

Visual Semiotics: Key Concepts and New Directions

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INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the study of anything that can be taken as a sign (the Greek word *sēmeion* means ‘sign’). Anything can be a sign as long as someone or, more importantly, a group of people who are part of the same culture or society, interprets it as ‘signifying’ something – that is, as referring to or *standing for* something other than itself (see Bal and Bryson, 1991). Does this mean that semiotics can be used to study anything at all, and therefore also not much in any real depth, then?

In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco (1976: 7) states that ‘*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’. His statement may simply sound like a provocation, and indeed Eco was well known not only for his vast intellectual production but also for his wry sense of humour. However, Eco’s idea that there ought to be a ‘theory of the lie’, together with a whole discipline dedicated to its study, points to the essence of what semiotics contributes to our understanding of the world. Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is made and the various ways in which language, here broadly intended, can be used to

represent reality and therefore also to tell stories. It is in this sense that signs can always be used to lie as, in fact, there is nothing inherently ‘true’ about any word, picture, or sound that we may use to communicate an idea or a fact.

A famous example that is often used in lectures introducing students to semiotics is a 1929 painting by the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte that depicts a pipe in a rather realistic manner. Below the pipe, Magritte also painted the phrase ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’, or ‘This is not a pipe’. The painting’s title is *La Trahison des Images*, or *The Treachery of Images* (Figure 23.1). Much later, apparently Magritte stated, somewhat humorously, that he would have been lying if he had written ‘This is a pipe’ below his picture of a pipe, as the painting was ‘just representation’.

Magritte’s painting is a great example of how signs are not the same as what they represent. As Chandler (2002: 70) points out, however, Magritte’s painting is also a reminder that ‘we do habitually refer to such realistic depictions in terms which suggest that they are nothing more nor less than what they depict’. Precisely because we systematically rely on signs to make sense of the world around us, semiotics helps us understand how both language and imagery, for



Figure 23.1 A cookie tin featuring Magritte's *La Trahison des Images* painting. (Photo: L. Pauwels)

example, do not reflect reality but contribute to constructing it. Meaning-making is fundamentally about mediation.

Ultimately, semiotics is indeed both a theory and a methodology that can be applied to a variety of 'texts', including novels, paintings, films, buildings, websites, and even clothing. The term 'text' refers to any semiotic object endowed with material or symbolic boundaries and structural autonomy, or where different parts all have a function in relation to a 'whole' and which can therefore be examined as a unit. To answer my previous question, however, the purpose of semiotic analysis is quite specific: it aims to make the hidden structures, underlying cultural codes, and dominant meanings of such texts both visible and intelligible. In doing so, semiotics is also a powerful instrument for a systematic study and critique of ideology in visual communication.

Visual semiotics should be considered not only as a sub-field of semiotics, but also as a theoretical and methodological perspective that has been adopted and adapted across disciplines (for example, art history, media and communication studies, cultural studies, and both art and design, to name a few). For this reason, visual semiotics has developed in ways that transcend traditional semiotics. A semiotic lens is also increasingly used to examine visual texts and 'artifacts' other than images like, for example, packaging, interior design, and layouts (see Ledin and Machin, 2018).

For simplicity purposes, here we focus specifically on still images.

This chapter¹ is divided into four parts. First, I briefly outline the main traditions, concepts, and contributions of semiotics as a theoretical and methodological framework. While semiotics is a complex field with multiple schools and strands, I focus specifically on key contributions by Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, who are widely considered as the main founders of semiotics' two main lineages. I then move on to discussing the work of Roland Barthes and Jean-Marie Floch; in different ways, their respective bodies of work have shaped the development of visual semiotics as we know it today.

Next, I introduce social semiotics as a leading contemporary framework for visual analysis. I discuss how social semiotics has refined and further developed some of the key instruments for visual analysis developed by Barthes and, to a lesser extent, Floch, while also introducing important considerations about the significance of both context and practice for a semiotic understanding of the visual. Finally, I offer a practical example of how imagery can be examined from a social semiotic standpoint through an original analysis of a stock photograph from the world-leading visual content provider Getty Images. Overall, the chapter aims to offer a general introduction to visual semiotics together with conceptual and methodological tools for visual analysis.

THE FOUNDERS OF SEMIOTICS: CHARLES S. PEIRCE AND FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

The founders of the two main semiotic traditions, Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, developed their ‘theories of the sign’ in parallel, though independently, at the end of the nineteenth century. Peirce and Saussure’s semiotic theories diverged greatly, and in fact initiated two distinct lineages – now known as American and French semiotics, respectively.

