

Roland Barthes, the French literary theorist, philosopher, critic and semiotician 'recognized that everything in culture could be decoded – not just literature but fashion, wrestling, strip tease, steak and chips, love, photography and even Japan Incorporated'.

Appignanesi, R & Garratt, C. (2007) Introducing Postmodernism. Icon Books p74

How do you decode and make meaning of visual signs within a contemporary painting?

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Fig 1, Noel, J. (1954) The Early Word Picture Dictionary.
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Fig 2, Crow, D. (2010) Icon, Index, Symbol in Visible Signs AVA Publishing SA

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Fig 4, Magritte, R. (1929) The Betrayal of Images
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Fig 5, Kertész, A (1931) Ernest. Paris, 1931
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Fig 6, Hamilton, R. (1968-69) Swingeing London 67 (f)
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How do you decode and make meaning of visual signs within a painting?

In this essay I am going to outline Saussure and Peirce's approach to semiotics, investigate Barthes theory of signification and apply his ideas to the practice of Elizabeth Peyton and Chantal Joffe.

Human nature is driven to discover meaning. Scientists, historians, philosophers and artists, seek the source of the meaning of human existence. Pre twentieth century linguists believed that meaning and the nature of thought could be found through the study of the origins of language. They were concerned with the structure of language within its own system, not its relevance to the mind.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher took a new approach. By looking at language as a system of signs, they believed that by understanding how the language system worked, we would understand how meaning was formed. They called this the science of Semiotics, the study of signs. Saussure said,

It is... possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (Chandler, D. 2002, p2)

As a linguist, Saussure's theory focussed on words as the signs. For example, the individual phonic noises r o s e represents the (form) signifier. When we conceptualize a rose we are referring to the (thought) signified. The combination of the two parts is the sign, the sound/thought of rose (Crow, D. 2010).

The relationship between (form) signifier and (thought) signified is arbitrary because languages differ. For example, flower' in French is fleur: German: blume and Spanish: flor.

Saussure argued that sound and thought is one inseparable mental process because we do not have to move our lips to create thought, we create thought when we talk to ourselves. We are taught the relationship between the (form) signifier and the (thought) signified, unconsciously as soon as we start to communicate. We learn a two-part code. 'The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image.' (Manghani, S & Piper, A & Simons, J. 2006, p105) (Fig 1)

Peirce on the other hand had a different approach and recognized the creative role played by the viewer. He proposed a three-part model - sign, interpretant and object. Peirce said,

A sign is something, which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign, which it creates, I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. (Manghani, S & Piper, A & Simons, J. 2006, p107)

Peirce defined three categories of signs: icon, index and symbol and each of these had three properties: firstness, secondness and thirdness.

The icon physically resembles the sign it represents. The index directly places the sign and the object physically together. The symbol, has no logical connection between the sign and it's meaning and relies on the viewers understanding of the conventions of a community. (Fig 2) Firstness is a sense of something, a mood, e.g. 'seeing red.' Secondness, the physical fact, e.g. a footballer receiving a red card from the referee. Thirdness, the psychological level, e.g. the concept of being in the wrong. (Fig 3)

The interpretant is the viewer's thought and interpretation of the sign.

The object is what the sign now stands for to the viewer (Crow, D. 2010).

He argued that signs trigger a chain reaction of meanings dependent on the cultural and historical experiences of the viewer. For example, in western culture a rose may trigger the thought of bouquet > wedding > happiness > laughter but in China it could have a different meaning: wreath > funeral > sadness > tears. Signs can substitute each other conceptually and physically. There are so many choices. 'Where there are choices there is meaning.' (Crow, D. 2010. p43)

Artists began to explore the relationship between signs and meaning.

