Seeing is a complicated phenomenon. When we see an image, our brain breaks the image down into various components and processes them separately, before reconstituting these parts as an image. For example, the brain processes properties such as colors, textures, the edges of objects, light and shadow, and motion separately and then brings them together into an image (how it does this still is something of a mystery).

SEEING

The actual act of seeing is determined by the physical structure of the eye. What we perceive, of course, is affected by other factors. In *The Hidden Dimension*, Edward T. Hall describes the physical structure of the eye. He explains that the retina (the part of the eye that is sensitive to light) is composed of three main parts or areas: the fovea, the macula, and the section of the eye where peripheral vision occurs. Each of these areas performs different visual functions, enabling people to see in three somewhat different ways. Because the three types of vision occur at the same time and blend into one another, normally they aren't differentiated.

In his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Nicholas Mirzoeff offers a description of the process of seeing (1999:5):
According to one recent estimate, the retina contains 100 million nerve cells capable of about 10 billion processing operations per second. The hyperstimulus of modern visual culture from the nineteenth century to the present day has been dedicated to trying to saturate the visual field, a process that continually fails as we learn to see and connect ever faster.

His discussion of the power of the human retina suggests that in terms of our abilities to process visual data, human beings operate at speeds similar to those found in supercomputers.

We need this ability to process images rapidly since it has been estimated that people in America typically spend a great deal of time looking at screens. An article by Brian Stiliter in The New York Times (March 26, 2009) titled “8 Hours a Day Spent on Screens, Study Finds” points out that adults typically spend 8.5 hours a day looking at screens of one kind or another such as television screens, computer monitors, GPS devices, and screens of cell phones. The study that produced this information was made by the Council for Research Excellence. It found that on a typical day Americans are exposed to 61 minutes of television commercials and other promotions.

The eye, then, is an incredibly complex organ, and the mechanism of seeing, though effortless for most people, involves extremely complicated relationships between our eyes and our brains—a subject that will be discussed in a later chapter.

The very structure of the eye, Hall points out, has an effect on the way we design and use space. As he notes, in Western countries, we tend to focus our attention on objects, not on the spaces that separate them. By contrast, in Japan, for example (1971:75), “spaces are perceived, named, and revered as the ma, or intervening interval.” We all have the same eyes, but what we see, or perhaps what we focus our attention on, differs from culture to culture.

Rudolf Arnheim suggests in Visual Thinking (1969:37) that

visual perception is not a passive recording of stimulus material but an active concern of the mind. The sense of sight operates selectively. The perception of shape consists in the application of form categories, which can be called visual concepts because of their simplicity and generality. Perception involves problem solving.

The same point is made by E. H. Gombrich in Art and Illusion (1960: 172), where he argues that perception “is always an active process, conditioned by our expectations and adapted to situations. Instead of talking about seeing and knowing, we might do a little better to talk about seeing and noticing. We notice only when we look for something.” Perception is not automatic, then. It may be a bit of an exaggeration, but in many cases, we have to look for something in order to see it.
BELIEVING

What we believe depends on a number of factors, including our age, education, socioeconomic status, country, family background, and personality. Generally, when we talk about believing, it means we think that something is true. Philosophers talk about the correspondence theory of truth—the notion that there is a correspondence between what we believe and what is true about the “real world.”

Our belief that things exist in the real world often is tied to what we have seen; our belief in the truth about propositions usually is tied to reasoning and inference. The title of this book, Seeing Is Believing, reflects people’s sense, first, that if they see something, they can be confident it exists, and second, that seeing enables them to ascertain, with “their own eyes,” the truth about events.

However, as this book will show, seeing isn’t always a good guide to knowing what is happening. Seeing may give us a certain amount of truth, but it may not reveal the whole truth, especially because much of what we see is mediated—determined by someone else. And new computer technology enables artists, filmmakers, and the like to generate all kinds of remarkable images. We can now modify photographs, create special effects, integrate scenes from old films, incorporate dead actors and actresses into commercials, and do many other things that force us to question the relationship between seeing and believing. Much of what we see—in the media, that is—we can no longer believe.

THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE VISUAL

Research suggests that many people are “obsessed” with their looks—with their hair, their faces, their complexions, their bodies, their arms and legs; and huge industries exist to help people lose weight, conquer acne, get rid of “saddles” on their hips or droopy eyelids—you name it. Surveys indicate that though people claim they choose their mates on the basis of personality, religion, occupation, and other traits, in fact, they are initially attracted to them on the basis of looks.

We gain a great deal of information about others (and provide a great deal of information about ourselves) on the basis of visual perceptions. For example, think how important our cars are to us and how important styling is for people when it comes to choosing a car. For most of us, cars are not simply a means of transportation; they are also, perhaps more importantly, statements about ourselves, our status, and our taste or style (Figure 1.1).

The same applies to our houses. People often judge us on the basis of where we live, how big our house is, what our house looks like, and whether
we have a view. The way a house is decorated—the color of the walls, the kind of furniture, the spatiality—all of these things might seem trivial and insignificant, but we know that they are connected to powerful and very deep aspects of our psyches.

People also evaluate us, perhaps unconsciously, on the basis of how attractive we are and how attractive our mates are. Numerous surveys demonstrate that people judged “attractive” are generally better liked and higher rated on surveys than are people judged “unattractive.” We learn whether we are attractive by the responses of others. Our identities, then, are to a great degree fashioned by what have been called “significant others” via the feedback they give us about ourselves.

This fact helps explain the anxiety people feel about “blind” dates. The term is important, for it directs our attention to the importance of the visual in our scheme of things. We might even have talked on the telephone to a so-called blind date, but because we have not seen this person, we generally feel uneasy. Numerous models and famous actresses tell tales of not having dates in high school or of having their mothers arrange for someone to take them to the prom. The same applies for many famous men—statesmen, actors, and businessmen who were not exactly social lions when young. Not having a date on a given day means absolutely nothing.
THE VISUAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

We've already suggested that visual perceptions confer status on people—that others evaluate us on the basis of our cars and clothes and houses and mates. The calculations these other people make generate ideas in their heads about who and what we are—about our identities.

And people often refer to us in terms of our physical attributes. Blondes supposedly "have more fun," and redheads are supposed to have tempers. Think also about baldness and the trauma it causes in men who often adopt bizarre hairstyles in a futile attempt to hide their baldness. People are also described in terms of whether they are short or tall, thin or fat (or skinny or husky), light or dark, and so on. Consider the role skin color has played in our history and in the history of many other nations.

Our physiques and other visible aspects can lead to nicknames that, it is likely, often play an important part in the way we develop our personalities. Undesirable identities probably lead to various kinds of compensating behaviors so that, to a certain degree, it might be argued that what we are or become is affected to a considerable extent by what we look like.

Consider the following markers of identity whose meanings are conventionally understood but can be misleading in certain circumstances. We must keep in mind the point made by Ferdinand de Saussure, that the relation between a signifier, or marker (what he called a sound or object), and its signified, or meaning, is arbitrary and based on convention:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signifier (Marker)</th>
<th>Signified (Meaning)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beret</td>
<td>Arty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew cut</td>
<td>Military, backward person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple hair</td>
<td>Punk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaved head (male)</td>
<td>Cool customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoulder-length hair</td>
<td>Antiestablishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-Mart jeans</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briefcase</td>
<td>Old-fashioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attaché case</td>
<td>Conventional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birkenstock sandals</td>
<td>Liberal egghead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingtips</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviator glasses</td>
<td>Middle-class square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bow tie</td>
<td>Individualist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String tie</td>
<td>Hick, westerner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to these more-or-less conventionally understood signs of identity, there are some people who try to mislead others about who they are and what they are like by the signs they use. Consider the following ways in which people play with their identities:

- **Transvestite**: Wears clothes of different sex
- **Dyed hair**: Different colors tied to different personalities
- **Impersonator**: Pretends to be a different person
- **Impostor**: Appropriates a different profession
- **Fake accents**: Pretends to have a different nationality
- **Passing**: Assumes a different race

My point is that there are many different ways in which to take on certain identities or play with signifiers in creating identities. **Semiotics** tells us that we are always sending messages to others about ourselves based on matters such as our hairstyles, our body decorations, our clothes, our shoes, our use of language, our body language, and our props. And others are sending messages about themselves the same way. Sometimes the messages we send others about ourselves are not correct in that they are not the messages we think we are sending. That’s why people reading is an art, not a science.

One of the most important ways of our establishing our identities involves our hair. As Rose Weitz, a professor of women’s studies and sociology at Arizona State University explains, “Our hair is one of the first things people notice about us and one of the primary ways we declare our identity to them.” Her work is described in an article “It’s All About Hair” in the Fall 2004 Arizona Research journal by Diane Boudreau. She writes:

> The ASU sociologist shows how hair is tangled up with all aspects of life, including sexuality, age, race, social class, health, power, and religion. The reasons for hair’s leading role can be attributed to three things, according to Weitz: “It is personal, growing directly out of our bodies. It is public, on view for all to see. And it is malleable, allowing us to change it more or less at whim. As a result it’s not surprising that we use our hair to project our identity and others see our hair as a reflection of our identity.”

I have often wondered whether some women have what I call “The Medusa Complex.” Medusa was a mythical creature with snakes for hair who killed people by turning them to stone when they looked at her. It seems possible to me that this ancient myth is now alive in some women in a highly diluted or diffused form. These women think their hair is an all-important means of looking attractive and being sexually alluring and that the right hair color and style can “knock ’em dead,” so to speak.

In his book *The Collective Search for Identity*, sociologist Orrin Klapp suggests that identity is primarily connected to a number of different symbolic
THE SEASHELL

In a graduate seminar in semiotics and the media, I taught an exercise that was very revealing. I asked each of my students to bring in a simple object in a brown bag, so nobody knew who brought which item, that they felt reflected their personalities and identities. I also asked them to include a slip of paper in the bag listing the qualities that the object reflected about themselves.

One student brought a light gray seashell, about six inches long. When I asked my class what the seashell suggested about the person who brought it, they gave answers like “dead,” “sterile,” and “empty.” The person who brought the shell, a vivacious and attractive woman, wrote “natural,” “elegant,” and “beautiful” (Figure 1.3).

The moral of this story is that we may think we are sending certain messages about ourselves through our hairstyles, clothes, body ornaments, and body language to others, but they may be misinterpreting these messages we send in the same way that we may misinterpret messages others send to us about themselves.

Phenomena and is not just a matter of one’s possessions. As he explains (1969:5):

Strictly it includes all things a person may legitimately and reliably say about himself—his status, his name, his personality, his past life. But if his social context is unreliable, it follows that he cannot say anything legitimately and reliably about himself. His statements of identity have no more reliability than a currency which depends upon the willingness of people to recognize it and accept it.