Peirce’s main focus was on the relationship between a sign and its object, or ‘referent’ – for example, between a portrait and the person it represents (Nöth, 1990). He identified three main types of signs, characterized by three different modes of relationship to their object, or referent (Peirce, 1931–1958). An *icon* is a sign that bears similarity or resemblance to its object. A photograph is an icon in that it looks like its subject, and so are maps, visual signs that identify ladies’ and gentlemen’s restrooms, and in verbal language also onomatopoeia (Fiske, 1990).² An *index* is a sign that has a direct relationship to its object, in terms of physical or causal contiguity. For example, footprints and photographs are both indexical in that they are both physical *traces* left by feet and light, whereas signals such as a phone ringing or pointers such as a directional signpost literally direct our attention to their objects. A *symbol* is a sign that is not directly connected or similar to its object but is purely conventional. Symbols are connected to their objects by virtue of agreement, codes, rules, or what Peirce defines as ‘habitual connection’. Words, numbers, traffic lights, and specific languages such as Morse code are symbols, in that their relationship to an object must be learned (Chandler, 2002). Peirce’s typology of signs, then, can be seen as a continuum ranging from most motivated to most conventional.

Based on this model, we can also begin to understand photographic representation as especially powerful, as photographs are often simultaneously iconic, indexical, and symbolic. For example, the power of press photographs lies in their being a record of an event that has actually taken place while also resembling particular people and places. Furthermore, they often evoke abstract meanings related to broader cultural values and social norms (see Lomax and Fink, 2020, this volume). Even in the age of digital retouching and computer-generated imagery, we still tend to see the photographic image as especially truthful and meaningful at the same time. Overall, Peirce’s typology of signs has been key to a broader understanding of the interaction between perception

and culture (see also Gualberto and Kress, 2020, this volume).

Unlike Peirce, Saussure was ‘concerned primarily with the relationship of signifier to signified and with one sign to others’ (Fiske, 1990: 51). In other words, Saussure’s conception of meaning was *structural* and *relational*, whereas Peirce’s was primarily *referential*. Saussure’s *sémiologie* brought social life into the semiotic equation. He claimed that a linguistic sign is the result of an arbitrary connection between its *signifier* and its *signified*, or its material form and the mental concept associated with it (Saussure, 1983 [1916]). Moreover, signifiers and signifieds can only be separated for analytical purposes, but when it comes to the reality of signification, they are in fact heavily dependent on one another, with the *sign* being their totality and the fundamental unit of the meaning-making process.

Unlike the Peircean sign, the Saussurean sign is always fixed by widely shared norms and is intrinsically defined by its being part of a system of other signs, namely the language system. Hence, there is no natural or inevitable reason why a given signifier and its signified should be permanently connected. Saussure’s notion of arbitrariness, then, ‘establishes the autonomy of language in relation to reality’ (Chandler, 2002: 28). According to Saussure’s model, language does not reflect reality; on the contrary, language constructs reality.

While Saussure never studied language in context, and his notion of sign was both static and limited to verbal language, his structuralist theory lent itself to the development of a conceptualization of meaning as dependent on historical, cultural, and social factors. For these reasons, a structuralist approach to signification has been widely adopted in cultural theory and visual analysis.

SEMIOTICS AND THE VISUAL: ROLAND BARTHES AND JEAN-MARIE FLOCH

Building on Saussure’s legacy, in the 1960s Roland Barthes was the first *semiologist* to look at signs and signification as dynamic elements of a social and cultural fabric. He was also the first one to focus systematically on ‘texts’ made of non-linguistic signs, particularly visual images but also fashion, cities, music, and a range of popular ‘icons’ of French culture including, among others, the Citroën car, the Eiffel Tower, the Tour de France, and even wrestling and plastic (Barthes, 1972, 1979). Whereas Saussure had looked at

meaning-making in a *synchronic* manner (as if frozen in time), Barthes was interested in how meanings change across cultural and historical contexts. Under Barthes' influence, the term *semiology* thus became associated with an interest in the analysis of broader cultural practices, particularly those related to popular and media culture.

With his theory on the layering of visual meaning, Barthes laid the foundations for visual semiotics as we know it today. Both in 'The photographic message' (1977 [1961]) and, most famously, in 'Rhetoric of the image' (1977 [1964]), Barthes claimed that visual meaning can be articulated into the two separate levels of *denotation* and *connotation*. The level of denotation corresponds to the literal meaning of an image, or the immediate meaning relating to what is represented in the image. The level of connotation corresponds to the symbolic or ideological meaning, or range of possible meanings, of an image inscribed by cultural codes. Codes can be defined as the 'implicit rules' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009: 434) that govern the ways in which those who make and use images 'read' their meanings. As part of a shared system of culture, most of us are able to draw from the same codes to interpret and understand images.

A now classic example used by Barthes (1977 [1964]) is that of an advertisement for a pasta brand (Figure 23.2). The denotative meaning (which is difficult to simply describe without



Figure 23.2 Denotation and connotation in Barthes' famous Pasta Panzani advertisement example

adding connotation) of the image used in the Pasta Panzani ad is roughly this: a fishnet shopping bag full of packaged pasta, canned tomato sauce, onions, peppers, and mushrooms, together with a packet of grated cheese, a tomato, and a mushroom next to the bag, all of this being displayed against a red background. Its connotative meaning is that of *Italianicity*. Barthes also points out that this ideological association between a simple shopping bag bursting with Mediterranean vegetables and pasta (along with the name Panzani, which is part of the advertisement's linguistic message) and the 'essence' of being Italian generally works for the French, whereas Italians might not even associate a connotation of *Italianicity* to this message. The ideological meaning of the image is therefore context-dependent, and to achieve a similar outcome in different contexts the denotative meaning may need to be differentiated. The denotative message, then, functions as a necessary support for the connotative message, which in turn is seen as a second meaning attached to the photographic message proper (Barthes, 1977 [1961]).

