

**THIS
MEANS
THIS**

**THIS
MEANS
THAT**

**A USER'S GUIDE
TO SEMIOTICS**

INTRODUCTION

Starting with the basic concepts of semiotics, *This Means This, This Means That* guides the reader through the morass of meanings that our culture creates. A total of 76 concepts will be explored through a variety of objects, images, and texts. Each concept will be presented with a question. Readers are then invited to consider their own response before turning the page to find the author's answer. In this way, the reader is challenged to think about how meanings are made, interpreted, and understood.

Semiotics is now mentioned regularly in newspaper articles, in magazines, and on television. But what exactly is semiotics and why is it important?

Semiotics is defined as the theory of signs. The word "semiotics" comes from the Greek word *semeiotikos*, which means "an interpreter of signs." Signing is vital to human existence because it underlies all forms of communication.

Signs are amazingly diverse. They include gestures, facial expressions, speech disorders, slogans, graffiti, commercials, medical symptoms, marketing, music, body language, drawings, paintings, poetry, design, film, Morse code, clothes, food, rituals, and primitive symbols—these are just some of the many things that fall within the subject of semiotics.

To see how signs work, consider the following:

Stop means Stop
Apple means Apple
Crown means Crown

Now compare this:

Stop means Danger
Apple means Healthy
Crown means King

Signs are important because they can mean something other than themselves. Spots on your chest can mean that you are ill. A blip on the radar can mean impending danger for an aircraft. Reading messages like this seems simple enough, but a great deal hangs on context. Spots on the chest need to be judged in a medical context, while a blip on the radar needs to be read within the context of aviation. So signs are not isolated; they are dependent for their meaning on the contexts in which they are read and understood.

The context for some signs seems obvious. For instance, *Toy Story* is an animated film about two central characters: Buzz Lightyear and Woody. Arsenal is an English soccer team. These are the contexts we use for the purposes of interpreting these things. But are these the right contexts? Perhaps *Toy Story* exists only to sell plastic replicas of the two leading characters to children, and perhaps Arsenal exists only to sell merchandise to its fans. If that is right, then the context for reading these things is not film or soccer after all, but advertising, and we should alter our interpretation of them accordingly.

Semiotics, then, is about the tools, processes, and contexts we have for creating, interpreting, and understanding meaning in a variety of different ways.

CHAPTER ONE



1

SIGNS AND SIGNING

Signs are everywhere, but how exactly are they formed?

Signs are formed through the society that creates them, by the structures they employ, and via the sources they use. Let's look at how this works.

Signs are always produced and consumed in the context of a specific society. In the Western world we live in a society that is largely mechanistic and consumerist in outlook. So when it comes to discussing all manner of topics we often use the mechanistic and consumerist metaphors that reflect the dominant views of our society. If we take a fairly concrete topic such as health, we find we will talk in mechanistic terms about, say, the *war* against AIDS or the *fight* against cancer. The same thing applies when we speak about more abstract topics such as "time." Here we speak in largely consumerist terms: we talk about *using* time, *wasting* time, *saving* time, and *spending* time, as if it were a commodity like money rather than a process which unfolds. Signs, then, are shaped by different societies in different ways.

The signs that we find in each society are superficially different. However, they often seem to have the same

underlying structures. It appears that all human beings, whether ancient and modern, feel the need to tell stories. That is why we find folklore, fairy tales, legends, proverbs, sayings, and riddles in all societies, whether they end up in the form of anecdotes, novels, urban myths, soap operas, or "reality" television programs. Yet there are other structural similarities, too: most societies tend to create hierarchies, perform rituals, play games, adhere to moral systems, and engage in forms of symbolic representation.

Societies have two basic sources of signing: the first source is natural, while the second is conventional. For instance, we know that it is natural for humans to wear clothes in cold climates. The kind of clothes we wear, however, and how we wear them, is a matter for convention (*i.e.*, it depends on the "rules" of the particular society of which we are a part). Consider the wearing of shoes. Shoes can be practical and can afford protection from harsh terrain, but they can also take on meanings that have little or nothing to do with practicality. The wearing of high heels is an instance of this latter phenomenon. In spite of the fact that high heels are highly impractical, they have a very particular

SIGNS AND SIGNING

conventional meaning as sexual symbols in Western societies. (Note, however, that in other societies the wearing of high heels may seem strange and eccentric.)

In due course we will have occasion to explore some of these themes in greater detail. Before that, however, we have to do two things. First, we must show how one thing means another. The concepts that will help us to explain this will include signifier and signified, sign,

icon, index, and symbol. These are the basic building blocks for meaning-making. Second, we must describe the sort of journey that a message may take as it travels from sender to receiver. The journey we will describe follows the path set out in the examples below.

The other key concepts we need to examine in this section, then, will include sender, intention, message, transmission, noise, receiver, and destination.

The Journey of a Message

A designer
Wishes to design a vacuum cleaner
He designs a very efficient vacuum cleaner
The design is manufactured in plastic and metal
It is sold in a shop with complex instructions
A buyer purchases it
The buyer uses the product by following the instructions

A painter
Wants to paint a portrait
He paints a portrait that resembles the sitter
It is painted on paper with watercolor
It is hung in a gallery under artificial light, which changes its color
A viewer sees it and buys it
The viewer hangs it over his fireplace where it looks dull

A writer
Aims to produce a text on semiotics
He writes a book explaining the complexities of the subject
It is printed
A printing error occurs
A reader reads it
The reader, not detecting the printing error, is confused