So our identities are a combination of our personalities, our characters (including national character), our occupations, our genders, our races, our ages, our religions, and any number of other phenomena—many of which are communicated visually to others by our hairstyles, our clothes, our facial expressions, our accents, our possessions, and various other means.

From a semiotic perspective, then, we project our identities by such matters as (in alphabetical order):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Hairstyle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>Hair color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body shape</td>
<td>Hats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes</td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye-glass styles</td>
<td>Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Speaking voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gizmos</td>
<td>Use of language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To a considerable degree, our identities can be seen as sign systems that we put together to form an identity, hoping that others will “read” us the way we want to be read. This doesn’t happen all the time, for people often misread the signs we send.

TATTOOS

People have been tattooing themselves for thousands of years, for a variety of reasons. Tattoos can be described as permanent forms of body modification using pigments to make designs and other images. At one time tattoos signified deviancy or criminality, but in the last 30 years, tattoos have become very popular with young men and women, who seem to regard them as little more than fashion accessories. In postmodern societies, where “anything goes,” people no longer feel any stigma connected to getting tattooed. At the gym where I work out, around 10 percent or so of the men and women have tattoos, from those that cover much of their bodies to little tattoos, on various parts of their bodies.

There is a lack of agreement among mental health professionals about the significance of tattooing. Some psychologists and psychiatrists see tattoos in adolescents as tied to their desire to establish their own identities.
and as a step toward separation and individuation. Many young men and women get tattooed to suggest that they are “arty” or to signify their rebelliousness or attachment to countercultural movements. Other psychologists and psychiatrists and people involved with mental health see getting tattooed as an indicator of personality problems and the possibility of risky behavior. There may also be an element of narcissism in those who have many tattoos on their bodies, since people with tattoos tend to be looked at more than people without them. What is most disturbing to many writers who discuss tattoos is the fact that tattooing is a permanent form of body modification. It is very expensive and painful to remove tattoos on a person’s body and there are also medical risks from infections and other diseases in getting tattooed.

If we look at the photograph of the woman with tattoos over a large part of her body, we have to ask ourselves whether the tattoos enhance or detract from her attractiveness. We are drawn to look at the tattoos but do we do this instead of looking at her as a person? What kind of a message is the woman sending when she turns her body into a work of art?

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE IMAGE

Herbert Gans, a sociologist who has done work on popular culture, argues that there are five “taste cultures” in America, based on people’s income, occupation and education, including not only what people learn in academic institutions but also what they learn from their exposure to the mass media as well as other sources. In his book Popular Culture and High Culture: An Evaluation of Taste, he writes (1974:x):

I suggest that America is actually made up of a number of taste cultures, each with its own art, literature, music, and so forth, which differ mainly in that they express different aesthetic standards. The underlying assumption of this analysis is that all taste cultures are of equal worth. Because taste cultures reflect the class and particularly education attributes of their publics, low culture is as valid for poorly educated Americans as high culture is for well-educated ones, even if the higher cultures are, in the abstract, better or more comprehensive than the lower cultures.

His classification of these taste cultures is as follows: high culture, upper-middle culture, lower-middle culture, low culture, and quasi-folk culture. According to Gans, then, there are five major groupings in American society—and we can infer that similar groupings can be found in other societies—which have considerably different tastes as far as aesthetics and their reactions to images are concerned. His focus on income, occupation, and education means that he doesn’t have to deal with ethnicity, religions, regional variations, and other variables.
In the chart that follows, I take material from Gans's second chapter, "A Comparative Analysis of High and Popular Culture," and elicit from it his suggestions about what each taste culture likes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Culture</th>
<th>Visual Preferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Primitive art, abstract expressionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-middle</td>
<td>Bergman films, public television, documentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
<td>Representational art, Norman Rockwell paintings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low culture</td>
<td>Religious art, paintings with vivid colors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-folk</td>
<td>Comic books, graffiti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart only takes the topics that Gans discusses which have a visual dimension to them, but it is important to remember that for Gans, the preferences of people in each of these taste cultures are valid for them and these works serve their needs. The dominant taste level in America, Gans adds, is the lower-middle one.

What the Gans classification suggests is that our education, occupation, and income level (which roughly means our socioeconomic class) shape our notions of what is beautiful, and affect the way we respond to images and other visual phenomena.

SEEING ISN'T BELIEVING

If visual matters are so important, it makes sense for us to understand how visual communication works—the rules, principles, and codes that people use to interpret (or misinterpret) visual phenomena. The principles discussed in this book can be applied anywhere—in magazine design, in newspaper layout, in advertising, in photography, in film and television making, or in something as humble as writing a résumé—because these principles apply wherever visual matters are important, and they are important everywhere.

We know, from watching magicians, that we can be misled by a visual phenomenon. Magicians don't saw people in half; they only seem to. We also know that people often have delusions, see "apparitions" that really aren't there, have dreams that are "unreal," and can be fooled or misled by visual phenomena (Figures 1.4 and 1.5).

This book will help you learn how to interpret and understand visual phenomena more correctly and use them in a more reasoned manner. It will deal with principles of design and other matters involved in visual communication; with photography, film, television, typography, comics, and cartoons; and with the relationship that exists between visual matters and the imagination.
DREAMS

Interpreting why we dream has been the subject of a considerable amount of controversy. We know that dreams play an important part in our psychological well-being, for in dreams we often work through problems that we face in our waking lives. Freud considers dreams to be the "royal road" to the unconscious and his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, is generally considered to be his masterwork.


The subjective experience which appears in consciousness during sleep and which, after waking, is referred to by the sleeper as a dream is only the end result of unconscious mental activity during sleep which, by its nature or its intensity, threatens to interfere with sleep itself. Instead of waking, the sleeper dreams. We call the conscious experience during sleep, which the
sleeper may or may not recall after waking, the manifest dream. Its various elements are referred to as the manifest dream content. The unconscious thoughts which threaten to awaken the sleeper call the latent dream content. The unconscious mental operations by which the latent dream is transformed into the manifest dream we call the dream work.

This latent dream content is based on nocturnal sensory experiences (such as noises we hear at night), ideas and thoughts we had when we were awake, and various id impulses that our egos and superegos prevented us from acting upon and which we repress.

Understanding and interpreting dreams is difficult because in our latent dreams, an image can stand for its opposite, and the manifest dream—what we remember from our dreams—is a set of disconnected images that we stitch together. There is a good deal of disagreement in the academic community about Freud's notion that dreams primarily involve wish fulfillment but, whatever the case, dreams play an important role in our lives.

Freud explains that there is a considerable difference between our dreams and our thoughts related to our dreams, which he calls "dream thoughts." As he writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1965:312–313)

The first thing that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream content with the dream thought is that a work of condensation on a large scale has been carried out. Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of dream thoughts. If a dream is written out, it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space.

Films often have dreamlike sequences and some films make use of dreams. Akira Kurosawa, one of the greatest film directors, did a remarkable film in 1990, *Dreams*, based on a number of his dreams. And many plays, films, television shows, music videos, and similar texts make use of dreams and dreamlike scenarios. One of the greatest works using dreamlike scenarios is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

**COGNITION AND VISUAL IMAGES**

We actually expend a great deal of energy in the process of seeing things. In *Understanding Video*, Jarice Hanson (1987:39) cites some fascinating statistics on this matter:

It is estimated that 75 percent of the information entering the brain is from the eyes, and that 88 percent of the fibers entering or leaving the central nervous system are in the optic nerve. Current research indicates that the eyes have 100 million sensors in the retina, but only five million channels to the brain from the retina. This means that more information processing is
actually done in the eye than in the brain, and even the eye filters out
information . . .

Thus, we allocate much of our energy to processing visual information. We
do this in the service of our cognitive faculties, or the means by which we
acquire knowledge. This is generally done through either perception, intuition,
or reasoning. For our purposes, the term perception will be used to
deal with visual phenomena. We might, then, distinguish between sight, or
the ability to see; seeing, or the actual process of using sight; and perception,
or the ability to apprehend and know the world by means of sight.

Robert E. Ornstein explains, in The Psychology of Consciousness (1972:27),
that our eyes are always active: “Our eyes are also constantly in motion, in
large eye movements (saccades) as well as in eye tremors (nystagmus). We
blink our eyes every second, move our eyes around, move our heads and
bodies, and follow moving objects.” The term saccade is French and means
“the flick of a sail.” Each saccade takes about one-twentieth of a second—
the same amount of time needed to make possible persistence of vision, the
process that enables us to connect the frames of a film and “see” the film as
continuous.

When we scan a fixed image, our vision fuses after a few seconds, and we
sweep it again and again to signal our brains to keep the image in our
minds; when we follow a moving object, our eyes follow it and keep it fixed
on our retinas (Figure 1.7). What we describe as vision is a physiological
process that involves light striking our retinas and becoming registered by
photo receptors located at the back of the retinas behind blood vessels and
nerve fibers. This information is then processed by the brain. In the follow-
ing excerpt, Ornstein suggests that we have to fashion an awareness out of
the different inputs we get (1972:27):

If we “saw” an “image” on our retina, the visual world would be different
each second, sometimes one object, then another, sometimes a blur due to
the eyes moving, sometimes darkness due to blinks. We must then construct
a personal consciousness from the selected input, and in this way achieve
some stability of awareness out of the rich and continuously changing flow
of information reaching our receptors.

That is, we must learn to select from all the information that is available to
us and, in a sense, construct the world we see.

The Disney Corporation and a number of other media companies are
conducting research that follows the eye movements of people when they
watch advertisements on the Internet. According to Brooks Barnes, in an
article in The New York Times titled “Watching You Watching Ads” (July 27,
2009, pages B1 and B6) Disney’s scientists not only track eye movements,
but also heart rates, skin temperatures, and facial expressions—the last by
attaching probes to facial muscles. CBS has a research facility in Las Vegas and tested 70,000 people in 2008 by monitoring their brain activity while they watched television and advertising.

In addition, many marketing companies are investigating neuromarketing techniques, which study brain waves in an attempt to find out which parts of our brains are activated when we are exposed to advertising for various products and services. Neuromarketing involves obtaining information by subjecting individuals to functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to see how their brains respond to brands of products. The origins of neuromarketing are unclear, but it seems to have started when a marketing professor at Harvard University, Gerry Zaltman, began scanning people's brains to gain information about their preferences as consumers. Neuromarketing practitioners argue that asking people to talk about their feelings about brands of products isn't useful, because of the unreliability of their responses.
HEMISPHERES OF THE BRAIN

Our ability to process visual images seems to be related to our bicameral (two-hemisphered) brains. Research indicates that in normal people, even though both sides are involved in most activities, each hemisphere tends to specialize. Ornstein describes this phenomenon as follows (1972:51):

The left hemisphere (connected to the right side of the body) is predominantly involved with analytic, logical thinking, especially in verbal and mathematical functions. Its mode of operation is primarily linear. This hemisphere seems to process information sequentially... If the left hemisphere is specialized for analysis, the right hemisphere (again, remember, connected to the left side of the body) seems specialized for holistic mentation. This hemisphere is primarily responsible for our orientation in space, artistic endeavor, crafts, body image, recognition of faces.

