

Midway's Legacy: Inspiring Action through Awareness

Emma Hutchinson

October 2013



Figure 1. Chris Jordan, An image from Midway Atoll of a dead bird's carcass lying on the ground with trash in its stomach, 27 October 2009

This is a very striking, powerful, and chilling image – one of a dead seabird, feathers crumpled and decaying, with its stomach open to reveal, not normal intestinal organs, but byproducts of our own disposable human world. This bird’s stomach contains plastic – bottle caps, cartridges, pieces of containers, and more – and this disturbing collision of nature and the man-made world is what instantly captures viewers’ attention. This image was taken on Midway Atoll, a tiny island in the North Pacific Ocean, which is in the middle of the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch”, an enormous collection of floating human trash (“Why Midway”). Plastic debris covers Midway Atoll and the waters surrounding it, and seabirds mistake the plastic for food and ingest it daily (“The Journey”). After looking at this image, viewers can sense the gravity of this rude overlap between nature and the man-made world. Photographer Chris Jordan employs color modality, a vertical, static perspective, and conceptual representation in this image to demonstrate that the unnatural collision of humans and nature has led to damaging and destructive consequences.

I found this image online on a private news blog. The October 2009 blog post included the image and a short written commentary about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and birds that are “raised on plastic”. In his commentary, the author of the blog asks “why we don’t talk about our oceans more” and draws attention to the unnatural and ugly collision of humans and nature with the title of the blog post, “Garbage Island”. Despite the author’s good intentions, it doesn’t seem like this particular blog post has reached a wide audience; there were only 2 comments on the blog post, but both of them were very supportive (Johnston). From my personal experience, I think that this photo is pretty well-known and well-circulated on the internet, which brings up many questions about this blog post as an exception: Has this image been over-shown or overused to the point that people have stopped paying attention to its core message? Or has the

picture only reached a limited, specific audience of people that are already very environmentally aware? Either way, this image portrays a crucial message that everyone needs to hear about the relationship between nature and the human race.

Color modality is one rhetorical technique that Jordan uses in his image to accentuate the disparity between humans and the natural world. Modality relates to realism and the reliability of a message, and color modality is made up of three parts: saturation, differentiation, and modulation. In Jordan's image, most colors are not very saturated at all, which makes the image more believable and realistic; in other words, this image is something that we could see in real life. For this reason, color saturation greatly supports the overall modality of the image and the message it portrays. In terms of color differentiation, there is a huge contrast in color between the bird and the contents of its stomach. While the ground and the bird's carcass are made up of very natural and almost dull colors such as gray, brown, and white, the contents of its stomach contain blues, greens, and yellows. Color modulation also adds to the separation of the natural and the man-made aspects of this image. There is a lot of modulation on the carcass as it is made up of various shades of very natural and soft colors that make the object very recognizable; however, the plastic contents of the bird's stomach are made up of very bright, un-modulated colors. For instance, the blue bottle cap in the bird's stomach is a very bright, full shade of blue. This clear difference between the shades of colors of the carcass and those of the plastic make the contents of the stomach appear very synthetic and fabricated.

Color saturation, differentiation, and modulation work together to both increase the reliability of this image with natural colors that make up the carcass, and with bright, synthetic colors that make up the plastic objects, and to further demonstrate the disturbing and unnatural collision between humans and the natural world. Jordan uses colors that not only reflect what a

viewer would actually see in real life, building up the ethos and credibility of the image, but that also distinguish the nature and the context of certain objects within the image. The image portrays a message to viewers that it is very unnatural and astonishing that these bright, fabricated, artificial, ugly pieces of plastic were being carried around by what once was a beautiful, natural, wild creature; this also challenges the traditional first impression that viewers might have of the image by alluding to the bird as a once beautiful creature instead of an ugly, rotten corpse. By accurately capturing the striking difference in colors between the carcass and the plastic and immediately drawing viewers' eyes to this remarkable difference, Jordan uses color modality to demonstrate the severe disparity between the destructive products of human activity and the innocence and helplessness of the natural world. Jordan further explores this helplessness of natural ecosystems and organisms through the image's perspective.

Orientation of the image with a vertical, static perspective places viewers into the scene and evokes a feeling of personal responsibility for this consequence of our disposable society, as well as for the overall damage humans have done to the natural environment. The image is oriented so that viewers are looking down from a vertical angle at the carcass lying on the ground. This gives the viewer a sense of actually being in the scene and standing over the corpse, which is lying dead and motionless at his or her feet. From this angle, the bird appears vulnerable and helpless, especially when compared to the powerful human standing directly above it. If this image were pictured exactly the same way except with an orientation from the side, or from a distance away from the carcass, it would make the viewer feel differently. But because this image is oriented from directly above the bird's carcass, and the framing is fairly close to the actual bird, it forces viewers to fully examine the carcass – the deflated, defeated, helpless body of the bird, and the sickening pile of trash that has accumulated in the bird's stomach over its

lifetime. This image uses pathos in such a way that viewers can't help but feel inextricably tied to what is happening in this image. They can't help but feel personally responsible for the death of this bird and countless other organisms just like it that have died at the hands of the powerful human race, which has the ability to destroy nature as well as the responsibility to protect it.

