Photos in the News: 
appraisal analysis of visual semiosis 
and verbal-visual intersemiosis 

by 
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To the memory of my parents,

John Economou (1922-2001) and Alice Economou, (1926-2000),

who always wanted me to be a doctor.
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Abstract

This thesis concerns the intersection of social semiotic theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA), applying systemic-functional (SF) theory to verbal-visual news media texts. The aim of the thesis is to develop social semiotic descriptions of visual meaning in order to facilitate analyses of evaluative stance in visual-verbal text. The texts studied are ‘factual’ daily broadsheet news photos and prominent visual-verbal ‘displays’ that incorporate these photos alongside headlines and captions. Such displays introduce investigative stories on the front page of broadsheet weekly news reviews and are referred to in the thesis as ‘standout’ texts. They are significant because they may also be read as independent texts and play a critical role in positioning a wide readership on the issues investigated in the story.

The SF system of verbal appraisal was used in this thesis to develop a corresponding system of visual appraisal. The process involved applying general appraisal options to a corpus of news photos and proceeding to further delicacy in a repeated cycle of analysis and system-building. Once refined in this way the system was applied alongside the verbal appraisal system to account for evaluation in verbal-visual standouts. In the thesis four Australian and four Greek standouts introducing stories on asylum seekers were analysed in order to explore the potential for variation and the impact of context on evaluative meaning choices.

The thesis contributes insights into SF theory, media discourse and CDA. The visual systems developed allow appraisal analysis to be extended to images and to verbal-visual texts. Visual appraisal analysis in the thesis provides new evidence for the ideological and evaluative power of news photos. Verbal-visual appraisal analysis shows how each semiotic contributes to evaluative meaning, and to its accumulation and spread across a text. In respect to media discourse, the thesis also provides evidence for the ‘standout’ as an orbital verbal-visual news genre. The comparison of evaluative stance in two sets of standouts demonstrates consistent editorial choices in texts within each context and contrasts across the two sites. The Australian texts display more evaluative complexity, greater emphasis on entertainment and offer two different stances, aligning a diverse target audience. The Greek texts are more
straightforward and construct a single stance, aligning a narrower audience. By identifying the semiotic choices involved in the evaluative positioning of readers by visual-verbal texts, the thesis can contribute to more informed and reflective practice. Thus, as well as making theoretical advances, the findings have relevance for journalism and education at a time when the impact of images is changing our conception of literacy.