

## Introduction

Our mind looks for – and finds meaning in – everything within our field of vision. Processed in a part of the brain we share with the lower animals, the information from our visual environment – the sight of a car racing towards us, a smiling face, or a hand raised as if to strike – allows us to find meaning in the world around us.

The act of *imagining* is the manipulation of images in the mind. Close your eyes and think of ‘Home’, ‘New York’ or ‘my ideal job’ and your mind will spontaneously summon up a visual image: one that not only ‘stands for’ the idea, memory or experience, but which, in its selection of visual elements also *describes* your emotional associations and unconscious judgments about the concept. Picture ‘a terrorist’ and notice how the visual features of the accompanying mental image represent the negative character of the individual. Now imagine a ‘welfare recipient’; do you ‘see’ a large corporation benefiting from tax breaks worth millions of dollars – or do you ‘see’ a single mother from a minority ethnic group?

The use of ‘mental pictures’ is the oldest form of human cognition – our most basic way to assign meaning and to know what something ‘is’. In other words, *what* we think of something is shaped by *the way in which we ‘picture’ it*. This ancient and primitive way of ‘thinking in pictures’ continues to exert an enormous influence over many of our supposedly rational and objective decisions.

Operating below the level of conscious awareness, these ‘mental pictures’ are drawn from our memory and imagination, as well as from the images from popular entertainment and advertising are carry within them the capacity to shape our beliefs and assumptions of the things they depict. Accordingly, it is extraordinarily difficult for us to acknowledge – or even to recognize – the judgments hidden behind the mental symbols through which we ‘know’ and experience the world around us. The ‘meaning-full’ images we carry within our mind become the basis of our narrative metaphors: unquestionable – and to the conscious mind, largely inaccessible – value judgments that shape our perceptions and reactions.

As citizens<sup>1</sup>, we are exposed daily to thousands of images, each designed to solicit our emotional attachment to a product, corporation or political idea. As the new literature of popular culture, the visual media (particularly television) is now the dominant influence on the perceptual / narrative metaphors through which we consider social and economic issues. With the power to imply meaning through the selection and juxtaposition of the images through which we ‘see’ the world, the corporate, political or ideological sponsor is able to target the psychological underbelly of consumers and voters and shape our perceptions in support of their socio-economic ideology – encouraging us to believe in *Truth on Television*, *Social Justice through Capitalism* and *Achievement through Consumption*.

In addition to the practical and professional skills necessary for gainful employment, we therefore have a responsibility to assist our students in recognising the social and psychological implications of the media environment and its capacity to shape our perceptions of the *Product*, *the Politician* and *the Right Priorities*. An understanding of the theories, techniques and applications of visual design is therefore a necessary prerequisite to the ability to participate fully as citizens in modern society. Taken together, I refer to these skills as *Visual Literacy* and encourage the faculty and administrators in departments of Art, Design and Communications to incorporate these subjects into their respective curricula and to explain their importance within the following three contexts:

1. As part of the skill set necessary to succeed in a highly competitive and international job market in which the ability to communicate in the visual media is of increasing importance;
2. As a way to identify and examine the extent to which the use of visual communication in the commercial media has insinuated the socio-economic interests of the corporate sponsor into the way in which they IMAGInE themselves and the world; and,
3. As a means towards greater awareness of the power of visual communication to ‘frame’ our perception of information and its implications for how we make meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> *Archaic*: Term by which consumers and target markets briefly defined themselves prior to the Corporate Revolution. Its period of currency coincided with the popularity of the now-defunct notions of *Democracy* and *Informed Consent*.

If undertaken with honesty and perseverance, an investigation of these issues will help our students to develop a greater awareness of the unconscious beliefs and assumptions that are the basis of most of their most important decisions – and so will determine not only the lives they will lead, but the shape of the world they will leave behind.