In 1929 Magritte painted 'The betrayal of Images,' a picture of a smoker's pipe and the words 'This is not a pipe'. He plays with the idea that the painting of the pipe cannot be smoked; you cannot fill it with tobacco therefore 'it is not a pipe'. The words do not anchor the image. The words and the image do not make sense yet, they make perfect sense and the viewer is forced to look for new meaning. (Fig 4)

Roland Barthes, French writer, critic, and literary theorist developed these ideas to completely re-valuate the creative role played by the viewer. He questioned social convention, ritual, authority and the author and systematically dissected other creative genres like photographs, fashion and advertising.

In the 1950s Barthes wrote a series of essays titled 'Mythologies'. He assessed the signs within his own culture and questioned whether aspects of French society were based on 'myth' created and controlled by the media and authority. He was saying that we should not accept what we are told and should speak out.

Myth is a system of communication, that is a message'. 'Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. (Harrison, C & Wood, P. (eds) 2003. p693).

In 1970, Barthes wrote *S/Z*, his analysis of 'Sarrasine' an 1830 novella by Balzac. Sarrasine is an artist who falls in love with a castrato he believes to be a woman. Barthes was absolutely fascinated with this concept of gender, mistaken identity, the ambiguity of the artist's feelings and the ambiguous identity of the speaker. He interrogated the authority and identity of the mythmaker (Barthes, R. 1977).

Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology?

He cannot resolve who is really speaking and decides that it's up to you. Meaning is made in the mind of the reader.

Writing is a space 'where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing' and continues, 'text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the Author. (Barthes, R. 1977. pp142-148)

In 1980, Barthes turned his analytical eye to photography and wrote *Camera Lucida*. His sensitive reflections structured around twenty-four photographs dated between 1823 and 1979 reveal a new system of reading artwork. He scrutinizes the images as frozen time and brings them alive with beautiful narrative. (Fig 5)

The date belongs to the photograph: not because it denotes a style (this does not concern me), but because it makes me lift my head, allows me to compute life, death, the inexorable extinction of the generations: it is possible that Ernest, a schoolboy photographed in 1931 by Kertész, is still alive today (but where? How? What a novel?) (Barthes, R. 1982. p84)

Barthes system of reading signs centres on five components of signification: denotation, connotation, third meaning, studium and punctum.

Denotation: langue is what we say, the words and a physical reality.

Connotation: parole, is the tone of voice, how we say it, a visual language.

The third meaning is something special you cannot quite put into words. (Crow, D. 2010) Studium is to contemplate the author's ideas, read the signs and draw your own conclusion.

The studium is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, "politeness") which allows me to discover the Operator, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them "in reverse," according to my will as a Spectator. (Barthes, R. 1982. p28)

Punctum is a powerful emotional response provoked in the viewer.

'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'. (Barthes, R. 1982. p27)

Barthes system of signification as a theory of reading and making meaning of visual signs is paramount to artists and viewers and can be applied to the translation of artworks today. It is also fascinating to consider that photography has become a powerful tool for artists and is openly acknowledged as a source of visual inspiration. 'The photograph became an integral part of the painter's subject.' (Hayward Publishing. 2007. p6) (Fig 6)

Contemporary figurative painters like Elizabeth Peyton and Chantal Joffe work from their own photographs and media pictures taken from popular cultural sources. Their concepts may centre on contemporary western culture and the signifiers in their artworks do differ to the photographs in Camera Lucida, but Barthes principles of decoding still apply.

Peyton's small, delicate 'precious jewel-like' paintings depict predominantly male celebrities, historical figures, family and close friends. Her characters look romantic, innocent and vulnerable because they invariably look away into the distance, quiet, meditative, physically isolated and detached. Her paintings do not appear to have a story, just girlish, sentimental devotional paintings of

favourite pop stars copied from photographs. But, the longer you look at them, the more you sense both the spirit of the subject and their place in time.

