

Semiotics and Visual Representation

Brian Curtin, PhD

International Program in Design and Architecture

semiotics: general definitions

1. Semiotics is concerned with meaning; how *representation*, in the broad sense (language, images, objects) generates meanings or the processes by which we comprehend or attribute meaning. For visual images, or visual and material culture more generally, semiotics is an inquiry that is wider than the study of symbolism and the use of semiotic analysis challenges concepts such as naturalism and realism (the notion that images or objects can objectively depict something) and intentionality (the notion that the meaning of images or objects is produced by the person who created it). Furthermore, semiotics can offer a useful perspective on formalist analysis (the notion that meaning is of secondary importance to the relationships of the individual elements of an image or object). Semiotic analysis, in effect, acknowledges the variable relationship[s] we may have to representation and therefore images or objects are understood as *dynamic*; that is, the significance of images or objects is not understood as a one-way process from image or object to the individual but the result of complex inter-relationships between the individual, the image or object and other factors such as culture and society.

semiotics: defined through semiotic terms

2. To introduce the language used in discussions of semiotics; we say that semiotics is the study of signs and signifying practices. A sign can be defined, basically, as any entity (words, images, objects etc.) that refers to something else. Semiotics studies how this *referring* results from previously established social convention (Eco 1976, 16). That is, semiotics shows how the relationship between the sign and the ‘something else’ results from what our society has taught us. Semiotics is concerned with the fact that the reference is neither inevitable nor necessary. The image of the swastika, for example, can have radically different meanings depending on where and how it is viewed.

3. Signifying practices simply refers to *how*, rather than *what*, meaning is produced and, finally, the social convention which links signs with meanings is called a code (Potts 1996, 21). *The cross is coded in Christian cultures*. Meaning does not, as such, inhere in images and objects. The significance we give images and objects is *other* to what the image or object literally is. In other words, images and objects can operate like signs and, importantly, the meaning we attribute to the sign relates to cultural ideas that we have learned, and may or may not be aware of. Further, Alex Potts wrote that images and objects are not only mediated by conventions, but meaning is largely *activated* by cultural convention (Potts 1996, 20). How is it possible not to recognize an image or object? When we recognize an image or object, how do we recognize it?

historical notes

5. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) founded semiology early in the 20th century, as well as linguistics, as *a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life*. The origins of semiotics can be linked to structuralism, which also has its origins in Saussure’s thinking. Structuralism is a method of analysis that seeks to study and reveal the ‘deep’ structure behind the appearance of phenomena; that is, the hidden rules which

organize anything from how people interact in particular social contexts to how stories are written or told. Given phenomena has generally been understood on the model of language, or as a language, and academics and theorists since Saussure have variously modified, altered and challenged the insights and uses of linguistics, alongside the relevance of structuralism.

6. Saussure defined the sign, as we have seen, as the relationship between a signifier (that which carries or produces meaning) and the signified (the meaning itself). His primary insight was that the relationship between them is arbitrary; within language the signifier 'red', for example, is not in itself red and, further, different languages of course have different words for the same thing. In effect, Saussure emphasized the fact that entities do not precede or determine their naming, otherwise a name would mean the same thing in every language. Eskimos, for example, have many more words for 'snow' than English speakers, who only have one.

7. This idea was rendered more complex by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), who challenged the notion that a sign simply generates its idea, however arbitrary. In Peirce's model, semiosis functions through three, rather than two, positions. There is the sign (that which stands for something else) and the interpretant (also called meaning or meaning-effect, and basically means interpretation or the mental image the individual forms of the sign) and the object (or referent, the thing for which the sign stands).

semiotics and visual culture

8. For studies in visual and material culture, Peirce's classification of signs in terms of icon, index and symbol are useful, though these are not the only classifications he created. An icon, simply put, is a sign that is linked to a signifier through similarity in appearance. Examples here include portraits or abstract paintings where color is, for example, black; the painting *is* black, *refers* to the color black and can then be interpreted differently. The point is

Semiotics and Visual Representation

that we can gain information (or think we can!) about the signified by looking at the sign. Think, for example, of computer icons. An indexical sign ties, as such, the signifier to the signified; the index has been described as visible sign which points to the invisible, though this may be too general. I would describe the indexical sign as *the registration of the real*; the sight of smoke, for example, can indicate fire, a bullet hole would refer to a specific act, or the sight of tears suggests sadness. Further, think of words such as 'this' or 'big' and 'small'. Finally, a symbol links the signifier and the signified in a purely arbitrary or conventional way; unlike the icon or index, the link is not physical or logical. We are taught by our society to make the link between the symbolic sign and its signified. For example, flags, dollar signs or the most obvious example, verbal language itself. Pierce's ideas can be useful but should not be understood uncritically. Like objects and images, these classifications are best understood as dynamic when applied to images and objects.