Here Barthes (1977 [1964]) also discusses the relationship between language and images. He distinguishes between two key concepts regarding this relationship, namely 'anchorage' and 'relay'. In film and television as well as cartoons and comic strips, there is a complementary relationship between language and image, as both words and pictures contribute to an overarching 'story'. For example, cinematic dialogue contributes 'meanings that are not to be found in the image itself' (Barthes, 1977 [1964]: 41). This is what Barthes calls 'relay'. In advertising and news media, however, most often linguistic text is used to fix or 'anchor' the meaning of an image.

The meaning of a news photograph can change completely depending on how it is captioned. An example of the importance of anchorage in visual meaning can be found in the 2005 coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, when two very similar press photographs portraying individuals wading through water while carrying bags and backpacks were captioned in radically different ways. One of the photographs depicted a young black man with the following caption: 'A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store.' The other image, which portrayed a white man and a light-skinned woman, was captioned in the following way instead: 'Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.' Due to the choice of words in the captions ('looting' versus 'finding'), these subjects were framed as a criminal and as innocent citizens, respectively. And because the portrayed individuals were black and white, this

difference in framing also had racial implications that were widely decried by many commentators online and in the media (Ralli, 2005). As Barthes (1977 [1964]: 40) states, anchorage is ideological and even 'repressive', as it 'directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others'.

In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes introduced an additional layer to signification: myth. Whereas connotation is the ideological meaning that is 'attached' to a specific sign, myth relates to ideological concepts that are 'evoked' by a certain sign. These correspond to a worldview or 'a culture's way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding it' (Fiske, 1990: 88). Barthes gave a striking visual example to explain this point. He looked at the cover of a popular French magazine, *Paris-Match*. On the cover, a young black soldier in a French uniform 'is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour' (Barthes, 1972: 116). In and of itself, the denotative meaning of this image is 'a young black soldier giving the French salute'. The connotative meaning of the image is a combination of Frenchness and militariness. However, the combination of denotative and connotative meaning of this image becomes 'form' for a third layer of meaning that is evoked (not symbolized) by the image as a 'chain of related concepts' (Fiske, 1990: 88). According to Barthes (1972: 116), this third order of signification is 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro (*sic*) in serving his so-called oppressors'.

Barthes explained that the young black soldier giving the French salute is not a symbol, or something that has acquired 'through convention and use a meaning that enables it to stand for something else' (Fiske, 1990: 91). The young black soldier giving the French salute does not stand for the concept of French imperialism as such. This is because the function of the mythical sign is to 'naturalize' an historical and cultural concept. As a whole, Barthes argued that bourgeois norms are propagated by means of representation, and the more these representations are propagated through repetition and multiple signifiers, the more they are experienced as universal laws. This process of normalization causes myth to be 'read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system' (Barthes, 1972: 131).

While Barthes is without any doubt the most important founding figure in visual semiotics, another French semiotician, Jean-Marie Floch, was also central to its development. Floch was Barthes' junior by over 30 years and his work is

not as widely known in global academia, both because his publications have not been systematically translated into English and because his scholarship became associated with industrial and applied semiotics, rather than with cultural and ideological critique. Floch was trained by Algirdas Julien Greimas, who was the founder of the Paris School of semiotics. He directed the visual semiotics workshop in Greimas' 'Groupe de recherches sémio-linguistiques' at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS-CNRS) in Paris (Greimas et al., 1989).

Alongside Barthes, Greimas was one of the most prominent French semioticians, but the two developed radically different epistemologies and semiotic frameworks – to the extent that Barthes, who had been very close to Greimas both personally and intellectually, distanced himself from the Paris School (Samoyault, 2017). Unlike Barthes, Greimas was not interested in the contingencies of history and the power-laden cultural codes that underlie meaning. Rather, he set out to develop a comprehensive generative grammar of the 'deep' structures of narrative, and posited that 'a finite number of functional themes in binary opposition juxtaposed with possible roles (subject-object; sender-receiver; helper-opponent) would generate the structures we call stories – all of them' (Lenoir, 1994: 5). As one of Greimas' key collaborators, Floch became interested in developing a systematic semiotic theory to identify the underlying patterns and structures of visual images. However, Floch's approach also combined an interest in the perceptual and compositional characteristics of images with an attention towards their cultural and historical significance from a representational standpoint (Broden, 2002).