## In Your Right Mind

The human brain is divided into two hemispheres, each of which controls the opposite side of the body. In the majority of the population, the Left hemisphere is the source of language and mathematics, both of which are expressions of logical, linear thought. Literally ‘on the other hand’, the Right hemisphere processes information *holistically* and finds meaning in our visual environment through analogy and spatial relationships. It is through the Right hemisphere that, before crossing a busy street, we judge whether we have time to make it safely to the other side and in sports, that we ‘know’ where and when to pass the ball.



The cognitive process of the Left and Right hemispheres do not find meaning in the same way – nor look for it in the same place. In order to find meaning, the Left hemisphere demands that words or mathematical symbols follow a linear, horizontal order of elements that adheres to logical ‘rules’. However, when we see a visual design (a gesture, a road sign, a painting, or an advertisement), its meaning is taken in ‘all at once’ as an *impression* not rather than an *explanation*. Accordingly, the Right hemisphere is less critical of the messages it receives. If I write: “It is kitchen o’clock and thyme to Van Gogh” your Left hemisphere will dismiss it as meaningless – but if I show you Salvador Dali’s painting *Soft Clocks* (in which timepieces droop like flaccid flesh), rather than rejecting the image as illogical or nonsense, your Right hemisphere will look for – and will usually find – meaning in allegory.

Interpreted by the logical Left hemisphere, words and slogans are susceptible to critical analysis, allowing us to recognize (and resist) some the more blatant attempts to manipulate our opinions – but when expressed in emotionally charged descriptive images, we are more likely to accept the message without protest or hesitation. As a result, images have the power to *imply* meaning and conclusions not easily subject to rational analysis. If the text of an advertisement asserts that “our products will make you ten years younger and assure you of that promotion”, or “our party’s policies will make life better”, the critical faculties of the Left hemisphere are capable of recognizing the claim as illogical or even preposterous – but when the same idea is conveyed to our Right hemisphere through visual symbols, we are more likely to accept its message and to act on its implications. In *The Age of Manipulation*, Key (1989) wrote:

*Symbols circumvent conscious thought and logic... [and] constitutes a subliminal technique of communication. [C]arefully researched, and powerful symbolic communication is basic to commercial manipulation [and] directly affect perception, feelings, and behavior.*

## Size Matters

Forged during the universal experience of infancy (when we learned to equate the size of our parents and other adults with their power over us), we learned to assign importance to large objects and to equate ‘small’ with ‘insignificant’. These implicit judgments about the relationship between size and significance are reflected in the phrase that we ‘look up to’ someone with power or whom we respect, and ‘look down on’ someone we do not – with implications for our attitudes and behaviours that both children and little people know only too well.

- The introduction of the horse stirrup from the East by Frankish chieftain Charles Martel (688-741) allowed those warriors wealthy enough to own horses to both literally and figuratively ‘rise above’ the peasants. The angle from which members of this group were then ‘seen’ would have had a profound (albeit largely unconscious) impact on the perception of the aristocracy as an ‘elevated’ social class.
- The most important role or activity in any society can be identified by the function of its largest buildings or monuments. (In Washington D.C., a city replete with symbolic architecture, the law states that no edifice may be built higher than the Capitol building.) Until the Industrial Revolution, the largest structure in any town was its church or cathedral; today our tallest buildings are the temples dedicated to commerce and finance. And one can only imagine the psychological effect of the resulting perspective on the attitude of the ‘elevated’ corporate class who ‘look down on’ others far below.
- When addressing our God in prayer, we traditionally look up to the sky from a kneeling, or prone position in order to be ‘seen’ by God from a visual perspective that demonstrates our submission to His authority.

The importance of a visual element is suggested by both its size and its position within the frame. When an element is large relative to the surrounding ‘negative’ space, it (and the idea it represents) is ‘seen’ to be important, powerful and authoritative, but when small in relation to other elements or the surrounding space, we are encouraged to assume that it is weak or insignificant. As a result, by determining the angle or perspective from which we perceive an object or element in a photograph or illustration, photographers, designers and advertisers can exploit this cognitive link between *size* and *significance* to influence our attitudes towards the thing or person depicted – as well as the ideas or principles with which they are associated. Even the meaning of a text is determined by the ‘picture’ it makes on the page by the combination of *typographical design* – the style and size of the characters (the use of capitals, underlining, boldface and colour), as well as by the *layout* (the relationship created between the typographical elements) as well as their location and distribution on the page.

