



Semantics focuses on the relation between visual elements, such as color, form, compositions, and what they stand for, their meaning. Our reading of an image depends on the conventions or the preset rules and the prior experience which we apply to the depicted objects. Semantics in visual literacy are responsible for such conventions: signs, symbols, archetypes and other mental models. We will call these shortcuts. A key concern is how the meaning attaches groups of visual elements, possibly as a result of the composition from smaller units. In this chapter we will review the important elements of visual semantics, as we consider semantics a study of a meaning.

The first example in this chapter, in *Figure 29*, consists of various images placed here in the same context. By context I mean the same setting. Such a depiction already forces us to lay certain connections between these objects. Every object on the image has a certain connotation that was formed by experience and prior knowledge.

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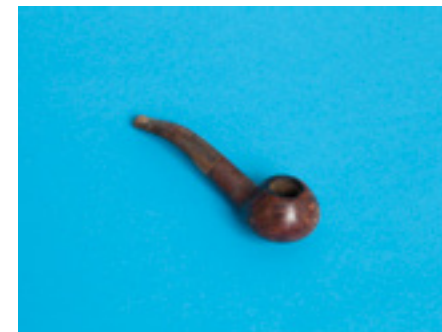


Figure 29: Various objects.

The occurrence of a pipe in *Figure 29* has a very big influence on the rest of the images. The pipe, in combination with the rest, could suggest a detective story, because of Sherlock Holmes who became a detective archetype. It was developed by culture and we know Sherlock through this culture.

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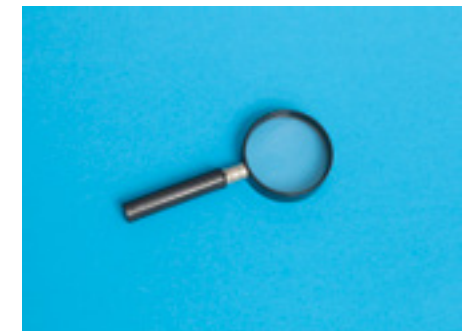


*Figure 30a: A pipe.*

Here in *Figure 30b* the magnifying glass stresses this effect as a visual metaphor, but works on another level. If in the case of the pipe we use culturally acquired knowledge which ascribed new qualities to the object, then in the case of the magnifying glass we use logical thinking, basically reading this image as ‘looking for something’. When we combine these archetypes, we can easily step into the trap of false assumptions and find a meaning there, where there was no intention for one. Combining different images, we can see how changeable and unstable our opinion can be.

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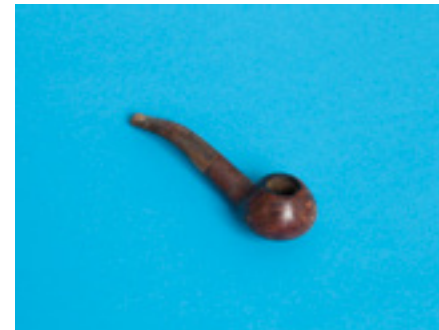


*Figure 30b: A magnifying glass.*

The images of a bag and a pipe in *Figure 30c* together can be seen as a demonstration of the inside of this bag, as an advertisement and representation of certain qualities of the object. In this case these two would be more or less separated from Sherlock Holmes' influence, because together they tell another story. A story that is more universal and thus more probable in general. The retaining of scale on both pictures also plays a role in our perception of these objects. It makes it possible to virtually place the pipe inside the bag. But let us see how this pipe changes, when shown together next to another object.

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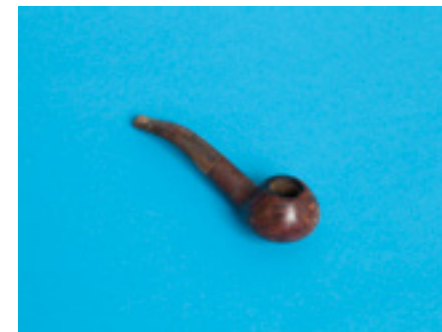


*Figure 30c: A bag and a pipe.*

These two objects, the pipe and the ticket in *Figure 30d*, do not have a direct connection, but they get one if placed together. They start to influence each other and their archetypical layer of meaning comes up. Sherlock Holmes comes into play, or if we had an experience in our past with smoking people and medical problems caused by smoking, it could also ring a bell. But this can become even more interesting when more objects are displayed.