The second part of the orientation of this image is that it is static and lacks movement of any kind; it is a motionless circumstance that involves both the bird and the viewer. The only slight aspect of movement or change in this photo is a small vector from the sunken eye sockets outwards, representing an empty, desperate, crushed gaze to nowhere. The life has been sucked out of this creature, and this empty gaze represents the lost life as well as the hopelessness of its species as it fights to survive in a world full of trash and peril. The fact that this picture is motionless also evokes a sense of personal responsibility in viewers by giving them a feeling that this deed is done and it is too late for this bird. Human carelessness and our disposable society has put this innocent bird in its grave, and the motionless of the image gives viewers a glimpse of a circumstance and an act that has already been done and cannot be changed. Both the vertical angle and the static movement in the image make the viewer feel personally involved and somewhat responsible for the death of this bird and for the acts of the human race. Responsibility also comes into play in the symbolism that Jordan uses in this image.

Conceptual representation in this image reiterates the overall decay of nature that we see in the world today, the culpability of humans in damaging the environment, and the negative effects of human carelessness. Three types of processes make up conceptual representation: the symbolic, the classificational, and the analytical. The symbolic process refers to the meaning of a participant in the image as it relates to the overall message. In the image, the bird is the carrier of the symbol, with the characteristics of matted fur, a deflated, broken appearance, and rotten

plastic and trash in its stomach. The decomposition of the bird plays on pathos in that it evokes a feeling in viewers of longing for what this bird once was. Alive, the bird was beautiful and free, and the carcass is not yet decomposed enough to obscure this fact. This leads viewers to imagine the life of this bird and what its life must have been like: What challenging interactions did this bird have with the human world during its lifetime? How did it get to where it is now, as one of thousands, perhaps millions, of broken, discarded carcasses lying on a pebbled beach? As a symbol, this image represents the decay of nature as a whole; just like this bird, many organisms and even whole ecosystems in nature are quickly breaking down and being destroyed by humans.

The classificational process relates participants in an image to an overall umbrella concept through taxonomy or hierarchy. This comes into play when viewing this image from a biological and scientific standpoint. The carcass is very decomposed, revealing the intricacies of the bird's skeletal structure, and it reminds viewers of forensics and scientific examination. In this sense, the image gives off an aura of a crime scene, as if an autopsy is being performed on the bird and the stomach is cut open to reveal the culprit: the very unnatural and prolific piles of human trash. This relates to the logos of the image in that this process provides a very logical and reason-based perspective on the image as a whole. Overall, the classificational process reinforces the culpability of humans in the death of this very natural creature and many others like it.

The analytical process relates participants through a parts-to-whole viewpoint. In this image, the parts are the carcass, the matted feathers, the plastics, lids, and human trash. The whole is truly greater than the sum of these individual parts as it portrays an overall message of human carelessness and the irrevocable effects of our disposable society. This image is not just one of a single dead bird with a few bottle caps in its stomach; it is the woe and struggle of an

entire species and an entire planet to stay alive in the face of unprecedented environmental change. The three aspects of conceptual representation work together in this image to show that this moment of a dead bird lying forgotten and, quite literally, trashed on a beach is one of many similar circumstances that happen every day in our world, and that modern society is having a very negative and irrevocable effect on the environment.

Through color modality, vertical and static perspective, and conceptual representation, Chris Jordan uses this image to portray the greater message that this awful clash of human byproducts and nature is having severe, detrimental effects on the natural world and needs to stop. This image forces us as viewers to reflect on the normality, fairness, context, and responsibility associated with this circumstance and every other one like it in our world. The image is extremely important for everyone to see, yet, it specifically targets an audience of individuals: those who may not be aware of these environmental concerns and those who don't feel personal responsibility for the damage humans have made. After viewing Jordan's image, viewers are stunned and may ask: Is this normal? Is this the reality of our present? Will this dominate our future? It is amazing that even in a place like Midway Atoll, which is so far away from any big cities, the human world is severely impacting nature in a very real and detrimental way. In this image, Chris Jordan perfectly captures the quiet consequences of our current way of living, brings viewers into the scene, and evokes a keen sense of personal responsibility. This important and stunning image shocks viewers out of ignorance and into awareness and action, and inspires them to not only change individual behaviors in order to live a lower impact lifestyle, but to also promote a more sustainable livelihood for our entire human community.

Works Cited

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