As far as vision is concerned, both hemispheres of the brain play an important role. Hanson (1987:41) tells us that while the left hemisphere is “more accurate in its ability to focus attention on something than is the right,” the left side also tires more rapidly “and often gives way to the right.” The right side maintains a general vigil in the surveillance of the environment, but it must call on the left hemisphere when it is necessary to pay attention to some detail.

When the right side does not call on the left side, a process that might be described as image narcotization takes place—a sense of monotony and boredom. On the other hand, using the left side of the brain is tiring, and so it must be reserved for occasions when focus and detail are important. Thus, both the left and right sides of the brain are needed, working in tandem, for people to process visual information in an optimal manner.

We can see the relationships that have been discussed in the chart that follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left Hemisphere</th>
<th>Right Hemisphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right side of body</td>
<td>Left side of body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Holistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical</td>
<td>Artistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Orientation in space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequential processing</td>
<td>Combinatory processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual focus, detail</td>
<td>Surveillance, generalized vigil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this in mind, we are prepared to consider our next topic, aesthetics.
AESTHETICS

Aesthetics means different things to different people. Courses in aesthetics, as it is conventionally understood, generally are offered by philosophy departments and tend to be theoretical in nature. Philosophers typically deal with aesthetics in terms of the following abstract questions:

1. What is the nature of the beautiful?
2. What is the relationship between form and content?
3. Is beauty objective or subjective? Does it exist independent of our opinions, or is it mainly in the eye of the beholder, as some have suggested?
4. What is the relationship between truth and beauty?
5. What is the significance of ethical content? Need a work of art have moral value? If so, how do we define moral?
6. Should we consider the artist's intention in evaluating a work?

These questions are important, and we might bear them in mind as we proceed.

This book, however, is about applied aesthetics and focuses on the literal meaning of the term aesthetics, "space perception." The questions this book deals with are practical ones:

1. How do we obtain certain desired effects using the basic visual elements at our command?
2. How do we best exploit the powers (and deal with the limitations) of whatever medium we are working with?

In the world of applied aesthetics, we start with the effect we want and work backward, using whatever we can to obtain that desired effect.

Taste is an important factor, of course, but it is very subjective. Taste is idiosyncratic; it is affected by factors such as sex, education, socioeconomic class, values, time, and culture. (Think, for example, how old-fashioned cars from the 1960s or fashions from just a few years back look today.) As mentioned, sociologists have suggested that there are "taste cultures" that shape the way people perceive things. From our perspective, that of applied aesthetics, taste reminds us that we must always know our audience and keep it in mind.

A PRIMER ON COMMUNICATION THEORY

Many theories and models have been developed that deal with communication theory—how people communicate with one another. One of the most famous models, created by the political scientist Harold Lasswell, asks:
Who?
Says what?
In which channel?
To whom?
With what effect?

Let me offer my own model which focuses on the relationships that exist among a work of art, the audience for whom it is intended, the medium used, the artist, and society. These are what I call the focal points, which can be used in the communication process.

Focal Points in the Communication Process

The arrows in this model show that every focal point in the communication process is (or can be) connected to every other focal point.

This model with five focal points is a modification of one used by literary scholar M. H. Abrams in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Abrams's model, shown below, deals with literary works, so it doesn't address the role of media.

The addition of media into my model and the change from universe to society enabled me to cover the most important elements, or "focal points," that one might consider in dealing with communication of all kinds. Most scholarly studies of the mass-mediated communication process and of the effects of communication focus on the relationship that exists between media and one or more of the focal points.
Abrams discusses another matter of interest in his book. He points out that there are four opposing major theories that deal with the relationship between works of art and the audiences of these works. These four theories are:

- **Pragmatic**: Art is functional, has a purpose.
- **Objective**: Art creates a world.
- **Emotive**: Art generates sensations, emotional reactions.
- **Mimetic**: Art mirrors or reflects reality.

According to pragmatic theorists, art is always functional and has a purpose. Objective theorists argue that what artists do is to create their own worlds. The purpose of art for emotive theorists is to create sensations for audiences. Aristotle, who is the father of mimetic (from mimesis, Greek for "imitation") theories of art, argues that what art does is mirror reality.

**ARISTOTLE ON IMITATION**

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. and died in 322 B.C. Richard McKeon, the editor of *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, writes in his introduction that Aristotle (1941:xv) "was reputed to have been bald, thin-legged, to have had small eyes, and to have spoken with a lisp" and that in his student days he was supposed to have been (1941:xv) "foppish in dress and to have affected gaudy jewelry." He is, unquestionably, one of the most important philosophers who ever lived.

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, his book on the arts, he argues that all art is based on imitation (mimesis). The reason imitation is so important, Aristotle adds, is that it based on something natural in all human beings (1941:1457):

Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation.

This assertion, that imitation is natural to human beings, forms the basis, then, of his theory of art and of his psychology.


When we think of those phenomena in which mimicry is likely to play a role, we enumerate such things as dress, mannerisms, facial expressions, speech, stage acting, artistic creation, and so forth, but we never think of desire.
Consequently, we see imitation in social life as a force for gregariousness and bland conformity through the mass reproduction of a few social models.

This theory suggests that advertising is a major force in generating “mimetic desire,” and when we purchase products we are imitating not the behavior but the desire of those sports heroes, actors and actresses, celebrities and so on, who are used to sell things. Thus “mimetic desire,” which is implicitly based on visual images, can be seen as an important factor in consumer behavior and in generating “consumer lust.”

These theories operate at a very high level of abstraction and those who support a specific theory claim that their theory best explains what all art does. It is possible, I would suggest, to find works of art that combine a number of these functions. For example, a television commercial has a pragmatic function. It is meant to sell products. But it also creates its own little world, one which may or may not “mirror” the real world, and it aims to generate emotions and desire in its audience. It’s useful to keep these theories in mind when you examine a work of art to determine which of them might be most important and how the theories might help explain the appeal different works of art have to different people.
Lasswell’s and my model actually are very similar—except for the terminology—as the following chart shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lasswell</th>
<th>Berger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who?</td>
<td>Artist or sender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Says what?</td>
<td>Artwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In which channel?</td>
<td>Medium used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To whom?</td>
<td>Audience or receiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With what effect?</td>
<td>Social impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using Lasswell’s model, we can understand that communication takes place when someone says something (interpreted broadly), using some medium, to someone (including groups of people), with some effect.

For our purposes, let us consider the “effects” Lasswell mentions as being linked to the ability to understand (or, in technical terms, “decode”) what has been said and have it generate some kind of impact—personal as well as social. For example, if I say something to you in Italian and you don’t know Italian, it will simply be gibberish as far as you are concerned. Italian, here, is a code, and knowing Italian will enable you to decode my message. That is why icons are used in airports and other public places. They transmit messages by images, which most everyone can decode, and not by words—though iconic signs may use words as well.

Another important model of the communication process comes from the linguist Roman Jakobson. He suggested that there are six elements in the process:

```
Context
Message
Sender   ------------   Receiver
Contact (medium)
Code
```

**Jakobson’s Six Elements of the Communication Process**

These elements may be described as follows:

1. A **Sender** sends a message.
2. A **Message** is the content of what is sent.
3. A **Receiver** is the object or objects of the message (audiences).
4. A **Code** is the form of the message: language, images, sound.
5. A **Contact** is the medium used (television, film, radio, conversation) to send the message.
6. A **Context** is background which helps us understand the message.

Jakobson's model of communication offers us an insight into the people and complexities involved in the communication process. It also compares significantly with the Lasswell model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lasswell</th>
<th>Jakobson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who?</td>
<td>Sender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Says what?</td>
<td>Message and code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In which channel?</td>
<td>Contact (medium)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To whom?</td>
<td>Receiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With what effect?</td>
<td>Context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jakobson's model doesn't deal directly with effects, but his inclusion of context in the communication process implies a social dimension to communication. Think how important context is. The statement “pass the hypodermic needle” means one thing in a hospital and another thing in a dark alley.

There are many other communication models, some of which are extremely complex. Some models incorporate elements such as feedback or context or “two-step flows” between opinion leaders and the general public into their formulations. But the models discussed here offer us an overview of the most important elements in the communication process, a perspective that can easily be applied to visual communication.

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**THEORIES OF MORALITY**

What is morality? Is an action right or wrong only in relation to certain conditions, or is it right or wrong independently of any conditions? Are the grounds for judging human conduct always the same, or should they vary with social and individual needs, customs, and historical evolution? Theories of morality may be classified as relativist or absolutist depending upon the answers they offer to these questions. But either relativism or absolutism may involve different general assumptions and may support different moral principles. An absolutist may argue for the invariant character of particular rules of conduct on the ground that they are divine commands, or that they are laws of nature, or that they are deducible from the concept of reason, or that they are intuitively self-evident. A relativist may hold that the rules of right conduct vary with human conventions, or with social traditions, or with political, psychological, economic, or biological needs. The history of ethical philosophy is a continuous dialogue between progressively more refined forms of absolutism and relativism.

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ETHICS AND THE IMAGE

The power to create images, videos, films, commercials, television programs, and the like—all of which profoundly affect viewers' emotions and beliefs, and have social and cultural implications as well—should not be taken lightly. We must be ever mindful of our responsibilities toward those who will see what we create and, in many cases, believe what they see.

Even if people don't always believe what they see, or believe everything they see, they are often affected emotionally by the media to which they are exposed. For example, we know that professional wrestling is "fake," but

CHECKLIST ON ETHICS AND THE MEDIA

Rather than dealing with ethics in terms of abstract philosophical matters, let us operationalize our discussion and deal with some of the problems we face when we try to act in an ethical manner.

Here are some key questions relating to ethical behavior for individuals who work with visual communication and other aspects of the media:

1. Will the works you create—videos, programs, commercials, print advertisements, and so on—give people distorted views of reality (to the extent that we can know reality, that is)?
2. Do your works use the power of images to exploit or manipulate people? Do your works attempt to get people to do things that are, or might be, self-destructive (like smoking cigarettes or drinking too much) or harmful to others?
3. Do your works stereotype people—members of racial or ethnic minorities or religious groups, for instance—and lead, as is often the case, to feelings of hatred toward and self-hatred by members of the stereotyped group?
4. Do your works have the power to disturb young viewers, who may not be emotionally able to deal with what they see?
5. Do your works contain gratuitous violence? Do they sexually exploit women's bodies? Are they sensationalistic?
6. Are your works something that you are not proud of? Do you have to rationalize your behavior by saying, "If I don't do it, someone else will...and I have responsibilities to my family as well?"
7. Do you create works you wouldn't want your children to see? If so, is it acceptable to create something that other people's children might see?
8. Do your works suggest some actions or values that you would be willing to universalize?