9. The contemporary semiotician Mieke Bal used the example of a still-life painting of a fruit bowl to illustrate the relationship between these positions; the painting is, among other things, a sign of something else (fruit), and the viewer shapes an image in their mind of what he/she associates with that something else. This mental image is the interpretant and points to an object which is different for each viewer; real fruit for some, other similar paintings for others, beautiful sensual skin etc. etc. (Bal 1998, 75). The point is that the interpretant (mental image) actually becomes a new sign which produces new interpretants and an infinite process unfolds, where no aspect can be isolated from another. Hence Saussure's pairing of two elements is undermined.

10. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was the first to apply ideas of semiotics, as it developed from linguistics, to visual images, for example, food advertisements, photography and motion pictures. Barthes' work offers a useful summary of the important aspects of semiotics discussed above. Essentially, he sought to analyze how the meanings we attribute to images are not a "natural" result of what we see; that is, images are not self-evident and universal in how we understand what we see. For example, it is very difficult to

attribute meaning to a photograph without a caption or accompanying text. Further, the meanings that we do give to images are linked to culturally specific associations, though it is very necessary to note that culture can not entirely determine our response (Potts 1996, 31).

11. Barthes called the immediate visual impact denoted meaning (or first-order or basic meaning) and the cultural meaning we attach to it connoted meaning (or second-order meaning). In other words, denoted meaning refers to the recognition of what is registered by the image or photograph (e.g. a photograph of a monk) and connoted meaning refers to the possible invitation of the image to interpret, give meaning to, the forms even against or beyond the authors' intention. This provides a useful backdrop to look at the application of semiotics to visual and material culture and, furthermore, in terms of considering cultural meanings, we may also usefully note Barthes' influence on post-structuralist thinking. Post-structuralism does not view language as a structure but rather a *structuring process* in terms of the relationship of the reader, or viewer, or consumer (Ribere 2002, 60). In this respect, there is a greater emphasis on the *impact* of language and the role the individual plays in creating meaning.

semiotics and visual representation in visual art

12. Given the root of 'representation' in notions of resemblance and imitation, among other factors, visual images have often been thought of as more direct and straightforward in their meaning than language itself, which varies from culture to culture. Or, in other words, there has been a strong tendency to think of visual images as not a language, as un-coded and possibly universal in their meaning. Furthermore, as a result of a pervasive link between visual art and the idea of expression, art has been thought of as more intuitive, unconscious and basic than language; therefore transcending the specifics of the culture[s] it emerges from. This, of course, is not true.

Semiotics and Visual Representation



Picture 1–3: Various visual representations of 'The Temptation of Saint Anthony' by three artists
Left: Hieronymus Bosch(1505–6), **Middle:** Paul Cezanne(1873–7) **Right:** Salvador Dalí(1946)

13. In this respect it can be useful to think of visual images as text-like, though one necessarily needs to be wary of linguistic models dominating our understanding of visual representation. In the first instance, the elements of images do not have established rules, unlike words, which require them to be combined in certain ways to form a sign. Furthermore, images and meanings are not entwined as a dictionary links words with their signified; while images are linked with particular meanings, for example, allegories or images of Buddha, the meaning doesn't require a distinctly or distinct visual language. Or, the meanings of particular images can also be explained in words and therefore we can conceive many different visual forms, none where the meaning is intrinsic (Potts 1996, 24–26). From any number of examples, the artworks that visualize the biblical story of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* point to the same narrative but in very different ways. Each painting depicts the scene in a landscape and while two, Bosch and Dalí, are fantastical they are very different with the Bosch being realistically grotesque while Dalí's is dream-like. Cezanne's approach is naturalistic and focuses a particular aspect of the narrative – sexual temptation.

