

## HOW WE SEE

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.

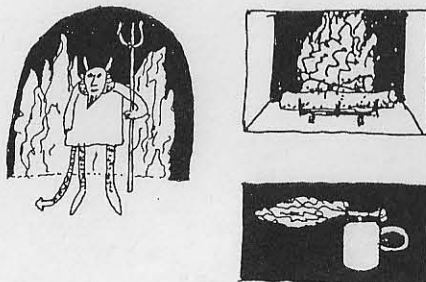
Studies indicate that vision is about one-tenth physical and nine-tenths mental. In visual perception, sensory input in the form of light patterns received by the eye is transformed by the brain into meaningful images. The interpretation depends on preconditioning, intelligence, and the physical and emotional state of the viewer.

The variety of our responses to visual stimuli is demonstrated by artists. Twelve people depicting the same subject—even from the same vantage point—will create twelve different images because of their different experiences, attitudes, interests and eyesight.

—DUANE AND SARAH PREBLE,  
ARTFORMS

■ FIGURE 2.1

Three renderings of fire. Our attitudes about fire are connected with everything from the myth of Prometheus (who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans) to our beliefs about the existence of hell. What other images of fire can you think of?



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 SEMIOTICS

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.

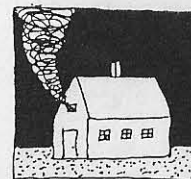
Consider the following:

1. A drawing of a person (Figure 2.2)
2. A house with smoke coming out of a window (Figure 2.3)
3. A cross (Figure 2.4)



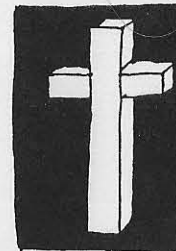
■ FIGURE 2.2

A very simple drawing of a man.



■ FIGURE 2.3

A house on fire. "Where there's smoke, there's fire."



■ FIGURE 2.4

A cross.

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 the 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.)

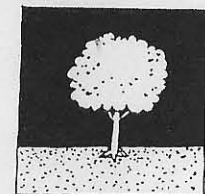
Now let us consider another matter related to visual communication that we might add to the preceding list:

### 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 *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* as a "woody perennial plant having a single, usually elongate main stem generally with few or no branches on the 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

■ FIGURE 2.5  
The word *tree*.

TREE

■ FIGURE 2.6  
A drawing of a tree.

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.

### 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 (Figure 2.7). 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 on the following page 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.



■ **FIGURE 2.7**  
Ways to suggest a secret agent.

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	Icon	Index	Symbol
Signify by <sup>a</sup>	Resemblance	Causal connection	Convention
Examples	Photograph	Smoke/fire	Cross or flag
Process	Can recognize	Can figure out	Must learn

Peirce'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 and 2.9). 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):



■ **FIGURE 2.8**  
Logos for Saturn motorcars. Of these four versions, the first one was chosen. All offer somewhat different "images" for the automobile, and all contain pictorial references to the planet Saturn.

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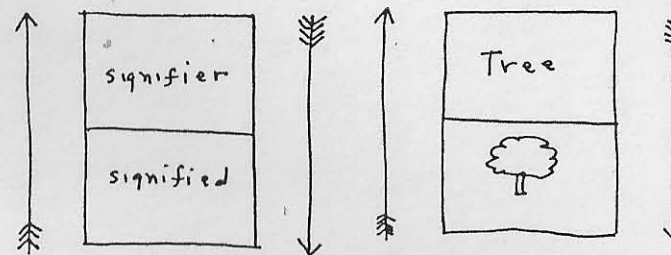


■ **FIGURE 2.9**  
These portraits enable us to see how Betty Crocker's image has evolved over the years, from her introduction in 1936 to the present. As a pamphlet produced by General Mills explains, a nationwide search identified 75 women of different backgrounds and ages who embodied the characteristics of Betty Crocker. Then "a computerized composite of the 75 women, along with the 1986 portrait of Betty, served as inspiration for the painting by the internationally known artist John Stuart Ingles."

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, Sinead 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.

**SIGNIFIERS AND SIGNIFIEDS.** The second theory, Saussure's, argues 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 2.10 and 2.11). 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.



■ **FIGURE 2.10**  
Signifier/signified diagram.

■ **FIGURE 2.11**  
Signifier/signified diagram for tree.

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 the 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

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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?

No 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, 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.

### 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. Figure 2.12 shows some of the visual signs and symbols used on roads and highways. Some of these signs 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.