This last question reflects the ideas of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who believed that ethical behavior should be based on what he called the "categorical imperative." Kant wrote in 1785: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature." That is, I would suggest, a very good principle to keep in mind when considering the ethical responsibilities of individuals who work in the media.

VISUALS

Scholarship on the effects of certain types of advertising.

Paul M. Zipf, "Advertising and the Visual Imagination."
people who watch it are still viscerally affected by seeing performers who are (or who seem to be) violently battering one another. Theater is "fake," too—actors and actresses pretend to have certain emotions and feelings. Audiences know this, but they still can be brought to tears in some cases or made to laugh hysterically in others.

Therefore, those who work in the media must consider their ethical responsibilities toward others. Ethics is, for our purposes, that branch of philosophy generally defined as dealing with "correct behavior," with what is "right" and what is "wrong." But what is "correct behavior"? What does it mean to act "morally" and avoid acting "immorally"? How do we know we're doing "the right thing" and avoiding doing "something wrong"?

Philosophers have debated ethics for thousands of years. Some philosophers have suggested that ethical behavior involves utilitarian considerations—"the greatest good for the greatest number." But how do we determine what the greatest good for the greatest number is?

Some philosophers argue that there are absolute standards of right and wrong. But others—the ethical relativists—argue that it is impossible to say, with any finality, that anything is always right or wrong. For example, in some societies, men have many wives, while in other societies, men have only one wife. Therefore, we cannot say conclusively that having more than one wife—or, by implication, doing anything else—is always right or always wrong.

Finally, many people believe we should obey the golden rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But others have disagreed with that notion, saying, "Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you—their tastes may not be the same as yours."

Deciding what's the right thing to do in any given situation is not easy, which explains why ethics is, and always has been, a very contentious branch of philosophy. But it is important for us to think, at all times, about ethics and the impact of what we do, not only for the good of society, but also for our own peace of mind.

**VISUAL PERSUASION**

Scholarly research on the way people react to images indicates that there are certain hardwired responses that people make to certain kinds of images. As Paul Messaris writes in his book *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (1997:4)

> Real-world vision is intimately connected with emotion, which, in turn, is tied to our functional needs as biological and social creatures. When we look at the world, we are strongly predisposed to attend to certain kinds of objects or situations and to react in certain kinds of ways. These predispositions reflect the influence of culture, but . . . they have also been shaped to a certain degree by
biological evolution. In short, real-world vision comes with a set of built-in response tendencies. Consequently, to the extent that a picture can reproduce the significant visual features of real-world experiences, it may also be able to exploit the response tendencies that are associated with those features.

This explains why advertising uses certain techniques in an attempt to attract our attention and shape our behavior. Our responses in these situations are involuntary because they are, to a great degree, biological or natural.

The following is a list of a number of responses to certain techniques used in advertising:

1. We pay attention, as Messaris writes, "to unfamiliar objects when they are only slightly different from our expectations." (1997:7)
2. We are affected by visual metaphors (communication based on analogies) and visual metonymies (communication based on association).
3. When someone gazes into our eyes, we return the gaze, what Messaris calls direct eye gaze.
4. We are affected by displays of emotion in others, whether real or pretended (as in the case of print advertisements and television commercials).
5. We are pleased by humor that amuses us and most likely transfer our sense of pleasure from the advertisement to the product or service being advertised.
6. We identify with others and often imitate them. French scholar René Girard has argued in his book A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare that imitation is a powerful social force and that we often imitate the desire of others, an activity he describes as mimetic desire.
7. We respond directly to sexual display and to beauty of all kinds. Thus, we are unconsciously affected by images in which a woman has dilated or enlarged pupils, which are signs of sexual arousal (Figure 1.9).
8. We can be "conditioned," to varying degrees, by continual repetition and by the use of cues that affect us much the same way that Pavlov was able to make dogs salivate by ringing a bell when he fed them.
9. We seek closure and want to know how narratives that attract our attention will be resolved—whether it is a long narrative, as in a television show or film, or a micronarrative, as in a television commercial.

This list suggests that advertising can do any number of things to automatically "push our buttons," and advertisers utilize these hardwired responses to the extent they can—whether they are selling soap or presidential candidates. Advertisers use every one of these devices they can because they know that, generally speaking, people don't want to be subjected to print advertisements, even if they are paying attention, and they don't exercise the same control over themselves that they do over others, the way actresses and models do in commercials.
advertisements and television commercials. Advertisers also have to face the problem of "clutter," the endless numbers of advertisements to which people are subjected and that generate information overload. It's an interesting exercise to watch commercials without the sound on. When you do this you notice in many commercials the extreme degree to which actors and actresses use facial expressions and body language to attract our attention and move us emotionally. They flirt with us, they plead with us and do everything they can to sell us whatever it is they are pitching.

What advertisers want us to do, generally speaking, is appeal to the id elements in our psyches, to our desire for pleasure and self-gratification and to phenomena buried in the unconscious part of our psyches. Advertisers wish to sidetrack or avoid ego and superego functions, which would ask us to decide, rationally, whether or not we needed that product or service being advertised.

From the list I gave of natural or hardwired responses we give to certain images, it would seem that the deck is stacked against the average consumer. That is why Ernest Dichter, one of the founding fathers of motivational research, suggests the following in his book *The Strategy of Desire* (1960:12):

> Whatever your attitude toward modern psychology or psychoanalysis, it has been proved beyond any doubt that many of our daily decisions are governed by motivations over which we have no control and of which we are quite unaware.

The illusion we have that we are in full control ourselves only helps advertisers pull our strings. Advertisers don't always succeed and people do have the ability to resist them to a certain degree, but advertising is a $150 billion a year industry in America (for 2010) for a good reason: companies that
advertise are getting the results they want. Not all advertising campaigns are successful, but over the long term, advertising is a very effective and powerful tool of persuasion.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD ON ADVERTISING AND PERSUASION

The French social scientist Jean Baudrillard offers an insight from psychoanalytic theory into why advertising is successful “in the long run.” He writes in his book *The System of Objects* (1968/1996:167) about advertising:

Neither its rhetoric nor even the informational aspect of its discourse has a decisive effect on the buyer. What the individual does respond to, on the other hand, is advertising’s underlying leitmotiv of protection and gratification, the intimation that its solicitations and attempts to persuade are the sign, indecipherable at the conscious level, that somewhere there is an agency (a social agency in the event, but one that refers directly to the image of the mother) which has taken it upon itself to inform him of his own desires, and to foresee and rationalize these desires to his own satisfaction. He thus no more “believes” in advertising than the child believes in Father Christmas, but this in no way impedes his capacity to embrace an internalized infantile situation, and to act accordingly.

Thus, in Baudrillard’s view, advertising facilitates a kind of collective psychological regression—a state in which we are very susceptible to persuasion. It is not any particular print advertisements or television commercials that shape our behavior as consumers. It is, instead, the continual impact of all of these kinds of persuasion that leads us to regress and succumb to our desires to buy things—and, in some cases, to buy things we didn’t even know we wanted.
CONCLUSIONS

Seeing Is Believing aims to entertain you (in the best sense of the term—namely, giving you ideas to "entertain"), as well as to teach you about visual communication, with the goal of helping you learn to see the world (and yourself) with more clarity and understanding.

APPLICATIONS

1. In order of importance, what visual phenomena are most important in shaping your identity? Consider such things as height, body shape, hair color, hairstyle, complexion, teeth, eye color, clothes, and so on.

2. List the most important status symbols in our culture. How do these symbols confer status on people? How have status symbols changed in recent years? Is price the most important factor or are there things to consider when evaluating status symbols?
3. What makes a person "attractive"? Is beauty something that exists independent of people's opinions, or is it merely "in the eye of the beholder"?

4. It has been suggested that seeing isn't always believing—namely, that sometimes we are led astray by things we see. Give some examples of this. How can we use visual phenomena to deceive people?

5. In this discussion on aesthetics, a number of notions of what is most important in a work of art were mentioned: form, content, truthfulness, ethical qualities. Which of these concepts do you think is the critical one? What reasons can you offer to support your contention?

6. Aestheticians have suggested four theories of the purpose of art: (1) to generate emotional experiences in people, (2) to achieve certain consequences for individuals and society, (3) to mirror reality, and (4) to generate the artist's own reality. (These are known as the emotive, pragmatic, mimetic, and objective theories of art, respectively.) Which of them strikes you as best? Why?

7. What is taste? Is taste a valid and useful means of evaluating works of art and other phenomena? If so, why? If not, why not?

8. Select some advertisements from fashionable and upscale magazines such as Vogue and Architectural Digest and middle-scale magazines such as Better Homes and Gardens. What differences do you notice in terms of such matters as the physical features of the models (male and female) in the advertisements? In the way men are shown relating to women? In the way women are portrayed?

9. Select some photographs or advertisements (with people in them) that reflect "beauty" in women and "handsomeness" in men. What do you find in common with selections made by your classmates? Have our definitions of beauty and handsomeness changed in recent years? If so, how do your photographs and advertisements reflect this? Are our definitions destrctive? If so, how?

10. If you had to bring a simple object to class that reflected your personality, what would it be? What attributes about you does it reflect? How might your classmates misinterpret what the object reflects about you?

11. Record a dream and examine the symbolism reflected in it. You might want to read some of Freud's book on dreams for help in this matter.

12. Which model of the communication process do you think best explains the various aspects of communication? Explain your answer.

13. Using the information on visual persuasion you've read in this book, make a tape of an interesting television commercial and analyze the way it uses images to persuade its viewers to purchase something.
14. The painting of an elephant, made by an elephant (Figure 1.12), raises
an interesting question—can animals be artists? If you don’t think they
can, what do you say about the elephant painting done by an elephant?

15. Have you ever purchased something or wanted to buy something
because a sports star, movie star, or celebrity pitched it on a television
commercial? If so, were you experiencing "mimetic desire"?

KEY TERMS FOR CHAPTER 1

signifier          taste cultures
signified          unconscious
semiotics          saccades
aesthetics         metonymy
ethics             direct eye gaz
metaphor           mimetic desire
This chapter deals with how we make sense of what we see. It introduces some basic principles of semiotics, or the science of signs, and some material from psychoanalytic theory, which can be used to help us understand how we find meaning in images and, by extension, in life, in general.