Floch's approach to visual semiotics was based on the distinction between *figurative* meaning and *plastic* meaning. Figurative meaning pertains to the representation of things and human beings, particularly in relation to the visual traits that enable us to recognize particular objects or subjects and the narratives that are associated with their representation (Floch, 1985). Plastic meaning, on the other hand, relates to visual cues like line, shape, light, colour, texture, and layout. These are all aspects of an image that can have meanings that are independent of what they represent from a figurative standpoint (Greimas et al., 1989). While *figurative semiotics* is germane to Barthes' approach to the 'rhetoric of the image', *plastic semiotics* cannot be reduced to representational features and, in fact, constitutes an autonomous level of analysis which, elsewhere, I have equated to an analysis of both 'style' and 'design' (Aiello, 2007).

Floch (1981) outlines this method in his analysis of Wassily Kandinsky's 1911 semi-abstract

painting *Composition IV*. First of all, he segments the painting into its left and right sides, as these are set apart by ‘plastic contrasts’. This means that they are made of formally opposite visual elements like, for example, multiple short and often intersecting lines on the left side, and fewer but longer and non-intersecting lines on the right side (see Polidoro, 2008). He then proceeds to reconstruct the meaning of this particular canvas by examining it in relation to the Russian painter’s ‘Blaue Reiter’ period, which lasted approximately from 1907 to 1916. Because Kandinsky’s painting during this period went from being figurative to being increasingly abstract, Floch is able to identify the key visual devices that the Russian painter usually associates with particular types of content like ‘the knight’, ‘the saints’, or ‘the dawn’. Through a careful evaluation of the continuities and transformations in Kandinsky’s work, Floch ultimately concludes that the left and right sides of the painting are thematically different, as one side represents the clash between good and evil, and the other side represents the positive outcome of this struggle, or where a new life begins. Because the two sides of the painting are also set apart by different visual traits, Floch concludes that this is a semi-symbolic system where plastic contrasts pertaining to the plane of expression correspond to contrasts in the plane of content. The main goal of plastic semiotics, then, is to understand how visual form and the level of expression (or the plastic signifier) make meaning in relation to the content of an image (the signified), both autonomously and alongside figurative elements (Floch, 1985).

Floch also used this model for his work as a marketing and communication consultant in the private sector (see Floch, 2001 [1990]). In his best-known book, *Visual Identities*, Floch (2000 [1995]) applies his plastic approach to a series of ground-breaking studies of brands like Chanel, Waterman, Habitat, and both IBM and Apple. Here, he also combines his original semiotic model with broader considerations about the work of designers and the role that their knowledge of perceptual qualities, historical references, and cultural narratives plays in the making of imagery as a form of ‘bricolage’ (Brodén, 2002). For example, in his comparative analysis of the Apple and IBM logos, Floch notes that a text like the Apple logo – which does not imply a linear narrative and which he thus calls a ‘mythogram’ – owes part of its success to the simple abstract patterns and forms that contribute to recreating an iconic rendition of an apple. As he writes: ‘The rainbow apple, minus bite, has the advantage of being much easier to read’ (Floch, 2000 [1995]: 38). Overall, Floch developed a visual semiotics centred on the meaning-making properties of form and its

relationship with content. While Floch’s approach was original, it also conversed with iconography (Panofsky, 1970) and the psychology of art (see Arnheim, 1966).

As I will explain in the next section, Barthes’ focus on representation and connotation and Floch’s emphasis on the perceptual and compositional characteristics of images are both key to a social semiotic understanding of visual analysis. In combining both ideological and formal concerns with a focus on cultural practices and social action, social semiotics offers an especially comprehensive and up-to-date framework for visual analysis.

FROM SEMIOTICS TO SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

The main limitation of semiotics is that it is centred on detailed analysis of texts and their components, with little regard for the practices and processes that underlie their production or reception. It is however important to point out that structuralism has contributed greatly to the development of critical approaches to the visual across a variety of disciplines.

Social semiotics originates from a synthesis of structuralism and Halliday’s (1978 and 1985) systemic functional linguistics (see also Gualberto and Kress, 2020, this volume). Social semiotics is functionalist in that it foregrounds choice and considers all sign-making as having been developed to perform specific actions, or *semiotic work*. Just like traditional semiotics, social semiotics is concerned with the internal structures of texts and, increasingly, also of other semiotic artifacts (for example, packaging) and semiotic technologies (for example, PowerPoint). Unlike traditional semiotics and other textual methodologies, social semiotics places emphasis on the relationship between form and how people make signs ‘in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc.’ (Van Leeuwen, 2005: 3). Further, social semiotics interrogates the ideological underpinnings and political implications of semiotic choices that become naturalized over time, and which are thus often taken for granted as the most sensible or neutral ways of representing given types of knowledge and information. It is in this sense that social semiotics shares a structuralist sensibility with Barthes’ semiological model. However, social semiotics does not see ideology as one of the components or *layers* of signification, but rather as its premise. Social semioticians highlight that

texts are never made by accident (Iedema, 2001). A central question here is 'who made the rules and how and why they might be changed' (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 135).