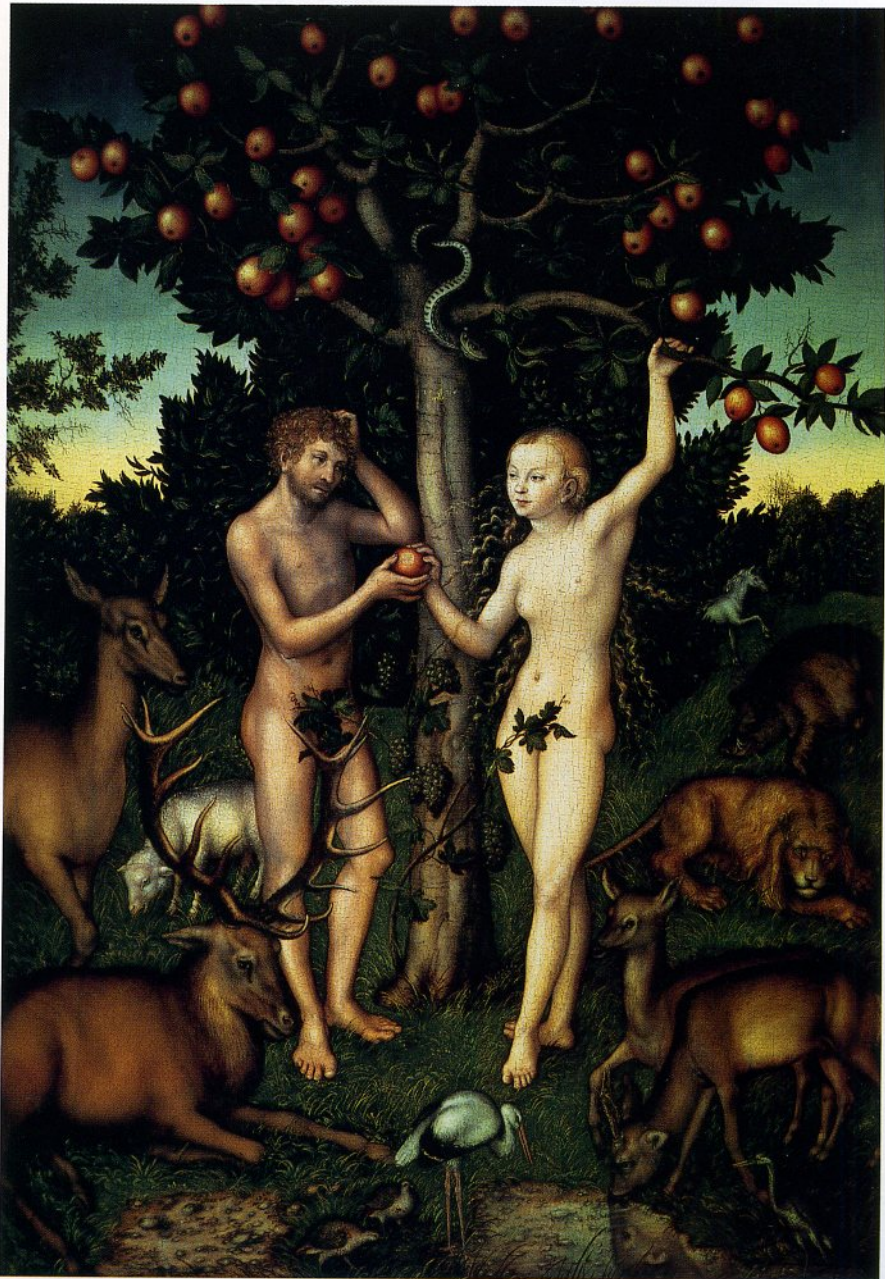
Key Semiotic Concept

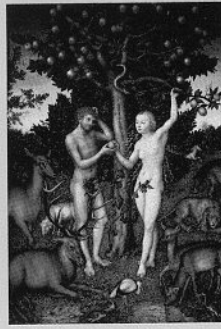
Sender (who)
Intention (with what aim)
Message (says what)
Transmission (by which means)
Noise (with what interference)
Receiver (to whom)
Destination (with what result)

Sender (who)
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WHAT DOES THE APPLE IN THIS PICTURE SIGNIFY?





WHAT DOES THE APPLE IN THIS PICTURE SIGNIFY?

This painting by Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The apple represents the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Satan, who takes the form of a serpent, uses the apple to tempt Eve. Eve picks the apple and gives it to Adam. With this act Adam and Eve fall from grace in the eyes of God.

It is easy to assume that the image of Eve being tempted by the apple accurately reflects the story in the Bible. But in the Bible there is no mention of an apple. Fruit is mentioned, but not apples. So perhaps it was really an orange that tempted Eve. Or a fig.

What seems to matter in the picture by Cranach is that the apple (what we call the “signifier”) is the fruit used to signify temptation (what we call the “signified”). However, while the apple means temptation, some other fruit could have been chosen to represent the same idea. It is only because there is already a well-established connection in our minds between the appearance of an apple and the idea of temptation that this fruit is used in the picture. It is this connection that makes the picture successful in terms of communication.

There are numerous relationships that can exist between signifier and signified. Two important things about the relationship stand out, however. One is that we can have the same signifier with different signifieds. The other is that we can have different signifiers with the same signifieds.

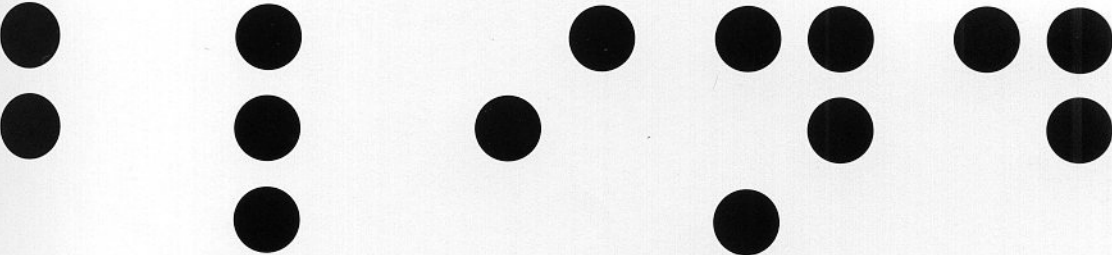
In the first three examples below, the same signifier gives rise to different signifieds:

Signifier		Signified
Apple	means	Temptation
Apple	means	Healthy
Apple	means	Fruit

However, in the next three examples, different signifiers (depending on whether the language spoken is English, French, or German) give rise to the same signified:

Signifier		Signified
Apple	means	Apple
<i>Pomme</i>	means	Apple
<i>Apfel</i>	means	Apple

CAN YOU MAKE SENSE OF THESE DOTS?