# *THIS IS IMPORTANT*

With our increasing reliance on the visual commercial media for our ‘picture’ of the world, the power to select and produce the images we see provides a powerful means to exalt certain ideas and to belittle others.

## A little Background, a little Colour

Have you noticed how often commercials for automobiles are filmed in natural and idyllic surroundings – rather than in urban traffic jams or on monotonous highways? And how often are we shown images of politicians surrounded by ‘plain folks’ – rather than the corporate leaders who are their true constituency? Through the careful selection of the background or ‘set’ against which the product is placed, the sponsor is able to make subtle (but unmistakable) claims about the power of the Brand™ or the authority of its corporate spokesmodel. Shown against a background of classical architecture or rich wood panelling, the product is associated with the security of time-honoured tradition, while a fashionably and expensively furnished home, restaurant, or office interior suggests status, material wealth and success. A studio set made to resemble a high-tech chemistry lab gives scientific credibility to the actor in a white lab coat.

Colours too, have a powerful influence over the meaning we find in what we see 'out there' and therefore over the way we respond to it. Numerous studies have shown that exposure to different colours provoke a predictable range of quantifiable physiological responses. When we 'see red' with its associations with passion, impulsive action, aggression, heat and danger ('red-hot', 'the woman in red' and red pencils), the pituitary gland produces adrenaline and triggers the body's 'fight or flight' response, leading to an increase in blood pressure, pulse rate, blood flow and rate of respiration. Conversely, 'cool' colours (blue and green) lower blood pressure, pulse rate, body temperature, perspiration, and promote deeper breathing, leading to a reduction of stress and anxiety. The sight of the colour blue causes the brain to release at least 11 tranquillizing hormones, but when taken to extremes, can even cause depression ('feeling blue'). Purple is perceived as the most disturbing colour: complex and intimidating, it combines the passion and energy of red with the tranquillizing effect of blue.

Red carries the imprint of ancient and powerful associations with blood and fire – phenomena intimately connected with survival. Buried deep with the Collective Unconscious, the race memory of the bloodstained claws and maw of wild and dangerous 'man-eaters', these powerful, deep-seated associations may also explain why red lipstick and nail polish remain the consistently highest-selling colour. Red also recalls firelight and its associations with both vital warmth and protection from larger and predatory animals. The race memories of fire and firelight may explain why, although light bulbs can be manufactured to produce any colour or hue, market research has consistently shown that consumers prefer the warm glow of incandescent bulbs. Could it be that our preference for the 'warm' light of incandescent bulbs reminds us of the warmth and safety that, for millennia, firelight provided our ancestors and why, despite the convenience and dependability of modern electrical or central heating, we continue to respond so powerfully to candlelight and to the sight of a fire in the hearth?

Industry studies have shown that the colour of the product or packaging leads consumers to make certain assumptions about its quality or value. In Dreyfuss (1955) wrote, "A light color can suggest a lack of weight in a vacuum cleaner and help sell it." Market research has shown (Verlodt, 1993), that when confronted by two similar products, consumers will often make their purchasing decisions based on the colour of the product or packaging.

'Warm' colours encourage our appetites, attract our attention and stimulate us to action:

- Red, associated with our animal appetites, energy and sexuality, raises our metabolic rate and so is often used in the interior of busy restaurants and fast food outlets to encourage us to eat quickly and leave, allowing the management to maximize customer turnover.
- Yellow, associated with youth, hope and vitality, is the most physiologically stimulating colour and is 'read' by the eye faster than other colours. This explains why signs that must be decoded quickly are often printed on a yellow background and why yellow lights on automobiles and highways increase the visibility of the objects they illuminate.
- Orange, incorporating the qualities of both red and yellow, is often used for safety garments (and in many American states, for prison uniforms).
- Gold, associated with solar light, suggests divinity, power, wealth and wisdom.
- Brown, associated with earth, is solid, steadfast, comforting and reassuring.