LEARNING TO SEE

The first thing we must recognize is that we don’t just “see” but have to learn how to see and what to see. We cannot focus our attention on everything around us; somehow, we select certain things to look at. And what we decide to see is determined by what we know and what we believe and what we want. Consider our behavior in a supermarket, where we are surrounded by thousands of products, each clamoring for our attention. We “see” an estimated eight products every second that we’re in the supermarket. We may try to neglect the products we feel we do not need or want—but it is very difficult for most people to avoid purchasing some products on the basis of “impulse.” (More than 60 percent of all supermarket purchases are not planned in advance, which means that impulse buying is a major factor in our trips to the supermarket.) And it is primarily as a result of packaging—that is, the way products look—that we are attracted to them. We are also affected by the design of supermarkets and the placement of products on the shelves. If we have to stoop down or reach up to get a product, we are less likely to purchase it than if it is at eye level and easy to reach.
The way we think about visual phenomena is affected by our knowledge. In Ways of Seeing, John Berger points out that in the Middle Ages, when people believed in the existence of hell, fire had a meaning much different from and more powerful than its current meaning (Figure 2.1).

We all have to be taught what different objects are (a plane, a ship, a dog, and so on, ad infinitum), but we learn so quickly and with so little effort that we generally don’t recognize that a learning experience has taken place. We simply seem to pick up much of this information by osmosis. But the fact is, we do have to learn, and much of this learning involves visual phenomena.

There is a vast literature on visual matters—everything from highly abstract theoretical and philosophical treatises to experimental research studies. And in between are countless reports on applied research, on such topics as the way we perceive spaces or relate to colors, the responses generated by various kinds of film shots, the impact of editing, and the relationship between a medium and its message, to cite just a few.

We can’t cover everything in this brief book, but by dealing with some of the most important aspects of visual communication, we can take that important first step on the “royal road” to visual understanding.

SIGNS, SYMBOLS, AND SEMIOTOS

How do we make sense of the visual world? Many of us never bother to think about this question because we do a pretty good job of interpreting the world around us and rarely reflect on how we know what we know.

Consider the following:

1. A drawing of a person (Figure 2.2)
2. A picture of a house with smoke coming out of a window (Figure 2.3)
3. An image of a cross (Figure 2.4)
The list might go on endlessly: a photograph of a friend, a Rolls Royce, a flag, the Mona Lisa, the Eiffel Tower, the White House, the Pentagon, a Russian tank, a Big Mac, a computer, a great white shark, the Washington Monument, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a football, and so on.

But how do we “make sense” of these three items?

In Figure 2.2, the matter is quite simple: the drawing looks like a person; and so we can say that drawings (as well as photographs, paintings, sculptures, and the like) communicate by resemblance. In Figure 2.3, we know from our experiences with fires—in fireplaces, at ceremonial events, in television news shows or films—that “where there’s smoke, there’s fire.” Thus, we have good reason to believe that the smoke is caused by fire and that the building is on fire. In Figure 2.4, the cross is an object that we have learned is associated with Christianity and is an artifact having great resonance and emotional power for many Christians because it symbolizes Christ’s crucifixion. There is no way for a person to “naturally” know the meaning of a cross; there is no logical connection between the object and what it stands for: the way there is between smoke and fire. (The connection is historical, not logical.)

Now let us consider another matter related to visual communication that we might add to the preceding list:

4. The word tree

The word tree and the object it refers to are shown in Figures 2.5 and 2.6. Linguists tell us that there is no natural connection between a word and the object it stands for. Thus, the word tree and the object it stands for (defined in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary as a “woody perennial plant having a single usually elongate main stem generally with few or no branches on its lower part”) are not logically related. The relationship between a word and the
object it stands for is arbitrary or conventional. This fact explains why dictionaries need to be revised all the time, because language is always changing. This same relationship between a word and its object also applies to all kinds of other phenomena, in which we learn that something (a word, a facial expression, an object, a hairstyle) signifies or stands for something else.

Let's recapitulate. We make sense of visual phenomena in a number of ways:

1. Resemblance (as in photographs)
2. Cause and effect or logic (as in smoke implying fire)
3. Convention (as in objects that have symbolic value)
4. Signification (as in a smile signifying pleasure)

There is a science that is of great utility in helping us understand how visual phenomena communicate—a field of knowledge called semiotics, the science of signs. Two theories are encompassed here: one is the field known as semiotics, which was developed by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce, and the other is the field known as semiology, developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. For the sake of simplicity, we'll use the term semiotics to cover both of these theories.

Ferdinand de Saussure describes his hopes for the science of semiotics in his book Course in General Linguistics, which was originally published in French in 1915. He writes (1966:16):

Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of these systems.

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology. I shall call it semiology (from Greek semainon, "sign"). Semiology would show what constitutes a sign, what laws govern them.

This can be regarded as one of the charter statements of the science of semiology, which means, literally, words about signs. As I mentioned above, the term semiotics is now the term of choice for this science. For semioticians, human beings are sign-creating and sign-interpreting creatures, and every aspect of our lives can be interpreted semiotically.

C. S. Peirce explains his theory as follows (quoted in the article "Peirce’s Theory of Signs" by J. Jay Zeman, in T. Sebeok’s A Perfusion of Signs, 1977:36):

An analysis of the essence of a sign ... leads to a proof that every sign is determined by its object, either first by partaking in the characters of the object, when I call that sign an Icon; secondly, by being really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object, when I call the sign an Index; thirdly, by more or less approximate certainty that will be interpreted
in denoting an object, in consequence of a habit (which term I use as including a natural disposition), when I call the sign a symbol.

According to Peirce, then, there are three kinds of signs and the science that helps us understand how these signs work he called semiotics. Let me explain a bit more about how signs work.

**What Signs Are**

A sign, from the semiotic perspective, is anything that stands for something else. What does this statement mean? Only that a great deal of communication is done not directly but rather indirectly, by using various signs. For instance, there are several ways to suggest that an actor is portraying a secret agent. The actor could say, "I am a secret agent," or a narrator could tell us. Or the actor could wear a trench coat and a slouch hat, carry a small revolver with a silencer, and drive a fast sports car. All of these are signs that, taken together, suggest a secret agent.

**ICONS, INDEXES, AND SYMBOLS.** Peirce identifies three kinds of signs: iconic, indexical, and symbolic, as the chart below shows. An icon is a sign that looks like or resembles the thing it stands for—which means that icons are easy to interpret; the drawing in Figure 2.2 is an icon. Because icons are so easy to interpret, signs in airports are often icons—pictures that most people, regardless of the language they speak, should be able to understand. An indexical sign is logically connected to what it represents; in Figure 2.3, smoke indicates fire. We have to learn about this connection and do so, often, simply from everyday life. A symbol, on the other hand, has conventional meaning, and there is no logical connection between this meaning and the symbol itself. It is something we have to learn, as with the cross in Figure 2.4. We can see the relation that exists among icons, indexes, and symbols in the chart that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signify by</th>
<th>Icon</th>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Smoke/fire</td>
<td>Cross or flag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Can recognize</td>
<td>Can figure out</td>
<td>Must learn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Petrie's theory is actually very involved, but these three central concepts can help us to understand visual communication. For example, internists
and other "cognitive" physicians (in contrast to surgeons and other "operative" physicians) work on the basis of indexical knowledge. They see various signs, and patients tell them about their symptoms; and on the basis of these phenomena, they try to determine what is causing a problem. All of us recognize the power symbols have over people—flags, the crucifix, the Star of David, college banners, logos . . . one could go on endlessly. These symbols can generate enormously powerful emotional responses in people. In fact, people often are willing to give their lives for the institutions and organizations behind these symbols.

Peirce notes that "the universe is perfused with signs, if not made up entirely of them," which means that everything can be seen as a sign of something else and that human beings are sign-producing and sign-analyzing beings. Logos are designs that are used to stand for and help reinforce the identity of a corporation or other entity (Figures 2.8). If everything in the universe is a sign or can be understood as one, it certainly makes sense to learn how to interpret and understand signs.

The situation becomes more complex because the boundaries between icon, index, and symbol are often vague. As Sandra E. Moriarty explains in "Abduction: A Theory of Visual Interpretation" (1996:169):

A rose can be an icon (a picture), an index (a sign of summer), and a symbol (the War of the Roses). Photographs are indexical as well as iconic because they are reality grounded. In communication production and reception, the meaning may shift from one to another as the communication act progresses. For example, Sneed O’Connor’s iconoclastic tearing up of the picture of Pope John Paul II . . . illustrates how conflict can be generated when an iconic representation is turned into a symbol.

An iconoclast is, literally, a destroyer or breaker of icons—but generally refers to someone who is unconventional and who goes against the grain as well as someone who destroys sacred icons. We see, then, that applying Peirce’s ideas can be quite complicated.
Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist, offers us an explanation of why symbols seem so natural and why they have so much cultural resonance. In his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973:45), he writes:

Thinking consists not of “happenings in the head” (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called, by G. H. Mead and others—significant symbols—words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels—anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. From the point of view of any particular individual, such symbols are largely given. He finds them already current in the community when he is born, and they remain, with some additions, subtractions, and partial alterations he may or may not have had a hand in, in circulation when he dies.

Symbols, as Geertz explains, help us make sense of the world and help shape our thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

**SIGNIFIERS AND SIGNIFIEDS.** In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure discusses the relationship that exists between signifiers and signifieds. He writes (1966:66–67):

The linguistic signs unite not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. . . . I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a sign . . . I propose to retain the word sign [signe] to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified [signifié] and signifier [signifiant]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts.

Saussure argues, then, that a sign is divided into two parts: a signifier and a signified. A signifier is defined by Saussure as a sound or object that calls to mind a concept or signified (Figures 2.9 and 2.10). According to Saussure,
the relationship that exists between the signifier and signified is arbitrary or conventional—that is, the relationship is not natural but must be learned.

Therefore, in Saussure's view, no signifier—whether a word or a drawing or any other kind of sign—is self-explanatory and implies a specific signified. A given facial expression—a wink, for example—can mean a number of different things, depending on the situation. As semiotic theorists often point out, if signs can be used to tell the truth, they also can be used to lie.

Saussure makes another extremely important point. He notes that concepts don't mean anything on their own; they are always defined in terms of how they differ from other concepts. As he puts it (1966:117), "Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms in the system."

Meaning, then, is determined not by content but by relationships. As Saussure (1966:117) suggests, as far as concepts are concerned, "their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not." This explains why our thinking tends to be so binary, so connected to oppositions—because that's the way language requires us to make sense of things.