CAN YOU MAKE SENSE OF THESE DOTS?

These symbols are written in Braille. In order to decode them you have to know that each set of dots represents a letter, which in turn makes up a word. In this case the word is “blind.” The word “blind” is the carrier of the meaning. This is the signifier. The meaning of the word, on the other hand, is what it signifies (e.g., that someone lacks sight).

Signs are often thought to be composed of two inseparable elements: the signifier and the signified. One thing that is intriguing about the relationship between the signifier and the signified is that it can be arbitrary. For example, when I use the word “dog” in order to talk about a certain furry four-legged domestic creature, I employ a signifier that is arbitrary. The sound made by the word “dog,” when uttered, is intrinsically no better than the made-up sounds “sog,” “pog,” or “tog” for talking about this animal. All these words could

have been used to communicate the meaning of “four-legged domestic creature that can make the sound woof.” We just happen to use the word “dog,” while in Germany they have chosen *hund* and in France, *chien*.

Many of the signs we use to communicate are arbitrary in the sense that they are not immediately transparent to us. For this reason they have to be learned with the conventions of the language in which they are embedded before they can be used. Once these conventions have been learned, however, the meanings that are conveyed by using them are likely to seem wholly natural. Yet by thinking of meanings as natural we do ourselves a disservice. This is because what is often seen as natural is just the product of various cultural habits and prejudices that have become so engrained that we no longer notice them.

WHAT IS THIS OBJECT?





WHAT IS THIS OBJECT?

This is an Inuit map. It is made from wood. Rather than being visual, it is tactile. The Inuit hold this map under their mittens and feel the contours with their fingers to discern patterns in the coastline. The advantage of this map is that it can be used in the dark, it is weatherproof, it will float if you drop it into the water, and it works at any temperature. It will also last longer than one that is printed.

Although the Inuit map is highly abstracted, it still resembles the shape of the coastline. While some maps follow the geography of the place that they represent in a fairly exact way, others do not. When specific information about the environment is represented on a map in an abstract way we tend to say that the map is

schematic, whereas when a map resembles the world in a more concrete and exact way we say that it is topographical.

With any icon there is some degree of resemblance between signifier and signified. The degree of resemblance can be either high or low (as we have just seen in the case of maps). There are many other examples. For instance, a portrait may look very like a real person or it may look a little like him or her—enough, say, for the person to be recognizable.

Here are some examples of an iconic relationship between signifier and signified:

Signifier

Line drawing	resembles
Sculpted portrait in clay	resembles
Color photograph	resembles
Sound effect (of footsteps)	resembles
An organic compound	resembles
A chemical mixture	resembles

Signified

The place depicted
The person portrayed
The object photographed
Footsteps
The smell of roses
The taste of cheese and onion

**WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE WOMAN
IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH?**





WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE WOMAN IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH?

The woman in this photograph by Cindy Sherman looks as if she is dead.

Representational photographs present us with a problem because they often appear to have been caused by real events even when they have been faked. This photograph highlights the very real and disturbing difference between how we might feel about an image of an actual death as opposed to its mere simulation. The photograph also raises the question of how we would be able to tell the difference between the two in certain cases.

When there is a physical or causal relationship between the signifier (*i.e.*, the photograph) and the signified (*i.e.*,

what the photograph depicts), the non-arbitrary relationship that exists is said to be indexical.

Other examples of an indexical relationship are shown below.

If only for survival purposes, it is important that we can detect the causal link between a signifier and what is being signified. For instance, we need to know that smoke means (and is often caused by) fire, or that a thermometer changing means (and is usually caused by) a rise or fall in temperature. We can see that a failure to detect these things is important when we realize that such a failure can result in mortal danger.