Social semiotics, then, sees meaning-making, or signification, as a process deeply embedded in existing cultural norms and shaped by social structures. This is not unlike cultural studies, which had a 'semiotic turn' between the 1980s and the 1990s as scholars in this field adopted Saussure's and Barthes' theories to focus on issues of meaning and ideology in media representation, particularly in relation to stereotyping (Hall, 1997). Cultural studies and social semiotics share a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and a Marxist framing of ideology, leading to the assumption that 'the power to signify is not a neutral force' (Hall, 1982: 70) and that, in fact, it is rooted in inequality (Hodge and Kress, 1988).

In the dialectic between text and context, a social semiotic approach entails a primary focus on textual structures or arrangements, whereas cultural studies has eminently focused on the historical roots of representation, the institutional contexts of visual production, and different contexts of viewing and image consumption (Lister and Wells, 2001). Along the same lines, visual rhetoric (see Gries, 2020, this volume) focuses less on extracting meaning(s) from visual texts in their own right and more on how images interpellate audiences, or on how visual persuasion works (Danesi, 2017).

Social semiotics, then, shares similar foundations and goals with cultural studies as well as visual rhetoric, but its analytical focus is firmly on the text and the ways in which images 'work' semiotically. As a methodology that is highly akin to critical discourse analysis, social semiotics is interested in 'the processes and products of discourse' and their 'vital role in the production, reproduction and transformation of the social practices that constitute the society in which we live' (Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen, 2003: 3). Within this overarching framework, social semiotics focuses specifically on how both language and 'modes of communication other than language' (Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen, 2003: 3) work together to create meaning.

Overall, social semiotics considers 'language' as a system of various possible choices that can be made depending on what sign-makers want to achieve within the constraints or affordances of given modes, media, and contexts (Ledin and Machin, 2018). For this reason, social semiotics replaces the structuralist notion of code with that of semiotic resource. Van Leeuwen (2005: 285) defines semiotic resources as physiological and technological means for meaning-making such

as 'the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes'.

For example, depending on the kind of identity or 'brand' that we may want to communicate for our café or restaurant (for example, rustic or sophisticated, local or cosmopolitan, organic or industrial), we will choose different kinds of colour, texture, sound, and even smell, together with their various combinations (see Aiello and Dickinson, 2014; Ledin and Machin, 2018). Our choices will not be narrowly defined by a 'code' linking signs with fixed meanings, but will rather be informed by a field of meaning potentials associated with the past and possible uses of given semiotic resources in the interior design of cafés and restaurants. According to a social semiotic perspective, sign-making is ultimately governed, though not determined, by authority, expertise, or simple conformity in particular contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Hence, social semiotics is also able to account both for top-down power and bottom-up polysemy in relation to the uses of semiotic resources. A social semiotic approach to visual analysis, then, focuses primarily on the ways in which given visual resources can be deployed within and across texts to generate a range of meaning potentials and, in this way, also achieve specific ends.

An example of the relationship between visual resources and meaning potentials can be found in Jewitt and Oyama's (2001) analysis of the visual representation of masculinity in British sexual health materials aimed at teenagers. They discuss how a resource such as 'point of view' can be used – even unwittingly – by the producers of educational materials in ways that affirm hegemonic norms of masculinity and narrowly define male and female sexuality as opposite poles. For example, a poster promoting safe sex through the use of condoms portrays a young couple sitting in a convertible. The man is sitting in the driver's seat and is positioned centrally and frontally in relation to the viewer, whereas the woman is looking at her partner and away from the viewer. While the man is portrayed as 'active', the woman is portrayed as 'other' and 'passive'. The meaning potentials made possible by the way in which point of view is deployed in this text are narrowed down to a few hegemonic reading options. That said, these meanings are not inherent in the visual resources deployed in imagery, but 'need to be activated by the producers and viewers of images' (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 135). Semiotic resources are actively used both by producers and viewers of images as cognitive resources to make sense of visual messages.

From a methodological standpoint, social semiotics combines *descriptive*, *interpretive*, and

critical aims (Thurlow and Aiello, 2007). First, at a descriptive level, a social semiotic analysis focuses on making inventories of key visual resources in and across texts, thus also outlining the basic semiotic repertoire of a given type of imagery. Second, from an interpretive standpoint, this analytical approach focuses on situating visual resources and semiotic repertoires in their specific historical, cultural, or institutional contexts of production and/or use, considering how key meaning potentials are established through the selection and combination of particular visual resources. Finally, from a critical perspective, a social semiotic analysis links texts and contexts to understand the ideological import of imagery and, at times, also consider alternative visual resources or 'new uses of existing semiotic resources' (Van Leeuwen, 2005: 3). As a whole, this is a framework that helps us ground the interpretive and critical stages of our visual analysis in an empirical observation of the visual text(s) at hand. It is also for this reason that, for larger samples of images, combining content analysis with social semiotic analysis can be especially productive. Most often, however, social semioticians analyze images according to three main *metafunctions* – namely, *representational*, *interactive*, and *compositional* meaning. In *Reading Images*, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) developed this highly influential social semiotic framework for visual analysis by adapting the three linguistic metafunctions which were originally outlined by Halliday (1985) to describe the three types of 'work' that all languages do regardless of cultural context.