This idea about concepts generating meaning relationally has significance in a number of areas when it comes to visual communication. We will see, for example, that a color's impact depends to a great degree on the colors around it. And size, as we all recognize, is also relative. With this in mind, let us consider what signs can do.

What Signs Can Do

Let's look at several examples of how signs can mean different things and how we can use them for a variety of purposes. For one thing, we can lie with signs. People who dye their hair are, from this perspective, "lying" with signs—though this kind of lying is not considered of great consequence. People who lease expensive cars and represent themselves as the owner are, in a sense, lying with signs (or, in this case, status symbols). When we laugh at a joke that we have heard before so that we don't embarrass the joke teller, we are lying. Or are we merely being polite?


Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything that can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist, or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all.
What Eco calls our attention to is the fact that signs always have a double valence: they can be used either to tell the truth or to lie. A great deal of human behavior is based on lies, of one sort or another, accomplished by using signs.

The absence of a sign, when some kind of a sign is expected, is also a kind of sign. If you say hello to a friend and don’t get a response, that is a sign. Not doing something when something is expected of you is a kind of sign for a behavior known as “aggressive passivity”; in other words, doing nothing or not responding can, in certain situations, be seen as a form of aggressive behavior. This “aggressive passivity” or “passive aggression” is often used by children to “get back” at their parents—for example, by taking forever to do their chores.

Signs are used by people as a means of getting information and drawing conclusions about things. During the Iran-Contra hearings of 1987, commentators made much of the participants’ facial expressions and body language, as a means of trying to understand what the participants really felt or believed. In the case of William Casey, the late CIA director, however, this was impossible, because Casey was “stone-faced.” Furthermore, the president, at that time, Ronald Reagan, had an extensive background in acting, and actors are people who can pretend to have feelings and beliefs that they don’t really have.

Facial Expressions as Signs

In their Executive Summary of Report to the National Science Foundation, psychologists Paul Ekman and Terrence J. Sejnowski suggest that faces are “windows” into the psyche and reflect the mechanisms governing our social and emotional lives. They write that facial expressions provide information about:

1. Emotions, such as fear, anger, and enjoyment
2. States of mind, such as surprise, sadness, and disgust, and more enduring moods, such as euphoria, dysphoria, and irritability
3. Cognitive activity, such as perplexity, concentration, and boredom
4. Temperament and personality, including traits such as hostility, sociability, and shyness
5. Truthfulness, including the exposure of concealed emotions, and clues as to when the information provided in words about plans or actions is false
6. Psychopathology, including not only diagnostic information relevant to depression, mania, schizophrenia, and other less severe disorders, but also information about how patients respond to treatment.
They also suggest that facial expressions can be used in medical research and might be helpful in identifying the role played by our emotions and moods in coronary artery disease. In the field of education, they point out that a teacher's facial expressions help influence whether his or her students learn, and a student's facial expressions help teachers determine whether their messages are getting through.

They also write that it is now possible to create "automated systems for monitoring facial expressions and animating artificial models" which could revolutionize medicine, communications and many other areas.

The seven emotions, in addition to a "neutral" state, one without any emotions showing, are (in alphabetical order):

- Anger
- Determination
- Disgust
- Fear
- Neutral (no particular emotion)
- Pouting
- Sadness
- Surprise

Faces (Figure 2.11) showing five of the seven universal human emotions are found in a Ph.D. dissertation by Irfan Essa and are used with his permission.

According to Ekman, who developed what is called FACS for Facial Action Coding System, there are 43 muscles in the human face that in different combinations show our emotions, even if the emotion lasts for just a fragment of a second, and the person experiencing the emotion in unaware of having had it. Many people think they can accurately identify emotions on people's faces, but when I showed some images of Ekman demonstrating the different emotions to my students and asked them to identify each of the emotions, they made numerous errors.

Figure 2.11:
Faces reflecting five of the eight universal human emotions. The images below each face show the energy one uses as each emotion is expressed. Courtesy Irfan Essa.
COMPUTER-ASSISTED SMILING

An article by Lucy Kellaway in Financial Times, July 20, 2009 titled, appropriately, "Lessons in smiling that have left me open-mouthed" contains a fascinating news item about smiling (2009:10):

In Japan, workers are being subjected to a new sort of control—computer scanning to see if their smiles are wide enough. Every day, staff at 13 railway stations are having to bare their teeth at a computer that rates the curvelessness of their smiles on a scale of one to 100. For those who can't muster a broad enough grin, the computer issues directions on how to improve performance.

There is another practical application of this matter of "reading" faces for emotions: playing a good game of poker. In the game of poker, players must make sure they do not give involuntary "tells," facial expressions or other signs which give away their hands. That explains why they learn to have "poker faces" and not provide any information to their opponents. But there are other matters, some of them involuntary, that can give information to opponents, such as body language, dilated pupils (showing sexual arousal), gestures, and facial coloration. Not only do poker players have to be careful not to give away information with signs, they also have to lie with signs and give their opponents false information. So poker can be seen as a game in which applied semiotics, sending signs of one kind or another, is of crucial importance. The cards are only one part of the game.

Codes

Because the relationship that exists between signs and what they mean (from Saussure's perspective) is arbitrary, we have to find ways of making sense of signs; we do so via codes. Codes can be looked at as ways of making sense of signs, as systems of conventions that we are taught or pick up from our culture. In fact, what we know as culture in anthropological terms can be seen as a collection of codes.

In some cases, these codes are created and systematized—as in the driving codes that we all must learn in order to get a license. These codes are collections of rules that tell us what to do when we see certain signs and when we find ourselves in particular situations. Thus, we learn that when we see a red light, we must stop our cars, and when we see a green one, we can accelerate or continue on if we have not stopped.

These codes list the conventions we have adopted in order to make it possible for us to get from one place to another with the minimum of danger and confusion. Some of the visual signs and symbols used on roads and
highways are iconic, and we can make sense of them without having to be taught what they mean. But others are symbolic and conventional, and we must learn what they mean. In some cases, we have redundancy, in which a message is repeated in several ways to reinforce its impact.

These driving codes and others like them are one kind of code. They are really collections of laws and rules. There are other kinds of codes, however, that are learned more or less by osmosis as people grow up in a particular culture. These involve the whole universe of beliefs (many of which exist at a level below awareness or articulation) that tell us what things mean or what to do in given situations.

For example, we have certain ideas about what being a “blonde” means, about what having a weak chin means, about what having “shifty” eyes means, about what being short or tall or fat or skinny means. We have notions about what certain kinds of food mean and when to eat them. For instance, in the United States, we eat salad before the main course, while in France and other European countries, the salad is generally eaten after the main course. (What we call culture shock is generally the result of finding ourselves in a society where the codes or culture-codes are different from what one is used to.) We have notions of how to dress for job interviews and what certain styles, colors, and fashions mean. We should recognize here that it is also possible to misinterpret signs. Because of differences in education, region, class, and so on, people often interpret (or decode, to use the semiotic term) signs in widely varying ways. This aberrant decoding is a problem for people—such as writers, artists, filmmakers, and especially those who create commercials and print advertisements—who try to convey something to people but find those people interpreting it in unanticipated ways.

Clotaire Rapaille on Culture Codes

A French scholar, Clotaire Rapaille, published a book on marketing that deals with codes that are found in various countries. He explains, in The Culture Code, that every country has its own distinctive behavioral codes and that these codes are imprinted on children by the age of seven. “Every imprint influences us on an unconscious level,” he writes (2006:7). In the book he discusses different codes found in France, the United States, Japan, and a number of other countries. These codes can be thought of as collections of imprintings and Rapaille spent many years searching for the way these imprintings function. As he writes (2006: 9–10):

If I could get to the source of these imprints—if I could somehow “decode” elements of culture to discover the emotions and meanings attached to them—I would learn a great deal about human behavior and how it varies across the planet. This set me on the course of my life’s work. I went off in search of the Codes hidden within the unconscious of every culture.
He suggests that in addition to the Freudian individual unconscious and the Jungian collective unconscious, there is a third unconscious—the cultural unconscious—that is distinctive in each country, which shapes our behavior.

As an example of how different codes function, he discusses the way Americans and French think about cheese: (206:25):

The French Code for cheese is ALIVE . . . The American Code for cheese is DEAD . . . Americans “kill” their cheese through pasteurization (unpasteurized cheeses are not allowed into this country), select hunks of cheese that have been prewrapped—mummified if you will—in plastic (like body bags), and store it, still wrapped airtight, in a morgue, also known as a refrigerator.

The conclusion Rapaille reaches is that we are all guided by distinctive national cultural codes, imprinted on us before the age of seven, that shape our behavior in many areas of life. What we call “culture” can be seen as a collection of codes that govern our notions about how to store cheese and any number of other things.

Metaphors and Metonymies

Many of these codes are connected to visual matters, as we’ve already suggested. And much of what we know or think we know from observing various visual signs is based on associations we make or have been taught to

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**WHAT IS “FRENCHNESS”?**

Semiotics is not just an abstruse philosophy but is something used in advertising, in films, in television, and every other kind of communication. People use signs to convey information and to attempt to shape attitudes and feelings in audiences. Consider the following task. You are directing a film. In that film, you want to suggest to your future viewers what we might call “Frenchness,” the feeling of being in France. What visual signifiers might you use to suggest France? You might say “Let’s have the action take place where you can see the Eiffel Tower. Show men wearing berets. Have little boys carrying long baguettes. Show chic women.”

Here’s one problem: is the Eiffel Tower a symbol of France or of Paris? I would say Paris, rather than France. Another problem: Men in Spain and other countries wear berets, so berets by themselves certainly don’t work and men wearing berets near the Eiffel Tower suggests Paris. Suggesting Frenchness rather than Paris is, actually, a difficult matter. Generally speaking, we convey information by using a number of signs that work together (form a gestalt) to generate an idea. It would be an interesting project to figure out how to convey “Frenchness” visually. And while you’re at it, you might want to tackle “Italian-ness,” “American-ness,” “alienation,” “anxiety,” and “fear.”
make about signs and what they signify. The technical term for these associations is *metonymy*. An example of this phenomenon would be an advertisement for Scotch whisky that shows the liquor being used by people who live in a mansion and are obviously rich and—it is suggested—have good taste. We learn to associate that brand of Scotch with what might be called “high-class” people and upscale living. The advertisement in Figure 2.12 is an example of the use of metonymy or association. Advertising makes great use of the power of **association** because this technique conveys information quickly and powerfully.

Another important method of transmitting meaning involves using **analogies**—saying or suggesting that something is like or similar to something else. Consider the two statements that follow:

1. My love is a red rose.
2. My love is **like** a red rose.

In the first case, we are making a very strong kind of analogy and are, in fact, suggesting equivalence. This figure of speech is known as a **metaphor**. In the second case, we are suggesting that our love is similar to a red rose, a figure of speech known as a **simile**. In both cases, the meaning is created by making an analogy.