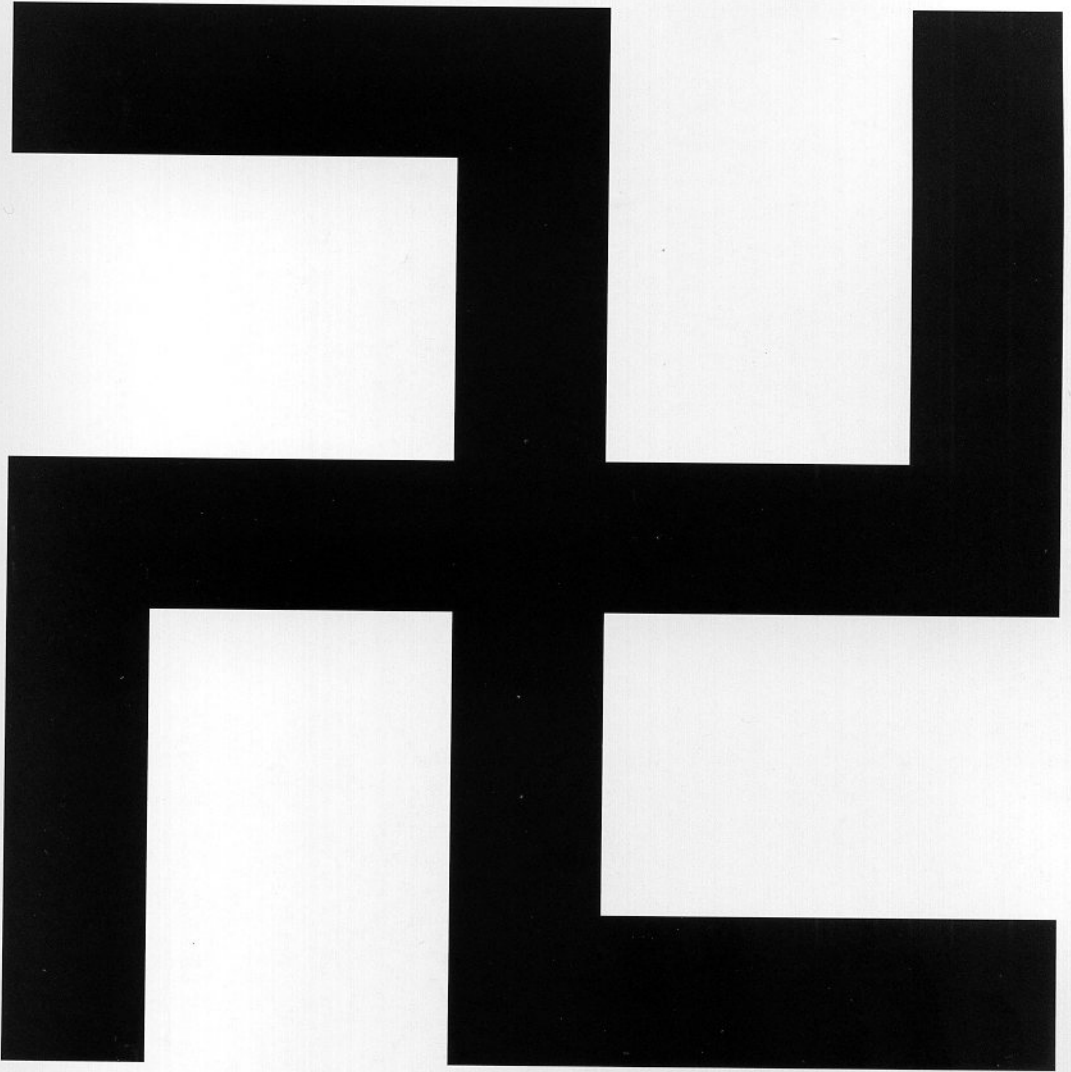
Signifier

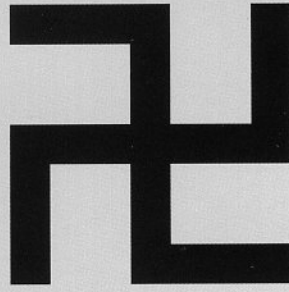
A black eye	is caused by
A thermometer changing	is caused by
Smoke	is caused by
A rash	is caused by
A knock	is caused by
A weathervane moving	is caused by
Ticking	is caused by
A photograph	is caused by
A recorded voice	is caused by
A defensive posture	is caused by
Handwriting	is caused by

Signified

A punch
A rise or fall in temperature
Fire
An infection
Someone at the door
The wind
A clock
A real place
A person speaking
An emotional attitude (<i>e.g.</i> , fear)
A person writing

WHAT DOES THIS SYMBOL MEAN?





WHAT DOES THIS SYMBOL MEAN?

The symbol on the last page looks like the Nazi swastika. In fact, it is an Indian swastika. In Hinduism and Buddhism the swastika stands for good luck. With the Indian swastika the "L" shape is inverted, unlike its Nazi counterpart.

It is often remarked that the Nazi swastika is a powerful and disturbing symbol. The word "symbol" in Greek means "to throw together." In semiotics one thing can be "thrown together" with another in such a way that a relationship is created whereby the first symbolizes the second. Here are some obvious visual examples:

Symbol	Meaning
Scales	Justice
Dove	Peace
Rose	Beauty
Lion	Strength

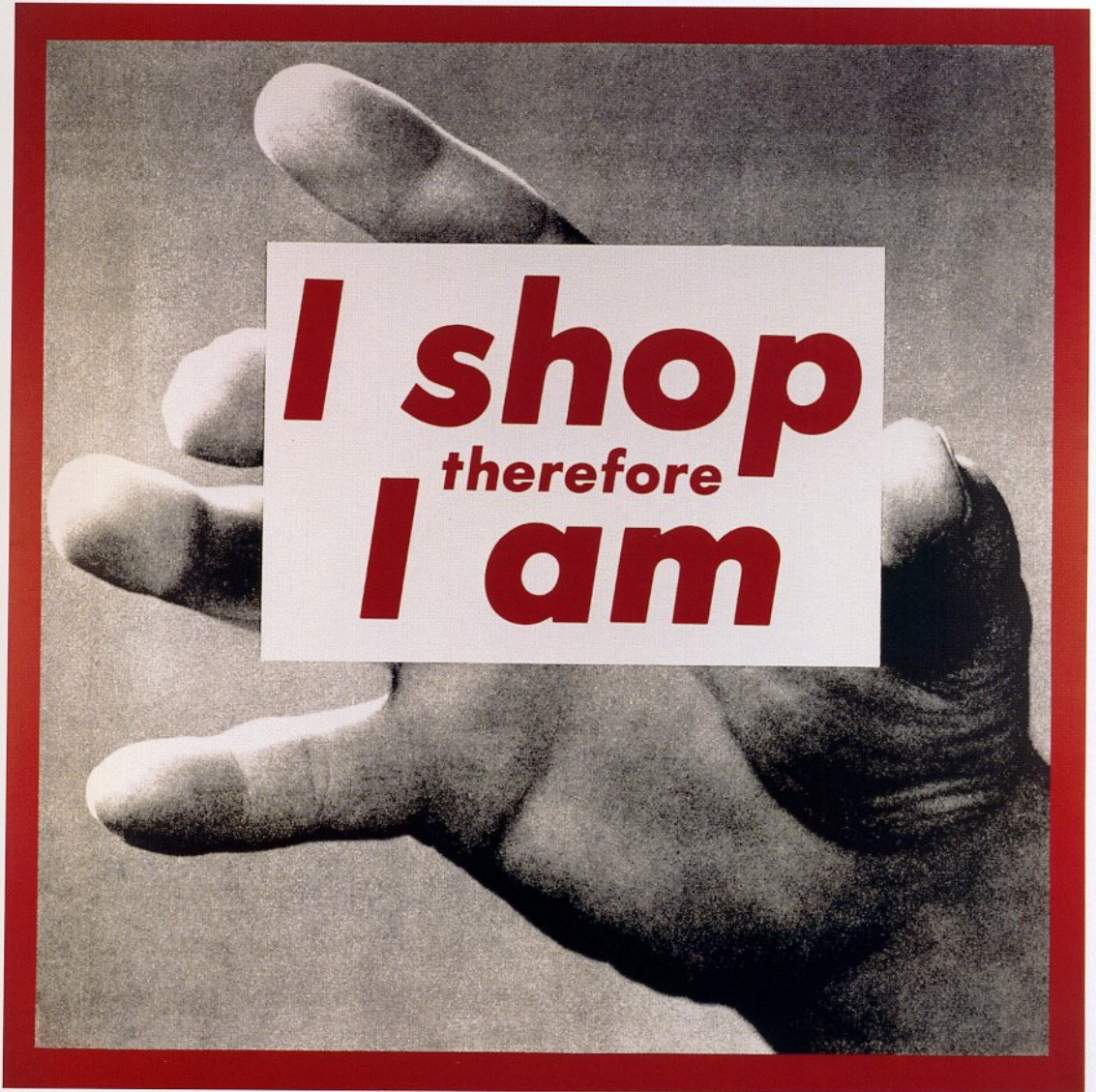
With these symbols, the meaning that is created is related to the nature of the object: balance is important for justice; doves are peaceful creatures; roses are beautiful; and lions are strong. However, there are some symbols where the relationship between the symbol and its meaning is less obvious:

