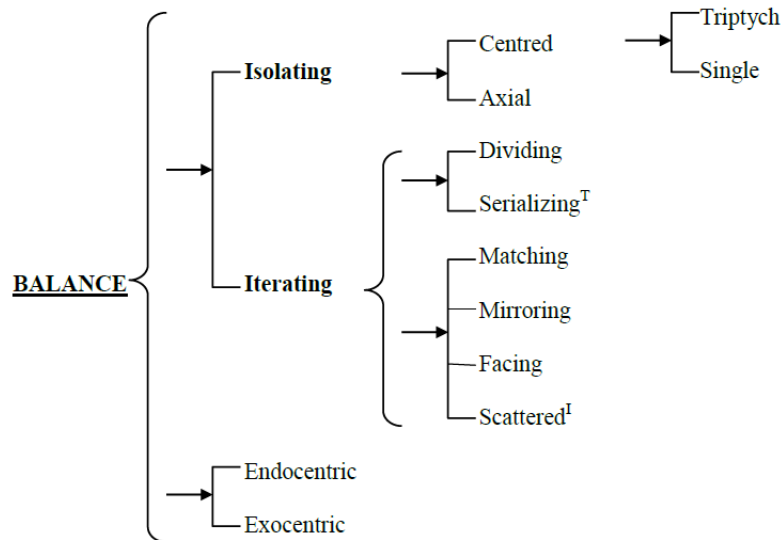


**Figure 1. The multisemiotic news story. (Various sources: ABC, The Daily Telegraph [AUS], The Washington Post, USA Today, The Guardian, BBC, Independent, The Daily Telegraph [UK]; reproduced from p. 2.)**

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the functionality of press photographs, including the systems of representational, interactional, and compositional meanings of press photographs. The representational system concerns what is represented in the image. Caple suggests, based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, that the representational meaning enjoys a narrative or conceptual structure. Press photographs, according to Caple, tend to present "unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79). Hence most of them have a narrative structure. The interactional system involves the relationship between the image, viewers, and the represented participants in the image. Interactional meaning is realized through three subsystems: contact, attitude, and social distance. Another way of achieving interactional meaning is through the affectual facial expressions of the represented participants in the image, including, for example, "the position/shape of eyebrows, lips, eyes, and degrees of tension in the facial musculature" (p. 74) of the participants.

The compositional system, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), involves the system of framing, salience, and the reading path of the image. But Caple points out that Kress and van Leeuwen's

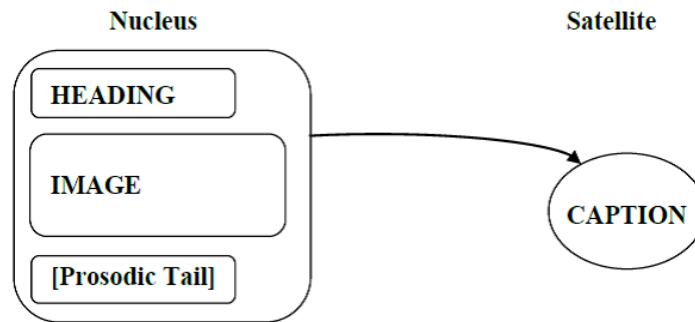
model cannot fully explain the compositional meaning of press photographs. She therefore develops an alternative framework, namely, the Balance network (chapter 4) (See Figure 2). This framework aims at assessing how images are designed to have a balanced composition or to challenge that balance, so much so that readers can construe news stories as aesthetically appealing. Based on an analysis of press photographs from the INNISC data set and those from press photographers, Caple elaborates on every part of this network, offering us a sound analytical framework and some intriguing findings.



**Figure 2. The Balance network (reproduced from p. 97).**

The study of word-image relations is another key area of *Photojournalism*, discussed mainly in chapters 5–6. Chapter 5 focuses on the functional structure of image-nuclear news stories. According to Caple, the image-nuclear news story follows a particular structure, that is, the nucleus^satellite structure (see Figure 3). In this structure, the nucleus includes the heading, the image, and a prosodic tail.<sup>1</sup> The heading often relies on wordplay, calling on experiences of the reader to decode, while the image tends to depict represented participants in an eye-catching, aesthetically pleasing manner. The satellite is the caption text that consists of the experiential orientation and the contextual extension. The experiential orientation functions to clarify and sharpen our understanding of the image, while the contextual extension aims to extend beyond what is needed for readers to understand the image.

<sup>1</sup> According to Caple, the initial part of the caption that leads to the caption text (or initial phase of the caption) is seen as “prosodic tail” that works, like the image and heading, to engage the reader on an interpersonal level.