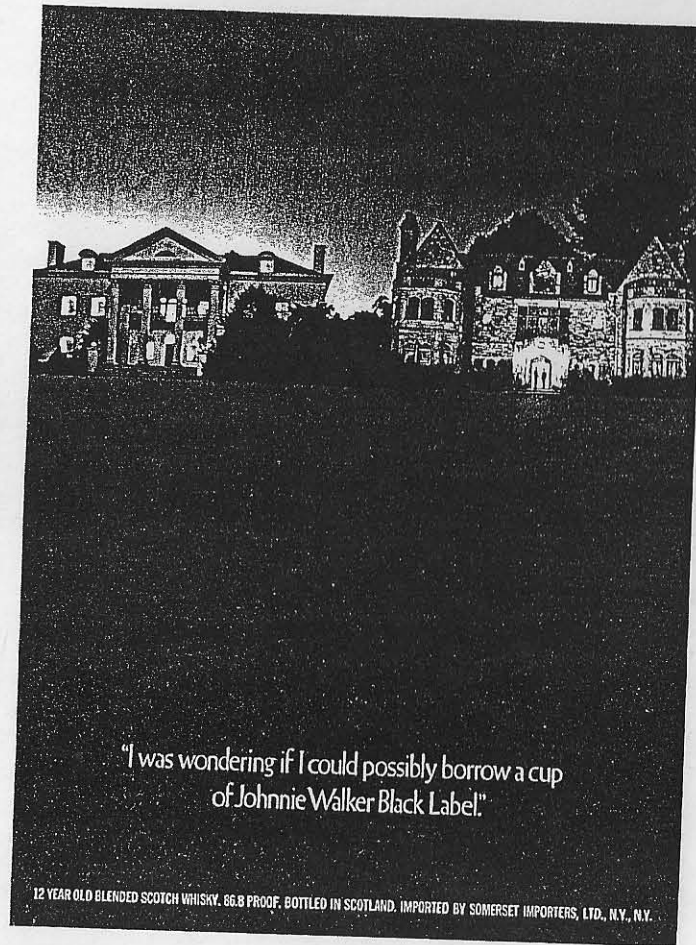
For example, we have certain ideas about what being a "blonde" means, about what having a weak chin means, about what having "shifty" eyes means, about what being short or tall or fat or skinny means. We have notions about what certain kinds of food mean and when to eat them. For instance, in the United 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 oneself 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.

### 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 make about signs and what they signify. The technical term for these associations is *metonymy*. An example of this phenomenon would be an advertise-



FIGURE 2.12  
Road signs use icons or language, and sometimes both, to convey their messages. Note the simplicity of the drawings in the signs.



■ FIGURE 2.13

Johnnie Walker advertisement. This advertisement uses the association (metonymy) of wealth and elegance to suggest sophistication and quality.

ment 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 2.13 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 metaphoric. 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.



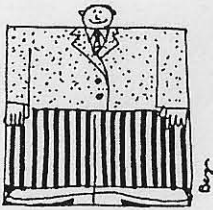


FIGURE 2.14  
Here is a visual metaphor  
that you might find  
amusing.

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 2.14). 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.

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

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).

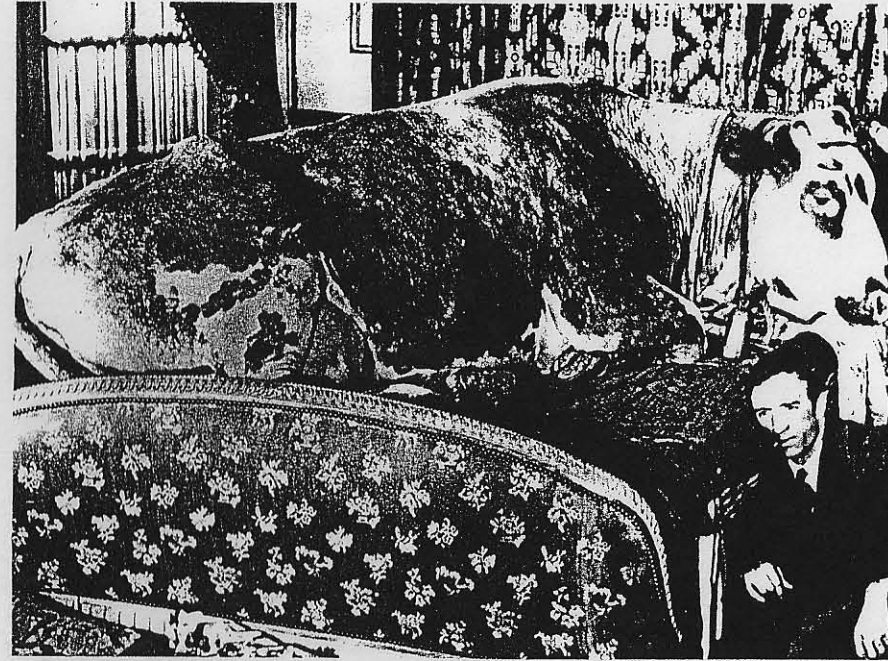
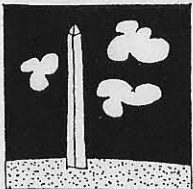
These terms come to us from Freud, who discussed them in his classic book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He used the terms to explain how the psyche uses images to evade what he termed the *dream censor* and avoid being awakened. By condensing images or displacing content from one image to something 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 awakened.