Some scholars argue that metaphor is the basic way we have of knowing about the world and that human thinking is itself essentially metaphorical. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have written in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980.3):

> Metaphor is typically viewed as a characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

> The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday reality.

Thus, metaphors play a central role in our thinking about the world and our functioning in it. The metaphors we have shape, it could be argued, our conception of the world and our place in it.

If, for example, you think that “love is a game” or that “love is like a game,” certain logical implications will follow. You will see love as essentially a contest, with winners and losers and rules (that can be broken, in certain circumstances), and as something that ends after a certain period of “playing.” This hardly seems a healthy or satisfying way to think about love.
"I was wondering if I could possibly borrow a cup of Johnnie Walker Black Label."

Figure 2.12: Johnnie Walker advertisement. This advertisement uses the association (metonymy) of wealth and elegance to suggest sophistication and quality. Reprinted with permission of Smith/Greeland, Inc.
In a chapter on "Metaphor, Truth, and Action," Lakoff and Johnson point out that metaphors often shape our behavior. They write (1980:156) "Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action." Our actions, they explain, can be shaped by the metaphor which reinforces the ability of the metaphor to make our experience seem sensible and coherent. Thus, the metaphor generates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Metaphor and simile are not confined to words and written language—they are also part of our visual language and pervade our image making (Figure 2.13). For example, in the comics, the Spiderman costume is a visual analogy, so is the characterization of Newt Gingrich as a "bomb" in Doonesbury. Freud's notion of "phallic and vaginal symbols," which will be discussed later, is based on visual analogies. Because metaphor and metonymy play such an important role in communication, it is only logical to find them in pictorial form as well as in our words.

It is not unusual for a given sign or symbol to have both metonymic and metaphoric aspects to it; that is, to communicate by using both associations and analogies.

Think, for example, of our old friend, the snake. We, in the West, associate the snake with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and with our eating from the Tree of Knowledge and being expelled from Eden. Thus, the snake is connected, in Western minds familiar with the Old Testament, with deception ("The serpent beguiled me," Eve says) and a host of other negative things like having to work and having to die. At the same time, snakes are long and thin (which means their shape makes them resemble penises), and thus, they are analogous to or function as phallic symbols. (In certain Eastern countries, on the other hand, the fact that snakes shed their skins and become "new" again leads people to associate snakes with rebirth and immortality.)

There's a wonderful example of visual metaphors in Chapter 4 of Alice in Wonderland. Alice's neck has stretched out very long, and a pigeon who sees her thinks she is a snake:

"Serpent!" screamed the Pigeon.
"I'm not a serpent!" said Alice indignantly. "Let me alone!"
"Serpent, I say again!" repeated the Pigeon, but in a more subdued tone, and added, with a kind of sob, "I've tried every way but nothing seems to suit them!"

The Pigeon describes how she's hidden her eggs in many different places but has not been able to keep them from the serpents. Alice takes issue with her:
"But I'm not a serpent, I tell you!" said Alice. "I'm a— I'm a—"

"Well! What are you?" said the Pigeon. "I can see you're trying to invent something."

"I— I'm a little girl," said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered a number of changes she had gone through that day.

"A likely story indeed!" said the Pigeon, in a tone of deepest contempt. "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, No! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you've never tasted an egg!"

"I have tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon, "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent; that's all I can say."

For the Pigeon, the fact that Alice is a creature with an extremely elongated neck who admits to eating eggs is enough to classify her as a serpent, an interpretation that is visually metaphoric and, in the realm of ideas, metonymic.

The following chart summarizes the differences between metaphor and metonymy, as well as their subcategories, simile and synecdoche.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Metonymy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analogy</td>
<td>Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meta</strong> = transfer, beyond</td>
<td><strong>Meta</strong> = transfer, beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>phor</strong> = to bear, carry</td>
<td><strong>onoma</strong> = name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love is a game</td>
<td>Rolls Royce = wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simile</strong> uses like or as</td>
<td><strong>Synecdoche</strong> uses part for whole or whole for part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love is like a game</td>
<td>The Pentagon (for U.S. military)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice looks like a snake</td>
<td>Alice eats eggs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obviously, it is very difficult to communicate anything with precision and certainty, because signs are so open to interpretation and misinterpretation and convey their information in so many different ways.

Condensation and Displacement

To further complicate matters, we must understand something about how the mind processes signs and symbols and other visual phenomena. Think of your dreams, for instance. In your dreams, you see all kinds of fantastic things. Sometimes, you see several different things tied together in bizarre ways. You might see a train with wings or a building floating in water.
In dreams, the mind, for its own reasons, unifies disparate phenomena and creates fantastic images.

The Bible is full of dreams and visions that feature incredible images and about which there is still much controversy. Consider, for example, the famous vision of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1):

And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides . . . As for the likeness of their faces, the four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side, and the four had the face of an ox on the left side; the four also had the face of an eagle.

The process by which we combine elements of various signs together to form a new composite sign or symbol is called condensation. In another important process, called displacement, we transfer meaning from one sign or symbol to another, so that, for example, a rifle or a plane really stands for a phallus (if you understand what is going on and know how to interpret such matters).

These terms come to us from Freud, who discusses them in his classic book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He uses the terms to explain how the psyche uses images to evade what he terms the dream censor and avoid being awakened. By condensing images or displacing content from one image to something else, we “trick” the dream censor, so to speak. In many cases, these condensations and displacements involve sexual matters. These two techniques enable us, then, to have our sexual fantasies and, by disguising them and fooling the dream censor, to avoid being wakened.

These terms are important because much of what we find in visual phenomena involves the use of these processes, and, as in dreams, much visual communication takes place at the unconscious level. And these processes also are connected to profoundly important unconscious matters in our psyches, which explains why so many visual phenomena have the emotional impact that they do. Symbols carry a great deal of emotional baggage, on both a cultural and a personal level, and have the power to evoke powerful, and often unrecognized, responses in us.

What Freud describes as phallic symbols—rifles, umbrellas, knives, and other objects similar to a phallus in shape and function—are really good examples of displacements. Our society does not allow us to show male and female genitalia in print advertisements, for example, but it is possible (and
often done, many argue) to use phallic symbols that evade the censors and call to mind various aspects of our sexuality. Consider here the symbolic significance of the monument for George Washington, the father of our country, being a large phallic shaft stretching up into the sky (Figure 2.14).

Surrealistic styles, which unite all kinds of disparate phenomena, are examples of condensation in action (Figure 2.15). And the power of surrealistic styles (found often on MTV) stems from the psychological associations connected with the various signs and symbols pulled together.

As the various paintings, advertisements, and other works reproduced in this book show, we generally find signs existing in some kind of context that includes other signs and symbols. This combination of signs and symbols is what we commonly describe as an image.

**THE IMAGE**

From our perspective, an image is a collection of signs and symbols—what we find when we look at a photograph, a film still, a shot of a television screen, a print advertisement, or just about anything. The word can also be used to mean a number of other things, including a mental representation we have of something, such as “the image of the businessman in nineteenth-century American literature.”

**Figure 2.14**

**Figure 2.15**
What is this cow doing in this man’s bed? This image, taken from L’Age d’Or, is typical of surrealism’s use of fantastic images and strange incongruities that irritate dreams to express the workings of the human unconscious mind. Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art, New York, Film Stills Archive.
Images generally are visual, often are mediated—carried by the mass media—and are connected to information, values, beliefs, attitudes, and ideas people have. This connection is not a natural one, remember; we have to learn to interpret many signs and symbols, which are important component elements of images. An image is a collection of signs, and each of these signs has meaning; in any image, there are many different levels of meaning and interactions between meanings.

Think of an advertisement in which a man is shown smiling and drinking a stein of frosty beer in a tavern; from his facial expression, he seems to be having a good time. In this image (which may be accompanied by words), the bubbles in the beer, the frost on the stein, the foam, and the smile all are signs meant to convey information and generate certain attitudes in the minds of viewers.

Images, of course, do not come into existence of their own volition. They are generally created and mediated—meant to be seen and read and to have a specific function and impact. Let us now consider how images relate to media, creators, audiences, and society in general. Using the focal points model discussed earlier, we can focus on images in terms of the following elements:

1. The artists, who create images
2. The audience, which receives images
3. The work of art, which is an image itself and might comprise a number of images
4. The society in which the images are found
5. The medium, which affects the images

A complex interaction of these five factors makes the way images work difficult to describe. The artists or creators of the images try to use signs that the audience will interpret or decode correctly; in this case, “correctly” means the way the artists want them to. The image itself is affected by the medium in which it is found, by various artistic conventions in a given medium (for example, television is often held to be a medium dependent on “close-ups” due to the small screen), and by the audience to which the image is directed. Signs and symbols such as Uncle Sam or the Republican Elephant also often have historical significance that may be recognized by some people and not by others. These signs may allude to important cultural, political, historical, and social experiences that a stranger in the society might not recognize or understand (Figure 2.16). Because of all these complications, communicating anything clearly and unambiguously is difficult. These factors also make our communications powerful and even put them beyond the control of those who create signs and symbols. It might be suggested that communication often takes place
Between the unconscious of the creators—the artists—and the unconscious of the receivers—the audience—so that the situation becomes even more mixed up. Nobody in such a situation completely understands or fully appreciates what is being communicated and what impact it is having.
Jung offers some insights into the power of symbols. As he writes in *Man and His Symbols* (1968:3–4):

What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to all its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us... Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider or “unconscious” aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained.

Symbols, for Jung, are attached to unconscious elements in our psyches and are often subliminally experienced, which helps explain why they are so pervasive in our dreams and why they have the power to move people emotionally. Symbols play an important role in our religions, our politics, and many other areas of our everyday life.

One thing is certain—images do have powerful emotional effects on people. Your self-image, for example, affects the perceptions others have of you, and their perceptions, in turn, affect the image you have of yourself. It is not unusual for people to change their images over the years and create new “identities” for themselves, as they move through their life cycles and find themselves in new situations. A person might be a hippie in his twenties, wear three-piece suits and be a “buttoned-down” businessman in his forties, and become a priest or rabbi in his sixties—three major changes in identity (and “look”) in one lifetime.

Images often have a historical significance. The meaning a given image has may also change over time, as a society develops and changes its views about things. Images also play an important role in religion and the arts. Think of the importance of visual elements in our religious ceremonies, in which we find people performing certain ritual activities, wearing certain costumes, using certain artifacts, and doing so in a space full of signs and symbols. The lighting is often important in such ceremonies, because it helps generate specific attitudes—such as a feeling of awe or piety or mystery.