**Figure 3. The nucleus^satellite structure of the image-nuclear news story (reproduced from p. 129).**

Chapter 6 continues to examine word-image relations in multisemiotic news stories, but now the image is regarded as satellite on the page. The chapter covers the semantic ties, the story layout on the page, and in particular the conjunctive relations between words and images on the page. Drawing on the case study of some newspaper news reports, Caple suggests three types of conjunctive relations: intersemiotic repetition (cf. elaboration), which is mainly realized by coreferentiality (e.g., “in other words”); intersemiotic expansion (cf. extension [e.g., “moreover”] and enhancement [e.g., “similarly”, “therefore”, “otherwise”]), which is realized by coextension and cclassification; and intersemiotic deviation, which suggests no relationships between words and image.

Chapter 7 explores the intrasemiotic relation of images in a sequence in online news galleries to “examine the extent to which cohesive visual narratives are formed within that sequence of images” (p. 175). The analysis concerns three online news galleries that represent three types of image sequences in covering particular issues or events. Gallery 1 follows a narrative structure. However, most of the images tell not the sequence of the story but what Caple terms “critical moments” of the event. Gallery 2 does follow a narrative structure in that the images in the sequence depicted the story both spatially and temporally, much like the practice of a narrative in language. Gallery 3 is regarded as a “dumping ground” for the reason that many images are stored in the gallery just to “sell” information instead of telling stories to the viewers.

Chapter 8 concludes the discussion of press photography and predicts the evolving practice of photojournalism in the near future. By examining the layout of some Web-based news stories, Caple points out that with the development of technologies, press photography will soon become “a full partner in the dissemination of news” (p. 217). In order for this trend to be effectively studied, Caple lists key topics that might be picked up by researchers who are interested in furthering the approaches she has discussed in this book.

*Photojournalism* can be seen as a necessary contribution to the study of multisemiotic news discourse and press photography. The analytical frameworks and tools developed in the book are efficient

and easy to use. These frameworks and tools have been effectively applied to a body of news stories and press photographs collected from newspapers, news organizations, online news galleries, and working press photographers. Equipped with these frameworks and tools, researchers are able to explore a wide range of multisemiotic discourse, especially material involving words and images.

There are also some theoretical innovations in this book. The first is the framework of the Balance network (chapter 4). Though based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) compositional system, this framework stands out as distinctive in terms of its particular focus on balance in visual composition. With this framework, not only can we address the compositional configuration of image, but we can also relate it to the "beautifulness" of the image and of the news event it represents. Another intriguing innovation of the book is the nucleus^satellite structure. This structure specifies the form and function of a particular news genre, namely, the image-nuclear news story, and offers us an easy-to-understand framework for exploring word-image relations in multisemiotic news stories. What is more, the intersemiotic conjunctive relations between words and images discussed in chapter 6 (such as intersemiotic repetition, intersemiotic extension, and intersemiotic deviation) can be seen as an innovative development and an expansion on Halliday's (1994) logico-semantic relations in language and van Leeuwen's (1991, 2005) conjunctive structure in tele-filmic discourse.

Excellent as it is, *Photojournalism* has some limitations. The first limitation lies in the data selection. Though some analyses involve materials from online news galleries and reports of particular issues/events, most of the data come from one particular news type, namely, the image-nuclear news story. I doubt that this type of news represents most types of multisemiotic news stories in photojournalism. Second, we need to be cautious of some notions suggested in the book. Caple seems to have relied too much on the discursive approach to news values, assuming that newsworthiness could be construed in an image (as well as words). But by what standards could we judge news value out of an image (and/or words)? It might become questionable to treat an image as "negative" or "superlative," for example, by just reading into the image (or the visual text) without considering other factors such as context and cognition, since such treatment or reading is usually individual and subjective. I am also cautious about the notion of aesthetical appealing. Chapter 4 introduces a well-formed analytical framework in visual composition, the Balance network, and Caple draws on this network to claim that press photographs have the potential to construe news events as aesthetically appealing to the viewers. This is a reasonable and interesting point in terms of newsworthiness. But we should take care to avoid stressing the aesthetical appeal, that is, the compositional meaning, while playing down the truth of a news event, that is, the basic value of news, which is usually shown through representational and interactional meanings.

There is, however, no doubt that the strengths of *Photojournalism* outweigh its limitations. It is an essential addition to press photography, social semiotics, and studies on intersemiotic and intrasemiotic relations. The analytical frameworks and tools developed in the book will undoubtedly assist students, researchers, and professional practitioners to explore more and understand better the meaning and form of press photographs in particular and multisemiotic discourse in general. In addition, the book is full of effective analyses of authentic data and raw materials. The arguments are clear, the analyses are well

documented, and the language is simple and easy to understand. In a word, it is well worth reading for those who are interested in journalism, social semiotics, and discourse studies, among others.

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