In Jewitt and Oyama's health poster example, representational meaning is related to the image's overall 'story': a (sexual) relationship between a young woman and a young man in an urban setting. The image's interactive meaning is found in the relationship to the viewer: the woman looks away while the man's gaze is direct, thus making him less socially distanced from the viewer. Here, compositional meaning is tied to the image's layout, where the young man and the condom packet are placed in a salient position (at the centre of the image) and the text anchors the image as a health advertisement.

Through these three metafunctions, social semioticians can engage, both systematically and descriptively, with the detail of visual texts while also raising questions about the situated meanings of their visual resources together with the cultural, social, or political implications of the ways in which these visual resources are deployed within and across images. This is not unlike what Barthes' denotation/connotation model does, but the social semiotic framework offers a more fine-grained approach to visual analysis, as it takes

into account a number of 'techniques' through which each of these levels of meaning may be established.

A social semiotic analysis of visual imagery will thus typically begin by offering some background information on the type of image or images being analyzed to then address three main questions (for a more detailed explanation of the three metafunctions and the visual features that realize them together with their meaning potentials, see Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006):

- 1 What is the *representational meaning* of an image or set of images? In other words, what is the 'story' (or stories) that is represented? Who are the key 'participants' (the people or objects portrayed); how are they represented as types or as parts of a broader 'whole'; what are some of the actions that are performed by participants, for example in relation to themselves or others, a certain product, or their environment? Specifically, here we are concerned with (a) the *narrative structures* of images, or the actions and processes that are visually represented by means of vectors, and (b) the *conceptual structures* of images (these can be classificatory, analytical, or symbolic), or the ways in which the 'essence' of participants is represented, for example in terms of their attributes or relations with other people and objects in the image.
- 2 What is the *interactive meaning* of an image or set of images? In other words, how do the images interact with the viewer, for example by means of a portrayed person's gaze, a certain camera angle, and frame size? Specifically, here we focus on (a) *point of view*, or the angle at which the image is shot or presented; (b) *contact*, or the gaze of the portrayed subject, which can be direct or indirect; and (c) *distance*, or whether the image is framed as a long shot, a medium shot, or a close up, thus representing participants as more or less close to the viewer.
- 3 What is the *compositional meaning* of an image or set of images? In other words, how are particular images laid out or organized, for example through the ways in which different visual cues or objects are placed in the image, are made more or less salient, connected, or disconnected, or are made to look more or less real? Specifically, here we focus on (a) *information value*, or the placement of various elements within the image (left or right, top or bottom, centre or margin); (b) *salience*, or how different elements within the image are made to attract the viewer's attention

to different degrees, for example through their placement in the background or foreground, their relative size, colour contrasts, or differences in sharpness; (c) *framing*, or whether and how elements in the visual text are connected or disconnected through devices like spacing or dividing lines; and (d) *modality*, or how more or less real the image or different components of the image are made to look.

Translating Halliday's three metafunctions into a model for visual analysis has been deemed problematic, because it may lead to the development of a rigid 'grammar' of visual communication based on linguistic principles but also because, in line with Floch's plastic semiotics, a semiotic understanding of visual images ought to exceed an evaluation of their content alone by considering the 'plane of expression' as equally significant (Eco, 1976; Ledin and Machin, 2018). Precisely because using the three metafunctions is not a sufficient method to address the specificity and situatedness of visual images, an analysis of representational, interactive, and compositional meaning also needs to be combined with an evaluation of four further aspects pertaining to the materials, uses, styles, and practices that shape images' visual resources and meaning potentials. These are:

- 1 The affordances that set apart the semiotic materials of the visual text or texts being examined, or the types of communicative acts and meanings that are enabled by their particular form of communication. As Ledin and Machin (2018) explain, photography and film, for example, have material qualities and features (such as stillness versus movement) that shape and make them apt for certain kinds of communication and interaction but not others.
- 2 The canons of use associated with visual texts' semiotic materials, or the 'typical work' that such materials (photography or film, but also packaging, documents, or retail spaces) carry out in our culture. In other words, we need to understand the histories and traditions that shape the ways in which images are used in specific contexts and the discourses and values that particular types of images are usually made to communicate (Ledin and Machin, 2018).
- 3 The role that non-figurative, plastic elements play in shaping the style and overall content of imagery (Floch, 1981, 1985), insofar as the meanings of design resources like shape, light,

colour, texture, and layout, cannot be completely captured by an analysis of representational, interactive, and compositional meaning alone (this is especially true for non-photographic and minimalistic images like logos; see Johannessen, 2017). It is also important to point out that a social semiotic analysis ought to consider how image-makers can and do take advantage of experiential metaphors (Van Leeuwen, 2006) and the perceptual qualities of imagery to 'work' on the viewer in particular ways, for example by creating illusions of movement through motion effects such as flickering (Gombrich, 1982).