14. Moreover, the very possibility of visual art being understood as a sign, of being readable, was challenged by, for example, the Impressionists and, later, abstraction. The Impressionists aimed to put visual representation on a par with visual perception and abstraction could aim to act in a direct emotional manner on the viewer, free of text-like qualities (Potts 1996, 27). Such aims, however, are problematic because we inevitably seek significance and meaning

as we would from the most explicitly coded image, think of the fact that Jackson Pollock's drip abstractions evoke the "real" of landscape painting, among other signs. Even the very act of acknowledging and describing the supposed absence of meaning and codes envelopes us in language, as a cultural screen between us and the paintings. Barthes' distinction between denoted and connoted meaning is relevant here; we can all agree on what we are essentially looking at (without interpretative meaning), be it the abstraction of Jackson or the water lilies of Monet but what meaning or signifieds and further signs do we attribute and create? Moreover, what sense does it ultimately make to talk of 'we can all agree on...'? Prominent artworks produced since the impact of critical theory (Barthes et al) in Western contexts have been somewhat self-conscious about the understanding of visual art in terms of language, or signs, signifiers and codes.

15. Before looking at examples of these artworks, Mieke Bal (1998) offered an interesting use of semiotics as a means of reading images to challenge prevailing orthodoxy. The Baroque painter Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598-9) has been subject to various interpretations within feminist criticism that see the painting as an allegory of inequality between men and women: though Judith is beheading him, Caravaggio, it is said, painted Holofernes with a *greater level of human interest* (i.e. sympathy) than Judith and therefore rendered him as a tragic hero. This is in contrast to the rendering of Judith as supposedly lacking any sense of humanity or personality. The reason for this, it has been proposed, is simply that Caravaggio was male and therefore could not identify strongly with the female Judith.



Picture 4: Caravaggio, Michelangelo Merisi da, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, c. 1598, Oil on canvas, 56 3/4 x 76 3/4 in., Galleria Nazionale dell'Arte Antica, Rome

16. Mieke Bal goes against this interpretation by focusing on a particular sign, the blood spurting from Holofernes' neck. In the first instance, Bal points out that the sign of blood is conjunction of icon, index and symbol; the sign, in other words, is iconic because of a relation between paint and blood, indexical because it relates clearly to Holofernes body, and symbolic because of general associations with passion and violence. Further, the symbolic nature of the sign appears to reinforce the realism of the painting. Bal, however, is interested in how the sign actually undermines the supposed realism because the blood implausibly travels in straight lines and is so separate from Holofernes body that it casts a shadow, rather than splashing unpredictably. The shadow creates a perspective that encourages us to read the blood as *preceding* the sword, the cut; this, Bal points out, goes against more a more logical organization of visual elements.

17. In other words, we would usually understand that blood follows the movement of a sword. Consequently, the painting becomes somewhat enigmatic because we begin to seek to solutions – reasons why – in the details for this apparent ‘error’. Bal’s interpretation plays on this question of causality – how actions cause something to occur – to disturb the issue that Caravaggio painted Holofernes with a sense of humanity in order to “cause” Judith’s sense of stillness, or robotic appearance. This appearance is otherwise interpreted as a sign of objectification on a continuum with other sexist imagery. In effect, the sign of the blood helps us to read the painting in terms of a challenge to how we may understand and the question of how it is we can *know*. Furthermore, a semiotic reading can put us in the “here and now” of interpretation, not relying on traditional academic analysis. Again, we may emphasize the role of the viewer in particular contexts. However, another reason to use Bal’s interpretation is to point to possible dangers in semiotic analysis; in this example, what may make sense grammatically does not always make sense visually. Bal makes much use of the word ‘causality’; it is an open question whether or not her reading of Caravaggio’s painting is actually convincing in this respect.

Picture 5: Elizabeth Magill, *Burma*, oil on canvas, size unknown.