'Cool' colours imply peace, rest and refreshment, and so are also used in airports and hospitals to promote calm as well as on the product labels of breath mints, toothpaste and mineral water:

- Green, the colour of nature, is associated with fertility and growth and evokes calm and an impression of health. (When London's Blackfriar Bridge was painted green, the number of attempted suicides dropped by 34%.)
- Blue is associated with peace and serenity and, in its deeper hues, can suggest a cold, hostile environment in contrasts with the warmth of the sponsor's product. Also associated with loyalty, integrity and conservatism, blue has always been a popular colour for the uniforms of workers within all professions.

'Neutral' tones (in which no single colour predominates) also carry well-defined associations.

- White suggests formality and cleanliness as well as goodness and purity (the robes worn by brides and the Pope, both of whom are supposedly free of the ‘stain’ of sin).
- Black implies the rejection of the material world as suggested by its (Western) associations with death and mourning and in the vestments of priests, nuns and other groups whose members have renounced the material realm for the spiritual. Black also confers authority and blocks scepticism, and so is the traditional choice for teaching masters and the paramilitary forces of totalitarian regimes.

## Judging by Appearances

The art and artefacts left by pre-linguistic peoples show that since the dawn of human consciousness, humans have revered the magical power of images. The intertwined histories of art, religion and ritual record our ancestors’ use of symbols to draw upon the sacred interior domain and to reconcile it with the material world in which they lived. But despite our relatively recent escape from the magical world of dreams and superstitions, their relics left in our imagination are not so easily discarded.

Jung (1933) wrote:

*[I]t is not only primitive man whose psychic processes are archaic. [C]ivilised man of today shows these archaic processes as well. [E]very civilised human being [...] is still an archaic man at the deeper levels of his psyche. Just as the human body connects us with the mammals and displays numerous relics of earlier evolutionary stages going back even to the reptilian age, so the human psyche [...] shows countless archaic traits.*

In his study of visual symbols and their influence on perceptions and beliefs, Key (1972) wrote:

*The system that processes subliminal stimuli appears to deal mostly with very basic emotional information content and is thought to be the oldest part of the human brain developed during evolution. [N]o significant belief held by any individual is apparently made on the basis of consciously perceived data.*

Ricoeur (1970) described the process of using visual symbols in the construction of ‘narrative metaphors’ as the earliest form of human cognition, and one that predates the emergence of spoken language. Koestler (1964) described the interpretation of visual images and symbols as the precursor of conceptual thought, adding that:

*[P]ictorial thinking is a more primitive form of mentation than conceptual thinking, which precedes it in the mental evolution of the individual and of the species. In Golding’s novel *The Inheritors* the Neanderthal men always say ‘I had a picture’ when they mean ‘I thought of something’; and anthropologists agree that for once a novelist got the picture right.*

Man’s early ancestors relied primarily on their noses and ears for important information about their environment. Then, approximately two million years ago, *Homo Erectus* rose up on two legs and looked out over the savannah, thereby enormously expanding the distance over which they could search the horizon for food and the presence of predators. Reinforced by its value in aiding survival, *sight* gradually supplanted *smell* and *hearing* as our most valuable source of information. As a result, ‘looking at’ something became our primary way of knowing what it is, and the *appearance* of objects became our way to assign them meaning. This ancient and primitive form of cognition they represent remains latent within us and continues to exert a powerful (albeit unconscious) influence over both *what we know* and *how we know it*.

In the axiom that “seeing is believing”, we acknowledge the primacy of our visual sense in mental cognition. The Oxford Dictionary (ninth edition, 1995) defines the verb ‘see’ as “(to) discern mentally; to understand”. (Look at the facts: Do you see what I mean?) Other words linking the visual sense with cognition include: *enlighten*, *insight*, *imagine*, as well as *contemplate* (from Latin “observation”), *definition* (from Latin: “to draw a line around”), *idea* (from Greek “to see”), *speculate* and *perspective* (from Latin: “to look”). Our highest accolade for someone’s mental abilities is to call them “farsighted” or “visionary”.