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 has described 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 2.15).

Surrealistic styles, which unite all kinds of disparate phenomena, are examples of condensation in action (Figure 2.16). And the power of surrealistic styles (found often on MTV) stems from the psychological associations connected with the various signs and symbols pulled together.

■ FIGURE 2.15  
Washington Monument.



■ FIGURE 2.16  
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 imitate dreams to express the workings of the human unconscious mind.

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."

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 compo-



nent 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 2.17). 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.

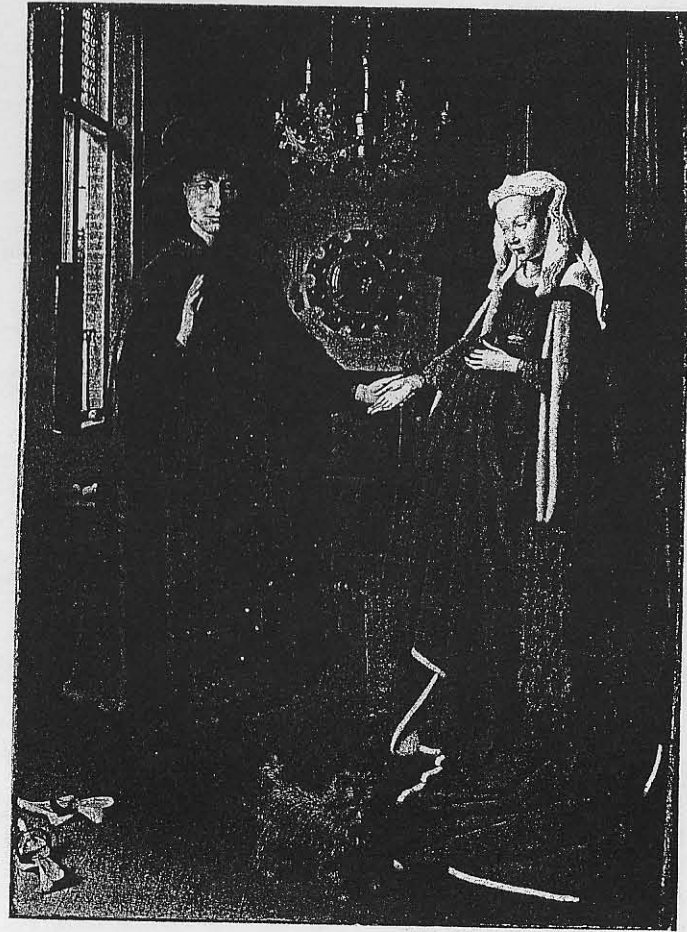


FIGURE 2.17

Jan van Eyck, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, 1434. Many of the symbols used in this painting were understood in van Eyck's time but are not generally recognized now. Thus, the lighted candle in the chandelier signifies Christ's presence and the ardor of the newlyweds as well; the convex mirror suggests the eye of God seeing everything and seems to reflect the painter and another witness; the dog symbolizes marital faithfulness; the bride has her hand on her stomach (and appears to be pregnant), signifying her willingness to have children; the fruit is tied to symbolism connected with the Virgin Mary; the carving in the back of the chair is of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth; and the shoes are probably an allusion to the commandment by God to Moses to take off his shoes when on sacred soil. The signature of the painting and the date are also prominent, to record this event. When looking at a painting or any image of a symbolic nature, what we know determines how fully we can understand and interpret it.

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.

#### DECODING VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Concept	Example	Method
Icon	Photograph	Resemblance
Index	Smoke from window	Cause and effect
Symbol	Crucifix	Convention
Signifier and signified	Bowler hat = Englishness	Convention
Condensation	Face/automobile	Unification
Displacement	Rifle = penis	Substitution
Metaphor	Spiderman's costume	Analogy
Metonymy	Huge mansion = wealth	Association

#### OPTICAL AND HAPTICAL 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 *haptical*. 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 superficialities of objects, Riegl called the haptical (from the Greek *haptēin*, “to seize, grasp,” or *haptikos*, “capable of touching”). On the level of artistic creation, the optical look—if the eye belongs to a painter—pro-

duces linearity and angularity, whereas haptic creativity focuses on surfaces. Using Riegl's 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.

Optical	Haptical
Surface	Depth penetration
Scans outline	Sees texture, grain
Linear	Pictorial
Metaphoric	Metonymic

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 haptical 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 Riegl's 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. This is necessary, because if we paid the same amount of attention to every visual stimulus, we'd never get very much done.