Symbol	Meaning
Sword	Truth
Lily	Purity
Goat	Lust
Orb and Scepter	Monarchy and Rule

With these examples, we need to know what the symbols stand for in advance if we are to understand them. We can't work it out just by looking at them. In semiotics, the word "symbol" is used in a special sense to mean literally any sign where there is an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. In other words, it is wider than the more traditional sense of the word "symbol," as used above. The following, then, are also symbols in semiotics:

Signifier	Relationship	Signified
Shaking hands	Arbitrary relationship	A greeting
Black tie	Arbitrary relationship	A formal occasion
Brrring	Arbitrary relationship	The telephone needs answering
A black flag	Arbitrary relationship	Danger
Ice cream	Arbitrary relationship	The end of a meal
The word "cat"	Arbitrary relationship	A cat

WHAT IS THIS MESSAGE REALLY SAYING?





WHAT IS THIS MESSAGE REALLY SAYING?

The meaning of the message seems obvious. It appears to be saying that shopping gives us a sense of who and what we are as human beings.

Perhaps, though, there is a deeper message. To see this we need to understand that "I shop, therefore I am" is derived from "I think, therefore I am," which was used by the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes.

Descartes was the first modern philosopher. He believed that in order to build a system of knowledge, one must start from first principles. To find secure foundations for his philosophy he employed what he called "the method of doubt," which consisted in trying to doubt everything that it was possible to doubt. This led Descartes to the conclusion that there was only one thing of which he could be certain, the famous *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). The idea behind the *cogito* was this:

If I think, it follows that I think.

If I doubt that I think, it also follows that I think.

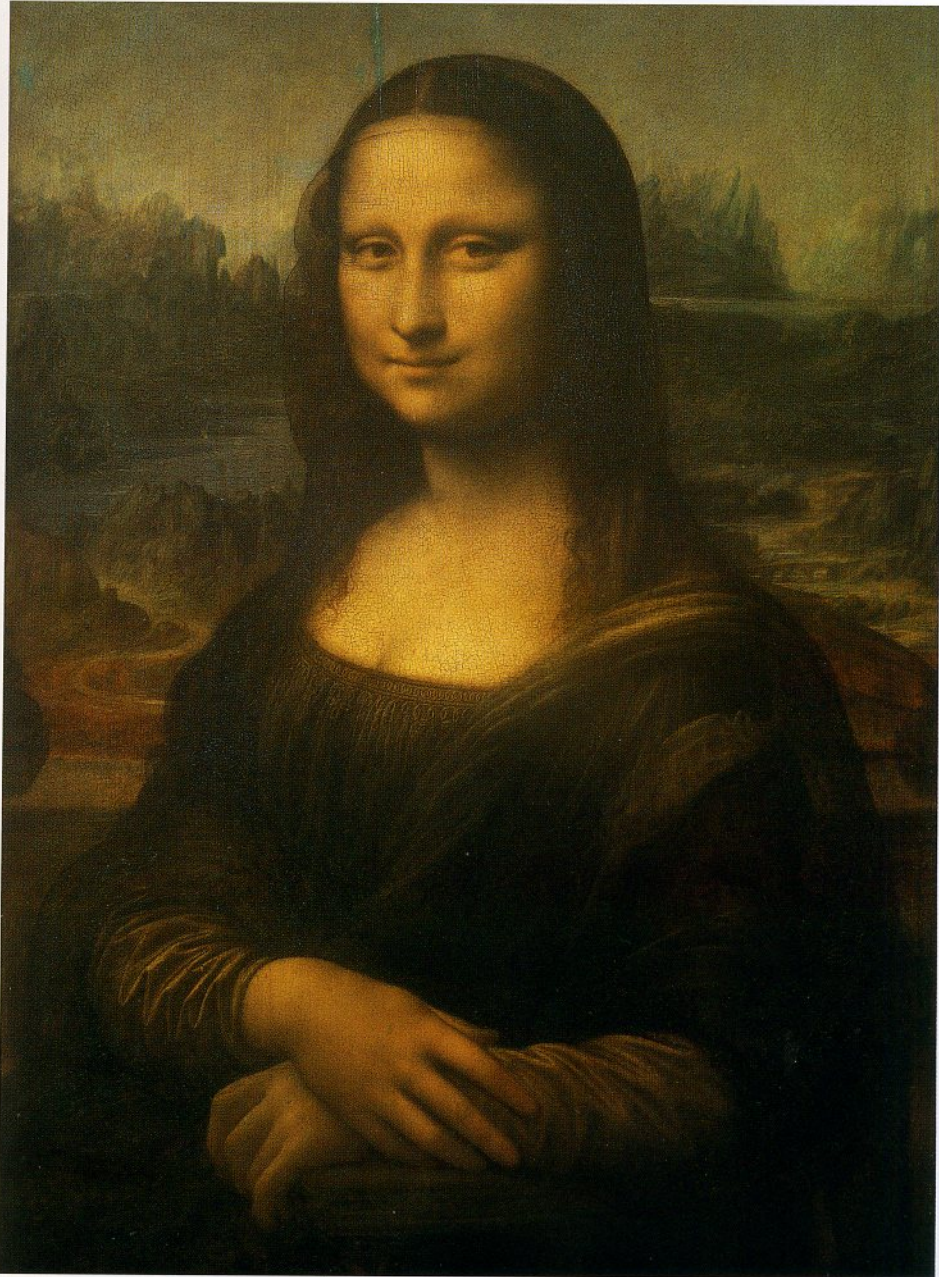
Therefore, either way, it follows that I think.