Buried deep within our unconscious, it is difficult to identify – and therefore even more difficult to challenge – the judgments hidden behind the mental symbols through which we ‘know’ and experience the world around us. These mental pictures (or ‘narrative metaphors’) give structure to our inner dimension, shape our perceptions and inform our judgments about the meaning of what we see ‘out there’. This ancient and primitive way of thinking continues to exert an enormous influence over many of our supposedly rational and objective decisions. Explaining the connection between symbols and our perceptions, Jung (1968) wrote:

*And even what we retain in our conscious mind... has acquired an unconscious undertone that will colour the idea each time it is recalled. Our conscious impressions, in fact, quickly assume an element of unconscious meaning that is physically significant for us, though we are not consciously aware of the existence of this subliminal meaning or of the way in which it extends the conventional meaning.*

## Narrative Metaphors Я Us

The act of *imagining* is the manipulation of images in the mind, and as a result, the world we inhabit is literally the way we imagine (IMAGInE) it. Close your eyes and think of ‘Home’, ‘New York’ or ‘my ideal job’ and your mind will spontaneously summon up a visual image: one that not only ‘stands for’ the idea, memory or experience, but which, in its selection of visual elements also *describes* your emotional associations and unconscious judgments about the concept. Picture ‘a terrorist’ and notice how the visual features of the accompanying mental image represent the negative character of the individual. Now imagine a ‘welfare recipient’; do you ‘see’ a large corporation benefiting from tax breaks worth millions of dollars – or do you ‘see’ a single mother from a minority ethnic group?

Drawn from our memory and imagination as well as from the images from popular entertainment and advertising, these ‘meaning-full’ mental images function like ‘mental bookmarks’ – within which hide a veritable Trojan Horse of emotionally charged cognitive reflexes. The beliefs associated with our stereotypes<sup>2</sup> for *Female*, *Homosexual*, *Fat*, *Black*, *Arab* or *Jew* have long since coalesced into unquestionable – and to the conscious mind, largely inaccessible – value judgments that shape our perceptions and reactions. By battering women, belittling our children, bashing gays, lynching Blacks, waging war on the Enemy-of-the-Day, or – the favoured past-time of neo-liberals – punishing the poor, we delude ourselves into thinking that we have excised the dread quality from ourselves, proving that we are among life’s ‘winners’ – and let the Devil take the hindmost. This isn’t politics, it’s exorcism – and it has been known to kill.

*The soul never thinks without a mental picture.*

*Aristotle*

*Every [...] moral or intellectual fact [...] if traced to its roots, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance.*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

*All genuine thinking is symbolic, and the limits of the expressive medium are, therefore, really the limits of our conceptual powers. A perception has meaning only when the signs are recognizable and can be related, through memory, to personal and cultural experiences.*

*Susan Langer*

*Experience is not possible until it is organized iconically; action is not possible unless it is organized iconically. The brain’s record of everything [is] iconic.*

*Oliver Sacks*

Do you think of your life as ‘a journey to be enjoyed’, ‘a ladder to be climbed’, ‘a path to be explored’, or as ‘a competitive struggle against hostile forces to be won’? By instructing us in the way the world works (the ‘rules’ by which we must live in order to “succeed”), our metaphors guide our search for fulfilment and self-esteem by determining the nature of the evidence we seek as our proof. How do you ‘picture’ “Success”? As the accumulation of wealth or material possessions? As the attainment of high social or professional status? As the possessor of a beautiful, youthful body? As the recipient of the sexual favours of a multitude of partners? – or by knowing that you are worthy of the love of those around you? The way you ‘see’ your goal determines the evidence you will pursue as its proof – and what you pursue shapes the life you create.

<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Dictionary (ninth edition, 1995) defines ‘*stereotype*’ as “A person or thing that conforms to an unjustifiable fixed mental picture”.