To see how the various aspects of images work, examine the following chart, which summarizes much of the discussion made to this point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Icon</td>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Resemblance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>Smoke from window</td>
<td>Cause and effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Crucifix</td>
<td>Convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signifier and signified</td>
<td>Bowler hat = Englishness</td>
<td>Convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condensation</td>
<td>Face/automobile</td>
<td>Unification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displacement</td>
<td>Rifle = penis</td>
<td>Substitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Spiderman’s costume</td>
<td>Analogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metonymy</td>
<td>Huge mansion = wealth</td>
<td>Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STUART HALL AND REPRESENTATION**

British communications scholar Stuart Hall, editor of the influential book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, points out that **culture** is now an important subject in the human sciences.


> What has come to be called the “cultural turn” in the social and human sciences, especially in cultural studies and the sociology of culture, has tended to emphasize the importance of *meaning* to the definition of culture. Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of *things*—novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics—as a process, a set of *practices*. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings—the “giving and taking of meaning”—between the members of a society or group.

He adds that culture can best be understood as the creation and transmission of meanings—that is, Hall looks at culture, and especially mass mediated forms of culture, from a semiotic perspective. As he explains in *Representation* (1997:36):

> The underlying argument behind the semiotic approach is that, since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs; and in so far as they do, they must work like language works, and be amenable to an analysis which basically makes use of Saussure’s linguistic concepts... his idea of underlying codes and structures, and the arbitrary nature of the sign....

In his discussion of the October 9, 1988 cover of the *Sunday Times Magazine* titled “Heroes and Villains,” Hall focuses on the matter of race and the way people of color are represented in the media. The image he is interested in shows the Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson winning a race, trailed by sprinters Carl Lewis and Linford Christie. The article about these athletes deals with drug-taking by athletes, and explains that Johnson was discovered to have taken drugs and was stripped of his medal.

Hall makes a distinction between what he calls the “preferred” meaning of an image, a connotative meaning of the image, and a literal or denotive meaning of the image. The literal meaning shows Johnson winning the race. The connotative meaning of the image has to do with drugs, race, and...
difference. The “preferred” meaning involves both heroism (a black man won the race) and villainy (he won because he took drugs). The chart that follows summarizes these distinctions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal or demonstrative meaning</th>
<th>Johnson wins race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connotative meaning</td>
<td>Johnson is black, took drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred meaning</td>
<td>Blacks are heroes and villains</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The important thing to recognize, Hall asserts, is that when it comes to the representation of minorities and people of color, people interpret images in terms of Saussurean oppositions: good versus bad, civilized versus primitive, repelling because different or fascinating because exotic and strange. And often, Hall adds, people interpret images in terms of both of such oppositions.

This leads Hall into a discussion of stereotypes. He points out we need them to help us make sense of the world but stereotypes are inherently reductionistic and oversimplify things, setting up categories that don't hold up. How, for example, does one “classify” a mixed-race golfer like Tiger woods, or President Barack Obama, who is half black and half white? Saussure showed that we make sense of the world by seeing things in terms of opposites and noticing differences between things. But this leads to many problems.

Hall argues that it is political power that is at the root of how races and minorities are represented in the media. Because images are ambiguous, in some cases, fortunately, the stereotyped and negative representations of people of color and other minorities are not interpreted correctly, which lessens their detrimental impact. Nevertheless, the problems caused by these negative representations remain with us.

THE POWER OF IMAGES: 9/11

The images of the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center and then of people leaping to their deaths rather than face being burned alive and of the gigantic buildings collapsing were horrendous and shocking. In many respects, these images changed the consciousness of people all over the world about the danger of global terrorism and about the nature of the world in which we live. People everywhere are united now in being possible or actual targets or victims of terrorism and it is terrorists who now occupy the attention of police agencies and military everywhere, since terrorism is now a global menace.

I was preparing to go to class early in the morning of 9/11 when I heard an announcement on the radio that a plane had crashed into the World Trade...
Center. I turned on the television set and saw images of the crash. That was the
day the world turned upside down. As I watched the two planes going into the
building I couldn't help but think of the similarity between the planes and
viruses that infect human beings entering cells in the body. The planes seemed
to be tiny viruses infecting and destroying the gigantic World Trade Center.

We make sense of new things by seeing them in terms of other things that
we are familiar with, so the analogy of these planes and viruses isn't too far-
fetching. Many people who saw the images of the planes crashing into the
buildings thought they looked like simulations or described them as being
like video games or movies.

If the planes were viruses, it would suggest that terrorists might be seen
as a kind of infection or disease, such as cancer, whose aim is to destroy us.
The language we use to talk about terrorists has a biological thrust to it. We
talk about “sleeper cells” that are waiting for the right moment to attack us,
and the fight against terrorists can be seen as similar in nature to chemother-
apy or surgery, meant to rid us of this disease.

Children who watched the images in news stories were often traumatized
and needed therapy, just as many adults were overwhelmed by feelings of anx-
xiety and fear. Since 9/11, there have been terrorist attacks in Spain, in London, in
Bali, and in a number of other countries. The attacks in London were captured
in numerous surveillance cameras, which showed images of the four plotters at
various stations and also revealed the extent to which people in London (and
many other places) are under continual surveillance by video cameras.

In a curious way, the faces of Islamic terrorists have come to the fore as
exemplars of “otherness,” replacing other people of color, both in terms of their
looks and their ideas about the role of religion in society and related matters.
We know now that there are people all over the world with different ideas about
just about everything we take for granted, including the sanctity of human life
and the rule of law. And it is through images that are shown on television and
printed in newspapers and magazines that we are increasingly aware of the exis-
tence of terrorists and the danger they pose to democratic societies.

**Optical and Haptic Ways of Seeing**

Another theorist whose ideas are of interest here is the art historian Alois
Riegl. He suggests that there are two opposing ways of seeing things, the
optical and the haptic. His ideas are explained in Claude Gandelman’s
*Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* (1991:5) as follows:

The two fundamental categories . . . are optics and haptics. Riegl stated
that one type of artistic procedure, which corresponds to a certain way of
looking, is based on the scanning of objects according to their outlines.
This trajectory Riegl called the optical. The opposite type of vision, which
focuses on surfaces and emphasizes the value of the superficiality of objects, Riegls called the haptic (from the Greek haptikos, "to seize, grasp," or hapto- khe, "capable of touching"). On the level of artistic creation, the optical look—if the eye belongs to a painter—produces linearity and angularity, whereas haptic creativity focuses on surfaces. Using Riegls formula, all forms of art may be grouped under the heading "outline and/or color in plane or volume." . . . The optical eye merely brushes the surface of things. The haptic, or tactile, eye penetrates in depth, finding its pleasure in texture and grain.

The following chart (to which I've added some other relevant material from Gandelman) summarizes the differences between the two categories of seeing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optical</th>
<th>Haptic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Depth penetration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scans outline</td>
<td>Sees texture, grain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Pictorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphoric</td>
<td>Metonymic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gandelman sees the optical as metaphoric because, with that kind of viewing, one scans an object and establishes relationships among elements that aren't necessarily in contact with one another. The haptic can be seen as metonymic because it tends to focus attention on selected elements of an object (its color, grain, and so on), that is, on a part of the object rather than the whole object.

Interestingly, Gandelman argues, using Riegls theory, that we also "view" literary texts (we scan them, with our eyes jumping from one passage to another) the same way we look at paintings and that we "read" paintings and other kinds of graphic art much the way we read books. This observation explains Gandelman's title: Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts. Note that the term text is conventionally used by critics to mean a work of art—in any medium. That is why critics often talk about "reading television" or "reading films," suggesting that television programs and films can be "read" and analyzed just as poems or novels are. The key is simply knowing the "language" these texts are "written" in—which is, to a considerable degree, the subject of this book.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we examined some of the complications involved in "seeing." It is not automatic, and we don't see without doing some thinking to make sense of what we see. We see selectively, focusing our attention on sights that interest us and paying little attention to ones that don't (Figure 2.17).
Figure 2.17
Here we see four paintings of the same thing. As the artist Jean Cocteau has explained, "By consciously repeating the same motif, I seek a sense of digging ever deeper into our mystery and more mystery." Courtesy of Jean Cocteau.
This is necessary, because if we paid the same amount of attention to every visual stimulus, we'd never get very much done.

One thing artists do for us is show that there are a number of different ways to perceive reality, and for painters, to paint an image that interests them. They use their creativity to show these different "takes" or versions on an image, as the paintings of Jason Berger demonstrate. Berger painted twenty different versions of a friend's sunroom, using a variety of styles.

APPLICATIONS

1. Applying your knowledge of semiotics, assume you are a television director and wish to give your viewers information and elicit certain feelings without using words. What visual phenomena—that is, what images—would you show on the screen to generate the following concepts: horror, terror, secret agent, "Frenchness," love, hate, alienation? Choose some other concepts as well. Remember, also, that sometimes the combination of visual images helps generate the concept.

2. Bring any small, simple object that you think reflects your personality to class in a brown paper bag and give it to your instructor. (This is to prevent people from knowing who brought what.) Write your name on the bottom of the bag and list the attributes the object has that you expect your classmates to find. Do your classmates interpret things correctly, or do they see things that surprise you? What do you learn from this exercise?

3. Analyze a full-page color advertisement containing people and words in terms of the various signs found in it. (Remember that words are signs also.) What signs do you find? How do they work? Do you detect any codes functioning? If so, what are they, and how do they work? (You can also use some of the advertisements reprinted in this book.)

4. Write down a dream you had in as much detail as you can. Using Freud's notions of displacement and condensation, how do you analyze the dream? If you are interested in the Jungian analysis of dreams, read Jung's Man and His Symbols and use his concepts to analyze the same dream.

5. Look through a magazine and find examples of linguistic and visual metaphors and metonymies (and similes and synecdoches) in advertisements. What role do you think these devices play in the advertisements?

6. Take a logo for some company and, using what you've learned about visual semiotics, redesign the logo. How does your logo work, and why is it superior to the logo the company has been using?
7. Do a library research project on facial expression. What insights about facial expression did you learn? Look in a mirror and try to make your face reflect emotions such as sadness, anger, enjoyment, anxiety, fear, and boredom.

8. What impact do you think the terrible events of 9/11 had on American culture and society? Did 9/11 affect any members of your family or any people you know? Did it affect you? If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” explain how.

9. Find an image in a news report and analyze it in terms of Hall’s three meanings: the literal, the connotative, and the preferred. How do images lead to the development of stereotypes and how do they reinforce these stereotypes?

KEY TERMS FOR CHAPTER 2

- association
- analogies
- metaphor
- simile
- condensation

- displacement
- culture
- stereotypes
- optical
- haptic