"I think, therefore I am" and "I doubt, therefore I am" were equally true for Descartes, because even doubting is a kind of thinking. This enabled Descartes to conclude that what I am, fundamentally, is a "thinking thing."

The deeper message behind "I shop, therefore I am," then, may be this: it is surely ironic that where once we tried to secure our belief systems on foundations gained by the profound activity of philosophizing, we now rely on the trivial and banal-seeming activity of shopping to tell us who and what we are.

We can scarcely imagine a world without the messages of advertising. But take a moment to think about how we would view the world if all advertising suddenly disappeared.

HOW IS THE MESSAGE OF THE *MONA LISA* TRANSMITTED?





HOW IS THE MESSAGE OF THE *MONA LISA* TRANSMITTED?

Messages are always transmitted through a medium. The medium carries the message from the sender to the receiver. The medium may be:

Presentational: through the voice, the face (or parts of the face, such as the mouth or the eyes), or the body (or parts of the body, such as the hands).

Representational: through paintings, books, photographs, drawings, writings, and buildings.

Mechanical: through telephones, the Internet, television, radio, and film.

The message of the *Mona Lisa* is transmitted through all three mediums. It uses the presentational medium of facial expression, the representational medium of painting (in its original form), and the mechanical medium of the Internet and television (in its digital form).

The enigmatic expression of the *Mona Lisa* is often remarked upon. To see how this expression is transmitted, consider the following drawings:

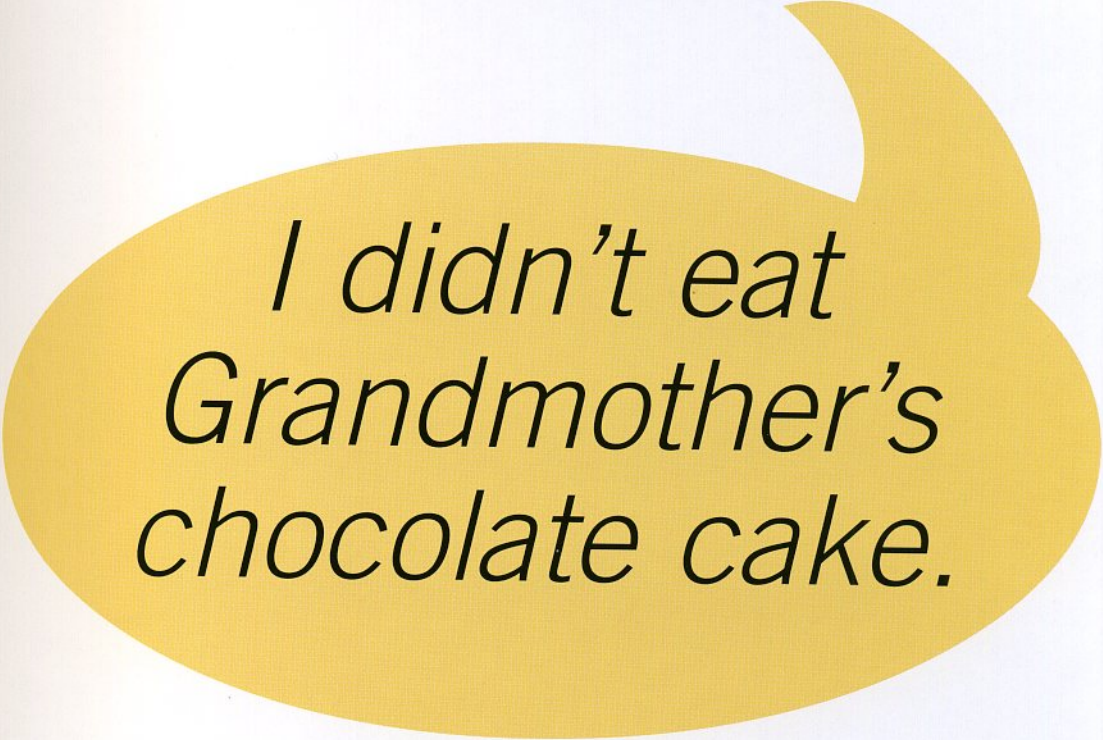


In both of these drawings the eyes are identical in terms of shape, tone, and position. What makes the eyes in the first picture seem happy, and the eyes in the second picture seem sad, is the mouth. The mouth is the transmitter of emotion; the eyes themselves are expressionless.

So even though we know that the charm of the *Mona Lisa* lies in her gentle smile, the lesson from these highly abstracted images of a face may be that very little is transmitted to us by the eyes. The eyes, it seems, are not the windows of the soul after all. The window of the soul is the mouth.