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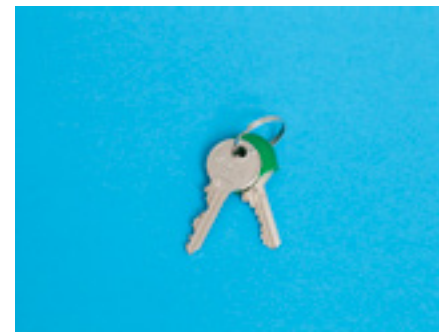
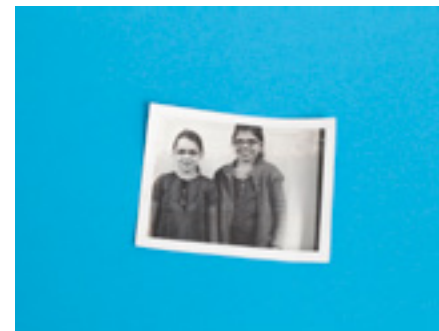


*Figure 30d: A pipe and a ticket.*

In *Figure 30e* we can see a set of images that could show the contents of a bag.

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*Figure 30e: A ribbon, a ticket, keys and a photograph.*

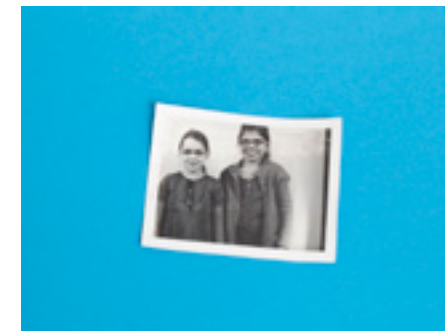


And by changing only one image in *Figure 30f* the same objects become evidence in a case of missing girls. We know that the last place they were seen is a pharmacy, we know how they look and that they were two happy little girls, probably sisters, and the blue ribbon is the thing that was found after they had gone missing. The magnifying glass plays a very important role here, for it totally shapes our perception of these objects. These powerful elements are semantically charged and are being shaped by the cultural background, transmitted by shared traditions and conventional models of the social practice.

We can go on and on with these combinations and build many different meanings around these eight photographs. But it is interesting to see why these meanings are formed. These principles are based on the common sense. It equates to the knowledge and experience which most people already have and share with each other. In a way the photo of girls will already make a personal impact on the story and the tape, which became almost an archaic object, will entail a nostalgic feeling. These processes indicate our belonging to a certain time and system of values which we regard as important.

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*Figure 30f: A ribbon, a ticket, a photograph and a magnifying glass.*

Until now we talked about meaning which occurs on a personal level. We indicated these meanings as archetypes, universally understood signs and symbols. The combination of these signs can be crucial for general understanding of particular object. The influence which the images may have on each other, have an unexpected effect on their interpretation.

For example, a bar of soap in *Figure 31* is just a bar of soap without any given context. But adding a rope in *Figure 32b* next to *Figure 32a* would create an entirely new meaning which would have a stronger order. A meaning of a stronger or higher order would be a meaning produced by combinations of images where they influence each other so strongly that it erases their original meaning fixed in their relation to original object. These can be strong enough to even influence other images by means of establishing connections which may never had appeared without new context.

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*Figure 31: A piece of soap*



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*Figure 32a: A piece of soap.*

*Figure 32b: A rope.*



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*Figure 33a: A glass of water.*

*Figure 33b: A pill.*

The first pair of images in *Figures 32a* and *32b* turns the second pair in *Figures 33a* and *33b*, a glass of water and the pill, into poison. Because of the strong emotional impact, these images in the following row, even if only one picture is added, would make these objects related to death.

And even though images in *Figure 34* are again random objects we can feel how our imagination plays with us and forces to generate context for them. The set of soap and rope which has started this chain reaction and directed our attention into the field of murder techniques, can also be considered a visual metaphor.

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*Figure 34: A plastic bag, a matchbox, a knife and a hairclip.*

Visual metaphors can be used to communicate a meaning which has no direct relation to the original object but because of our prior knowledge or experience we would attach a certain meaning to it. In the same way Mr. Holmes' pipe became a visual metaphor for crime investigation into *Figure 30a*, the soap and rope combination in *Figures 32a* and *32b* is a metaphor for strangling or hanging. In the case of the pipe, the shared cultural environment is used to create a metaphor. With the soap and rope combination, it is made by means of a literate reference to the objects, and in the next example by referring to the qualities of the original objects we are supposed to transfer these to a new object. So literally the surface of toilet paper in *Figure 35a* has the same qualities as the soft hair of a dog. I personally find this example funny rather than effective, but a certain logic can be found in it.

The images in *Figures 35b*, *35c*, *35d*, and *35e* demonstrate more examples of our definition of visual metaphors.

