

Visual Essay

Aaron Johnson

Inspiration:

Recently while driving home from work, an international news report on the radio caught my attention. The reporter discussed the day's events in Libya; she reported how rebels and pro-Gaddafi forces alike were battling back and forth, with minimal ground gained on either side. As I listened to the report, two things became very clear to me 1) how youth led democracy seems to be burgeoning in a region not known for tolerating political dissidence and 2) how the true nature of man is always to better his current condition. My mind was then reminded of a specific scene from the film *Amistad*. In the film, John Quincy Adams, played by Sir Anthony Hopkins, defends the ship's passengers as they stand trial before the highest court in the land. Hopkins goes into a splendor of oratory that would have made Moses proud, "Now, gentlemen, I must say I differ with the keen minds of the South, and with our president, who apparently shares their views, offering that the natural state of mankind is instead -- and I know this is a controversial idea -- is freedom. Is freedom. **And the proof is the length to which a man, woman, or child will go to regain it, once taken. He will break loose his chains, He will decimate his enemies. He will try and try and try against all odds, against all prejudices, to get home.**" It was this poignant scene, combined with recent events in North Africa, which provided the inspiration for my visual essay. The described scene can be accessed through the following link:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/assets/john-quincy-adams-argument-in-amistad-case>

I must admit my knowledge of China prior to Nixon's visit is not what it should be. But the essay I've created was not intended to be China specific, but rather a reflection of what Hopkins (in character) refers to as "the very nature of man." Recent events in China, including arrest of artist Ai Weiwei on April 6th, do however make the visual relevant to China's present environment.

Interpretation:

"Visualization is a template for ideas, a means of ordering one's thoughts about a complex subject" (Staley, 2003). My goal in creating this visual essay is to generate conversation as to its meaning. I agree with Staley that visual representation can be as effective as written prose; some might argue even more effective due to non-linear nature. Images have been strategically placed with symbolic syntax from left to right. Idea space chosen (white) intentionally centers attention to images. Image shapes, patterns vary in size; size and patterns need be considered when rendering meaning.

My intended interpretation: The images read left to right with larger, rigid visuals intentionally more prominent on first line. Along the second line however, the roles become reversed (more progressive, optimistic images larger in size); this is directly tied to young gardeners who seem to be

feeding political change. The youth led change is a direct reference to my above mentioned inspiration of the youth led movement currently proliferating the Middle East. Some images of particular interest: the second and third image, older generation observing ways of new generation (basketball new to Asia) - this again a reference to youth movement of Middle East; Mubarak and Gaddafi's ridiculing of social networks comes to mind. Basketball photo sandwiched next to Great Wall of China (establishment). Children faced with challenges (tug of war), next photo of older individuals discussing matters (much smaller this time). Second line, third picture symbolizes the opening or gateway of possibilities associated with a "freer" society. Notice again, optimistic youth continually feeding growth. One of my favorite images is of the young lady in front of snowy landscape. To me she represents willingness to change despite her environment; she has donned her coat and appears warm and happy despite the coldness of her current situation. The last and only autonomous image is of children expressing sincere happiness. I intentionally placed this image unattached, symbolizing breaking from oppression or at least breaking from the norm.