18. Mieke Bal's interpretation is an example of the use of semiotics for art historical analysis. With other artists an awareness of semiotics actually precedes the creation of artworks. The Irish painter Elizabeth Magill produced a series of landscapes that addressed the 19th century notion of the sublime, as this notion had been rendered in art allied to Romanticism. The sublime is a concept concerned with how a great sense of awe can be produced by, among other things, the sight of nature and this sense would not be describable in language. Magill's paintings re-create the general appearance of Romantic painting, and therefore evoke notions of the sublime, but also carry a generic quality that doesn't quite deliver what we believe such paintings should deliver. In looking at Magill's work we become aware of how notions of the sublime can be linked to particular visual languages, how, in other words, the *denotation* of the sublime precedes our supposed experience of it. Here it is necessary to note that language 'screens' experience, puts us at a distance, language is not a means to experience. Her painting *Burma* is curiously evocative. In linking the written signifier with a visual signified, Magill plays on certain preconceptions, assumptions, about the nature of a country which, factually speaking, is not depicted. The painting is of a landscape that could be anywhere. In other words, Magill challenges us to consider how we understand the signifier 'Burma' by consciously manipulating certain codes (the color red, hazy view, sense of distance, generalized sense of the exotic etc.). Formally speaking, I would like to keep as an open question how she actually achieves this.

Semiotics and Visual Representation



Picture 6: Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #21, 1978

19. Cindy Sherman's photographs examine the idea of 'woman' as sign. That is, signs of femininity which have been pervasive in North America media. In the first instance, Sherman acknowledges an understanding of visual imagery as a language because she appropriates a particular visual rhetoric, or style, from 50s Hollywood movies (titled *film noir*, meaning 'black movies'). It is testament to the visual strength of these movies that audiences have assumed that Sherman's photographs are stills, fragments, from existing movies; but, of course, they are not. With this absence of a narrative and the fact that Sherman, who is always central, is both present and absent (we are not perceiving the 'real' her) the photographs encourage us to consider their very status as signs. Or, in other words, insofar as the photographs can not be understood as self-portraiture (which traditionally aims at the 'real') and are not essentially part of a narrative (though we can invent one) they begin to refer back to themselves. (*What are these photographs saying?*) Therefore what we ultimately see, or recognize, are the ways by which images can generate particular ideas; in this instance, ideas about women. Note that Sherman's photographs evoke typically 'female' scenarios (e.g. woman-as-temptress or 'woman in danger') but, moreover, the suggestion of *stereotyping* is also rendered complex as the sign of 'woman' cannot be strictly linked to a signified in this respect. This is because we know Sherman is the author as well as the subject of her photographs and insofar as she appears to be engaged in various *performances of identity*, the sign of 'woman' is not fixed on a particular meaning, or meanings.

semiotics and visual representation in design

21. To briefly recap; we can say that semiotics is concerned with the nature and function of language (be it the relatively ambiguous status of visual language) and the processes by which meaning is generated and understood. Semiotic analysis acknowledges the position, or role, of the individual in terms of a challenge to any notion of fixed or unitary or universal meaning and therefore subjectivity can be engaged dynamically with the image or object. A significant way that subjectivity is acknowledged is in the fact that our perception, or *reading*, of images and objects can be revealed as socially conditioned. Central to semiotic analysis, in this respect, is the recognition of how visual and material culture is coded; the social conventions which link signs with meanings. Insofar as visual and material culture is *coded*, meaning is not intrinsic to the image or object and therefore not self-evident.

22. In design terms the architectural company COOP Himmelblau's *roof conversion for a legal practice* in Vienna (1983-4) is an explicit attack on traditional languages of architecture. The roof, as an aggressive intervention in a neoclassical building, calls on us to consider the very nature of architectural language. A definition of classicism would include ideas of harmony, balance, integration, sense of the grand etc. and the roof represents its opposite, dis-harmonious, disturbing, asymmetrical and modern. Further, any notion of the development of architectural style in terms of linear progression – one style superceding or replacing another – is upset by the fact that here two styles co-exist side-by-side. In effect, what we otherwise think we 'know' about architectural style – classicism as a singular, definable, self-evident entity – and the relation of time, in terms of the modern or the contemporary, is challenged. Differences, oppositions, have been collapsed in order to create new signs, new ways of looking.

Semiotics and Visual Representation



Picture 7: COOP Himmelblau, roof conversion for a legal practice in Vienna (1983-4)

23. There are many more examples that could be used to support or illustrate the use semiotics for looking at design or applying its insights to design practice. But perhaps suffice to say that design is a relatively young discipline and, at this point in history, the focus on meaning, on *signification*, that semiotics provides could provide a radical and useful means to consider the relation of the *form* and *subject* of design to what it means to *represent*.¹

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