HOW WELL DO YOU UNDERSTAND HIM?

Suppose a grandfather
says to his granddaughter:



*I didn't eat
Grandmother's
chocolate cake.*

Suppose a grandfather
says to his granddaughter:

*I didn't eat
Grandmother's
chocolate cake.*

HOW WELL DO YOU UNDERSTAND HIM?

Did you interpret it as one of the following?

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate cake.
(Paul ate Grandmother's chocolate cake.)

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate cake.
(I sat on Grandmother's chocolate cake.)

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate cake.
(I ate Susan's chocolate cake.)

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate cake.
(I ate Grandmother's fruitcake.)

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate cake.
(I ate Grandmother's chocolate cookie.)

How we make sense of this message depends on
how we interpret it and who we think is receiving it.
The message says that it is being sent to a certain

granddaughter. However, the granddaughter is actually imaginary. The person who is receiving the message is really a reader of a book on semiotics (namely you!). That is why in semiotics there is a distinction between the "receiver" (the actual person who gets the message) and the "addressee" (the person, whether real or imaginary, who is said to be the target of the message).

Below are some examples of familiar fields of communication with different senders and receivers.

In all these cases a message travels between a sender and a receiver *in* a specific context and *through* a specific object. The aim of the sender is to make sure the message has reached the right receiver without anything going wrong.

Sender	Communication	Receiver	Context	Object
Writer	Message	Reader	Literature	A book
Performer	Message	Audience	Drama	A play
Producer	Message	Consumer	Retail	Some clothing
Maker	Message	User	Design	A piece of furniture
Painter	Message	Viewer	Art	A drawing
Singer	Message	Listener	Music	A song
Transmitter	Message	Recipient	Technology	A telephone

WAYS OF MEANING

Sometimes we mean what we say. Suppose I look intensely at a painting. Then I remark, "The colors are very bright." What I have said may be literally true. Perhaps I have made this comment because the colors really are very bright. But what I say may not always be what I actually mean. This is because when I say, "The colors are very bright," I might say it in a sarcastic way. Sarcasm changes the meaning of what I have said. The sarcasm in my voice indicates that what I really mean is that the colors are dull. And in saying that the colors are dull, I may be implying that I don't approve of, or don't like, paintings like this. If I am being sarcastic, then I am literally saying one thing while meaning another.

There are various ways not to mean what you literally say. Strange similes and bizarre metaphors, clever metonyms and genuine ironies, little lies and genuine impossibilities, unusual depictions and curious representations are all of interest to those who study

semiotics because they allow us to say what we mean in a non-literal way. These non-literal forms of meaning enable us to make the familiar seem unfamiliar and the unfamiliar seem familiar.

Occasionally we have to work hard to understand what someone is really saying. This may be because what is being communicated is obscure, but it could also be because what they are saying is not literal. When we mean something other than what we communicate literally we may have to explain ourselves. This is because literal communication is more dominant, and more common, than non-literal communication. However, even though literal communication is very useful (*e.g.*, medicine would be very difficult without it), often non-literal communication is more interesting and no less important. That is why advertising agencies, poets, humorists, filmmakers, and painters often use it. After all, the truth about the world is often more beguiling if we have to do some work in order to

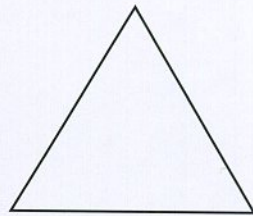
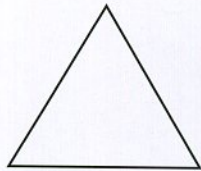
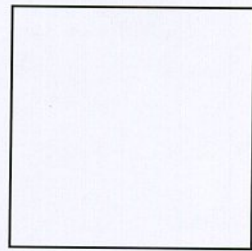
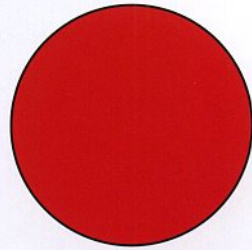
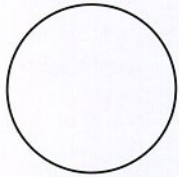
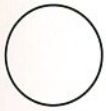
WAYS OF MEANING

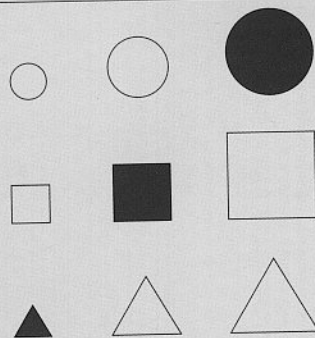
understand it. And non-literal communication will always make us work harder when it comes to deciphering the various meanings that human beings create.

There are numerous devices that we can employ to produce meanings of a non-literal kind. The key concepts, as we have already suggested, include:

simile, metaphor, metonym, synecdoche, irony, lies, impossibility, depiction, and representation. All of these concepts can help us to produce new insights into the meanings of objects, images, and texts. And all of these things, if used judiciously, can be used to create more resonant meanings in such disciplines as painting, design, advertising, illustration, filmmaking, fashion, and journalism.

WHICH THREE ITEMS ARE MOST ALIKE?





WHICH THREE ITEMS ARE MOST ALIKE?

The answer depends on what interests you. We could pick three that are alike in form, three that are alike in size, or three that are alike in color.

When we liken one thing to another we tend to highlight the features that interest us, and we ignore those that don't interest us. The likening of one thing to another is called a simile. A simile is a stated comparison between two different objects, images, ideas, or likenesses. In everyday life we often use similes without even noticing. They often occur in figures of speech (*e.g.*, busy as a bee, dead as a doornail, flat as a pancake, and the crack of dawn). Similes are not confined to verbal communication, however. They also occur regularly in visual communication. For example, using an image of a light bulb above the head of a person to represent the idea that he or she has just had a thought, or

employing an image of a heart to represent love are well-known visual similes. (They are also clichés.)