- 4 The specific creative, professional, or viewing practices that contribute to the visual resources and meaning potentials that set apart particular visual texts – for example through interviews and/or ethnographic fieldwork with key producers or users of imagery (see Aiello, 2012).

As a whole, these are all analytical dimensions that go hand in hand and which contribute to a critical analysis of visual texts, as their materials, uses, styles, and practices have all developed to accomplish communicative aims in the service of particular interests.

READING IMAGES: SOCIAL SEMIOTICS FOR VISUAL ANALYSIS

I am now going to briefly demonstrate this approach to visual analysis through an example from my own original research on stock photography. Here I choose to examine a single image from the world-leading commercial image bank Getty Images, but social semiotic analysis can be performed on larger sets of images, for example in combination with content analysis, or by examining key patterns across images and then performing a detailed analysis of a few typical cases. I focus specifically on an image included in the Lean In Collection, an initiative resulting from a partnership between Getty Images and Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook executive who authored the best-selling book and 'feminist manifesto' *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. The Lean In Collection aims to provide commercial images that represent women in non-stereotypical, more authentic, and more empowered ways. The slogan that was chosen for the Lean In Collection is 'You can't be what you can't see'. This is a particularly significant statement because, historically, stock photography has relied on clichés and

stereotypes to symbolize generic identities (such as ‘mother’, ‘beautiful woman’, ‘career woman’) and universal ideas or concepts (‘love’, ‘happiness’, ‘freedom’). For this reason, and despite its ubiquity, stock photography has been discounted as bland and insignificant if not downright ridiculous. As an example, there are entire Tumblr galleries devoted to the derision of stock photography with titles like ‘Women Laughing Alone with Salad’ or ‘Women Struggling to Drink Water’. Over the last few years, major industry players like Getty Images have taken it upon themselves to update and even ‘politicize’ the visual language of stock photography as a way to freshen up their brand and ensure that their product continues to be appealing among the many producers of media texts who use pre-produced images, particularly for profitable keywords like ‘woman’, ‘family’, and ‘business’ (Aiello and Woodhouse, 2016).

Overall, however, stock photographs are still typically staged, decontextualized, and clichéd (Machin, 2004). As Ledin and Machin (2018: 46) explain, this is because ‘canons of use’ of the symbolic image include advertising, branding, web design, and promotional media more broadly, where generic representations of people and objects are used to load ‘a set of ideas and values onto products’ or services. Hence, for commercial reasons, stock photographs are supposed to be idealized, simplified, and upbeat. In spite of their attempts to represent women as both authentic and empowered, even images from the Lean In Collection must be recognizable and usable as symbolic, generic images.

The Lean In image that I chose for this analysis is one such case, as it portrays a female scientist at work in a lab (Figure 23.3). It was created by a London-based photographer with the aim to have it included in this collection. To understand more about the creative process that led to the semiotic choices that were made to craft this image, I interviewed the photographer about this and other images in the same series. Before discussing the interview, I now turn to examining the image according to its representational, interactive, and compositional meaning.

From a representational standpoint, we immediately understand that the woman portrayed in the image is a scientist, because she is wearing a white lab coat together with protective gloves. These are ‘props’, or symbolic conceptual structures, that define her identity, together with the general setting of the lab. While she is not handling any particularly stereotypical scientific prop, like a microscope or a pipette, both the machine in front of her and the sealed bottles and containers on the shelves in the background communicate that this is a lab. In addition, the dominance of colours such as white and blue points to meaning potentials related to efficiency and technology. In terms of analytical conceptual structures, other personal attributes like the woman’s eyeglasses and the fact that she is visibly Asian ‘code’ this image further, as both of these signifiers are associated with the scientific professions in popular visual culture. It is also worth noting that she is alone, she is relatively young, and she is smiling. These are also all key visual features of stock photography, which



Figure 23.3 A stock photograph of a real scientist at work in her lab

typically tends to privilege a focus on the individual together with youthfulness and an optimistic outlook. In terms of narrative structures, the vectors outlined by the subject's hands and gaze index that she is performing an action on the machine in front of her. We thus clearly see her at work, both happily and individually, in a setting where she feels confident – as suggested by the firm placement of her hands on the machine and on the workbench, together with her gaze.

From an interactive standpoint, the viewer is positioned as a fairly close spectator. The subject does not make eye contact with the viewer, and her 'offer gaze' indicates that we are observing her rather than engaging directly with her. The image's point of view is horizontal, thus establishing an equal or 'neutral' amount of power between the viewer and the portrayed subject. In addition, the image is a medium shot, which suggests a certain amount of closeness but also proper distance. The angle and size of this image indicate that we could be standing not far from the portrayed subject to observe her as she performs her experiment, and that she is letting us watch her as she demonstrates her work process.