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*Figure 35a: A roll of toilet paper.*





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*Figure 35b: A dried apricot.*

*Figure 35c: A walnut.*



*Figure 35d: A clock.*

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*Figure 35e: 'Catamaran' fries with snacks.*



By shaping our common visual language, we developed signs, so-called cliches, which deserve special attention in this chapter. A cliché is an expression, an idea, or an element which has been used to the point of losing its primary meaning or effect, when we can see that the original was substituted by some sort of image of the original.

In *Figures 36a, 36b, 36c, 36d, 36e, 36f, 36g, 36h, 36i, 36j* and *36k* is the content of one box of strawberries I bought on the market. Each of them looks very different from the mental picture we have in mind, when we are asked to think of a strawberry. So the image we have, which was shaped by the earlier depictions of the strawberry, is different from a real strawberry from the market. It even goes further and makes these strawberries look cheaper, because their look does not correspond with 'real' strawberries which have a smooth surface and are without imperfections. Here we see only one example, but we should remember that every object has its representational look which could be different from its original. We got used to operate with these cliches and take it as real, but I think that certain awareness should exist if we want to develop visual literacy skills.

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*Figure 36a: A strawberry #1.*



*Figure 36b: A strawberry #2.*

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*Figure 36c: A strawberry #3.*



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*Figure 36d: A strawberry #4.*

*Figure 36e: A strawberry #5.*





*Figure 36f: A strawberry #6.*

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*Figure 36g: A strawberry #7.*



*Figure 36b: A strawberry #8.*

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*Figure 36i: A strawberry #9.*



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*Figure 36j: A strawberry #10.*

*Figure 36k: A strawberry #11.*

Cliches could also be seen as shortcuts, which may be used to transmit a meaning. Let us try describe time using visual language. The image of a typical clock can become a better metaphor for time than a clock which has certain qualities in design. A designed clock draws too much attention to the formal side of the object and obscures the message it carries. In *Figure 37* there are three different clocks. All of them have the same function and all of them have a similar form. But the first clock would be more universal in transmitting the idea of time than the other two. So we can say that it is more likely to be used to distance ourselves from the object itself and focus on its function. The third one can become a shortcut to start a conversation about time in a sense of nostalgic objects and retro design.

Archetypes can be a very useful tool in the meaning generating process, but we should know how to use them and what kind of impact they can have on the perception of an image. To avoid misunderstandings and multiple interpretation, the usage of archetypical images is required, the one which would not distract from the desired message.

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*Figure 37: Clocks.*



Another quality which characterizes our perception is the ability to recognize familiar forms in the unfamiliar. We mentioned this phenomenon in the chapter on morphology, where we studied the rules of grouping and got acquainted with the basic physiology of perception. The border state of this phenomenon is called apophenia, the experience of seeing meaningful patterns or connections in random or meaningless data. I think everyone, at least few times in one's life, experienced the phenomenon of pareidolia, when one sees a face in inanimate objects. Often the face can be recognized in power sockets, switches, boxes etc. But I think the back of the clock in *Figure 38* qualifies as an example of this effect. That is why we are using it to make a shortcut to the message we want to communicate. Another reason to use the same clocks as before is to illustrate how flexible our perception is. The objects are the same, but looking at them in a different context switches our perception of them as a representing object of time to an illustration of the perceptual workings.

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*Figure 38: Clocks, rear view.*



*Figure 39* consisting of two circles and a line is automatically recognized as a face, despite having only a few basic features of an actual face. This is an example of the workings of the brain to recognize faces. However, simple examples are not really bearers of any meaning, but sometimes this ability of our perception can be crucial in forming opinions. For example, the times are numerous when people see religious messages in objects and take it as proof of supernatural existence and as support for their beliefs. In this case, when coincidence and a random phenomenon acquire a certain meaning and thus some power, we, the visually literate, should be able to recognize this. Unfortunately, I have never been able to find a face of Jesus on the surface of my toast or the devil's figure formed from the smoke next to the burning Twin Towers, both famous examples of pareidolia. But if we do, we should remember that it is a suggestive reaction of the brain that stimulates meaning generation and makes us find a connection in a random set of circumstances.

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*Figure 39: A face.*

Conclude this chapter, we can admit that semantics explore the more tricky field in visual literacy, because of subjectivity which plays an important role in it. Of course, the entire study is based on subjective interpretation of an image but to talk about formal qualities is easier when one uses a systematic approach. It is much more complex to do so with meaning, because of the wide range of factors which can have certain influence. It is fair to admit that there are certain patterns which we could still apply to the act of visual comprehension. We should take these patterns into consideration when achieving some level of visual literacy. Let us recap some of these: two images placed together will generate a new context; we use certain archetypes in the process of meaning generation; we should not underestimate the influence of suggestive psychology. In this chapter we highlighted culture, surrounding and context as some of the factors influencing our perception. The next chapter will elaborate on these elements as important determinants of visual perception.