Artists and designers are always trying to find new similes. For instance, while a hedgehog is not a brush, it is like a brush in respect of its bristles. Here is how you might think:

First Object	Linking Property	Second Object
Hedgehog	Bristles	Brush

This simile is suggestive because if a hedgehog is like a brush, then that might suggest that we could design a brush that looks like a hedgehog. The helpful simile, then, is the one that enables us to see an old object or image in a new light by making a connection with another object or image in respect of a certain property or feature.

HOW IS THIS EQUATION POSSIBLE?



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HOW IS THIS EQUATION POSSIBLE?

With a metaphor there is an implied comparison between two similar or dissimilar things that share a certain quality. With a simile we say that x is *like* y, while with a metaphor we say that x *is* y.

Objects, images, and texts can all be used to create metaphors. Metaphors are often at their most interesting when they link something familiar with something unfamiliar. By drawing attention to the ways in which a familiar thing, x, can be seen in terms of an unfamiliar thing, y, we help to show that the qualities of the first thing are more like the second thing than we had initially thought. Metaphors, then, work by a process of transference. This process of transference shows that while x doesn't have certain properties literally, it can still have them metaphorically.

When they work, metaphors can also be very persuasive. The schema below shows how the metaphor on the previous page works to persuade us of the qualities of the product.

Signifier	Linking Notion	Signified
Person (e.g., Carole Bouquet)	= Abstract Concepts (e.g., beauty and elegance)	= Object (e.g., perfume)

The aim of Chanel is to find a metaphorical equivalent for that which it wishes to signify (namely, a bottle of perfume). The model Carole Bouquet is a suitable candidate because she has the kind of qualities that the perfume is supposed to embody (*i.e.*, beauty and elegance). Notice, however, that the ad could have used a different signifier. Had the designer of the ad thought of highlighting a different set of properties, then it might have been structured in the following way, by using a thing rather than a person:

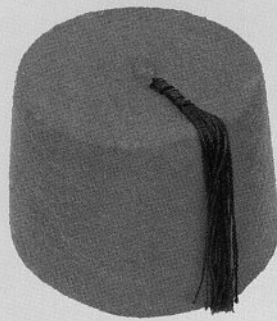
Signifier	Linking Notion	Signified
Thing in nature (e.g., a waterfall)	= Abstract concepts (e.g., naturalness and freshness)	= Object (e.g., perfume)

HERE IS ONE ANSWER:



**WHICH NATIONALITY IS REPRESENTED
BY THIS OBJECT?**





WHICH NATIONALITY IS REPRESENTED BY THIS OBJECT?

When one thing is closely associated with—or directly related to—another, it can be substituted for it so as to create meaning. A crown might be used to mean a queen, a shadow in a film might indicate the presence of a murderer, and a sign with an image of an explosion might represent the presence of a dangerous chemical. What is curious about these examples is that the thing actually depicted (a crown, a shadow, or an explosion) is used to stand for something that is not depicted (a queen, a murderer, a chemical). Thus, while the thing that is being referred to is missing, its presence is still implied.

Things

Statue of Liberty (object)	indicates
A brush (object)	indicates
A throne (object)	indicates

Images

A cartoon of a flattened thumb (effect)	indicates
A picture of the White House (place)	indicates
A photograph of a jacket (object)	indicates

Words

Watergate (place)	indicates
Charleston (place)	indicates
Einstein (person)	indicates

When one thing is substituted for another in a piece of communication we call it a metonym. Metonyms use indexical relationships to create meanings. Below are some examples of metonyms.

The intriguing thing about all of these metonyms is that they depend on extensive cultural knowledge. So in order to know which nationality is being represented by the fez on the last page, you have to know that they are worn in Turkey. (Note, however, that a fez may also stand for a particular type of user: a Turkish man of a certain age.)

Meaning

Freedom (concept)
Painting (activity)
A monarch (person)

Meaning

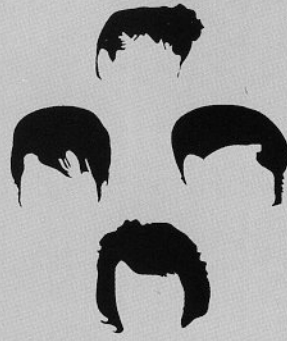
The presence of a hammer (cause)
The President of the USA (person)
A shop where clothes are sold (place)

Meaning

The impeaching of President Nixon (event)
Dancing (activity)
Genius (concept)

CAN YOU RECOGNIZE THIS PERSON BY HIS HAIRCUT?





CAN YOU RECOGNIZE THIS PERSON BY HIS HAIRCUT?

The person is Elvis Presley.

Sometimes in semiotics what matters is not what you put into a piece of communication, but what you leave out. In order to represent Elvis, you may only need to use part of him. In this case his haircut will suffice. Using a part of something to stand for the whole thing, or the whole thing to stand for part, is called synecdoche. Another example might be this: using an Italian to represent the people of Italy (here the part stands for the whole), or using a map of Italy to represent an Italian person (here the whole stands for a part).

The part/whole relationship is one example of synecdoche. Other examples include that between member and class, species and genus, and an individual and a group. Here is an example of the last kind. Newspapers and television programs often use individual people to stand for a category of persons that they want to portray as a group. So they

will report on a story about a particular criminal who is intended to stand for criminals as a group. This works as an act of persuasion because it is easy to get human beings to move from thoughts about a specific case to thoughts of a more general kind that are also negative. In this instance, the activities of a specific criminal will serve to remind us of why we dislike criminals as a group.

Suppose you were given the task of raising money for a charity for the poor. Would it be better to provide abstract statistics concerning the malnourishment of your target group, or would you be better off presenting a story about a particular person in that group who was malnourished (and in that way use him or her to represent the group that you are trying to help)? Those advertisers who are fond of using synecdoche in their work would probably opt for the latter, because the personal case will tend to awaken more sympathy than a set of somewhat impersonal statistics.