From a compositional standpoint, the image is more complex than a typical stock image. Unlike traditional stock photos and symbolic images more broadly, here the background is not stripped down or blank but well defined and cluttered instead, suggesting an authentic everyday work setting. While modality is higher in the foreground, where the scientist and the machine are placed, and the background is slightly blurred, this is a highly naturalistic image, also thanks to the colours, which are neither saturated nor muted. At the same time, the image is brightly lit and colours appear as fairly flat, as is typical of symbolic images. Furthermore, the most salient element of this image are the scientist's hands, both because they are placed in the centre and because the gloves' blue colour creates a contrast against the whiteness of the countertop and her lab coat. The salience of this detail is linked not only to the image's focus on science but also to some of the broader concepts encapsulated in some of the keywords associated with this image, such as 'Research' and 'Skill'.

When I interviewed the photographer who created this image, I wanted to know more about the semiotic choices that she had made to make sure that this and other shots she submitted for inclusion in the Lean In Collection would represent women as more authentic and empowered. She told me that hers was a new approach, as this and the other stock images that she contributed to the collection portrayed real professional

scientists in their workplace, whereas traditionally photographs of people working in sectors like science and engineering had shown models handling scientific props that they knew nothing about, which meant that the end result lacked authenticity. Hence, she shot real scientists in the labs in which they worked daily, and claimed that the shots were not staged and were a technically correct reflection of what these scientists do. To ensure accuracy, she also asked the scientists to help her craft the written text (both titles and keywords) accompanying the images. This said, she also airbrushed all specific references to the university labs in which the scientists were portrayed, such as logos on lab coats and other fixtures, to ensure that the images would be as generic as possible.

The photographer highlighted that all of the scientists portrayed in these photographs were enthusiastic about taking part in the initiative. She stated that 'they feel strongly that they're underrepresented' because 'in this kind of work environment they see women drop out all the time, so they want to inspire the next generation'. However, the photographer also admitted that she was not in charge of deciding whether these photographs would go into the Lean In Collection. Moreover, decisions regarding the ways in which the images would be used were out of her hands, and she did not even get detailed information on who purchased the images.

Overall, the stock image that I just analyzed is slightly different from a typical symbolic image, in that the portrayed subject is contextualized to a greater degree, both through a more detailed setting and a more realistic approach to representing her actions. However, the image is still centred on key rules, and therefore also ideological tenets, of stock photography. First, it focuses on the individual and on her actions and attributes (rather than on teamwork or collaboration, for example). Second, it foregrounds a generic and commercially viable identity rather than a specific form of subjectivity, in that the portrayed scientist remains unnamed and is defined-visually but also verbally- in the photograph's title and keywords as 'young', 'beautiful', and 'smiling', and as both 'Asian' and of 'Chinese Ethnicity'. Third, it makes broader concepts like 'science', 'research', or 'skill' more visually salient than specific details pertaining to the scientist, her lab, or the machine that she is operating. The photographer's decisions and practices underlying the making of this and other images also point to difficulties in breaking the rules of stock photography as such, given her lack of control over the placement, sales, and uses of her images.

CONCLUSION

A semiotic approach to the visual entails a focus on what Rose (2016) defines as the ‘site of the image’, or on images themselves, rather than their contexts of production or reception. This said, contemporary approaches to visual semiotics are set apart by a keen focus on the cultural and social contexts in which images are made and consumed. In other words, both what Rose (2016) defines as the ‘site of production’ and the ‘site of audiencing’ have become central to an understanding of the ways in which images work as texts. In addition, among visual semioticians there is increasing attention towards the broader ‘lives’ of images themselves. Aspects like materiality, circulation, and recontextualization are becoming key to semiotic analyses of visuals (see Aiello, 2016). In the age of digital reproduction, it is increasingly important for visual semioticians to be able to understand where images are physically located and what their key technological features are, how and where they are shared both online and offline, and where and how they are used, re-used, and re-fashioned – often multiple times, as in the case of memes and viral images.

Overall, however, visual semiotics is set apart by a keen focus on the formal aspects of imagery, and this is both its main strength and its main weakness. On the one hand, using a semiotic approach to visual analysis enables us to examine imagery both systematically and critically, thus also combining ‘analytical precision’ (Rose, 2016: 107) with an ability to link textual details to overarching power dynamics. On the other hand, traditional semiotic analysis is not able to account for the role that both producers and viewers play in meaning-making, together with other aspects pertaining to the broader contexts in which images ‘live’.

For this reason, semiotic analyses are often discounted as being merely individual readings of a particular text or set of texts rather than evidence-driven studies. Even in its most contemporary declinations, semiotic analysis often needs to rely on other forms of data collection – like interviews, focus groups, or historical research – and analysis to corroborate key findings on the ‘meanings’ of particular images. By the same token, semiotic analysis is also a great complement to empirical approaches such as content analysis or visual framing analysis, as it offers the interpretive and critical instruments that more descriptive methodologies often lack.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this chapter have been adapted from my 2006 journal article ‘Theoretical advances in criti-

cal visual analysis: Perception, ideology, mythologies and social semiotics’ previously published in the *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 26(2), 89–102.

- 2 Onomatopoeia refers to the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named, for example cuckoo or sizzle.

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