She always chooses personalities that interest her emotionally and captures their vulnerability with deceptively quick, casual paint strokes and a soft and delicate palette. (Hayward Publishing. 2007) For example, in Arsenal (Prince Harry) 1997, Peyton focuses on the thirteen-year-old prince the year his mother, Princess Diana died and isolates his face with a luminous palette and captures sadness. (Fig 7)

In Mendips 1963, (Fig 8) Peyton establishes the first level of signification: Denotation within the title. The painting is immediately placed geographically and in time. A slim young man, deep in thought stands in a leafy garden on a bright day holding a baby in his right arm. He is wearing a black round neck top and his auburn hair is cut in a fashionable moptop style of the era. The baby is about twelve weeks old and looks straight at you. He is wearing a nappy and a thin top, his head and legs are bare.

This is John Lennon holding his baby son, Julian in the garden of his Aunt Mimi's house, 'The Mendips.' in the summer of 1963. The Beatles had just had their first UK number one hit and their lives were about to change forever.

At the second level of signification: Connotation, Peyton implies the warmth of the day with the lime/yellow light of the sun on the grass, the red in John Lennon's hair and the babies bare head and legs. Their complexions are clear and fresh; their lips share the same rich blood red. She implies vulnerability by the way the baby is held with only one arm. They are both absolutely still.

The third meaning is the tension in John Lennon's fingers. He holds his baby as if he were a guitar. His fingers form a chord shape completely encasing Julian's tiny leg. His love of music comes through in his body language.

Punctum is the powerful sense of nostalgia. Their future is now part of popular cultures history. Peyton freezes a tender moment in a very short relationship that ended tragically in a very public way.

The studium is the level where one contemplates Peyton's concept, read the signs with which she has constructed her narrative and translates them into thoughts. The sense of nostalgia is overwhelming.

Joffe's paintings are big, bold and brightly coloured portraits of female fashion models in glamorous outfits, women in their best dresses, her girlfriends and their children. She depicts fashion and fashionable people. Some of her most recent works are based on her own photographs taken backstage at Paris fashion week. Her paint strokes are positive and powerful; her palette is brash and strong. Her women look independent, full of personality with confident body language. Her paintings burst with narrative. (Victoria Miro Catalogue. 2008)

For example, in the painting *Sacha*, 2008, (Fig 9) Joffe paints her friend, art critic Sacha Craddock, topless, wearing lacy tights and sitting on a tartan blanket. The tights and the pose are bazaar and the tartan blanket maybe a playful reference to Craddock's association with the Jerwood Charitable foundation and the Scottish Arts Council. This painting is full of fun and mischief, two women deliberately laughing at themselves.

In *Self-portrait with Esme* 2008, (Fig 10) Joffe establishes the first level of signification: Denotation within the title. This tells you straight away that this is the artist and her young daughter. Joffe would be in her mid thirties and her child about four years old. They are standing naked, upright, side-by-side and possibly in front of a full-length mirror. It is unclear what sort of room it is but the light pours in on them, there is a rich wooden floor, brightly coloured rug, two stools, a warm yellow wall and a white fire surround. The room appears sunny and cosy.

At the second level: Connotation, Joffe captures the warmth and fun in their relationship. They are completely natural together. Her daughter is sneaking a glimpse at her mum's breasts and Joffe is stifling a laugh. They are relaxed and confident sharing an intimate moment. The child is loved and enjoyed. The strong bold colours connect mother and child together in a powerful bond.

The third meaning is the curve of Joffe's stomach, rounded hips and strong thighs. These are symbolic signs of motherhood. She stands proudly and protectively next to her child. Punctum: the emotional response is simply the power of the maternal instinct.

Once you appreciate the components of Barthes theory of signification, you can apply his ideas and make your own meaning of visual signs within an artwork.

His insightful application of semiotics to the conventions of society and culture, along with his debate between author and reader has made him a leading figure in postmodern ideology. Fashion, wrestling, strip tease, steak and chips, love, photography and even Japan Incorporated may not always have the same meaning to each person but this is not important as long as it provokes ideas and feelings.

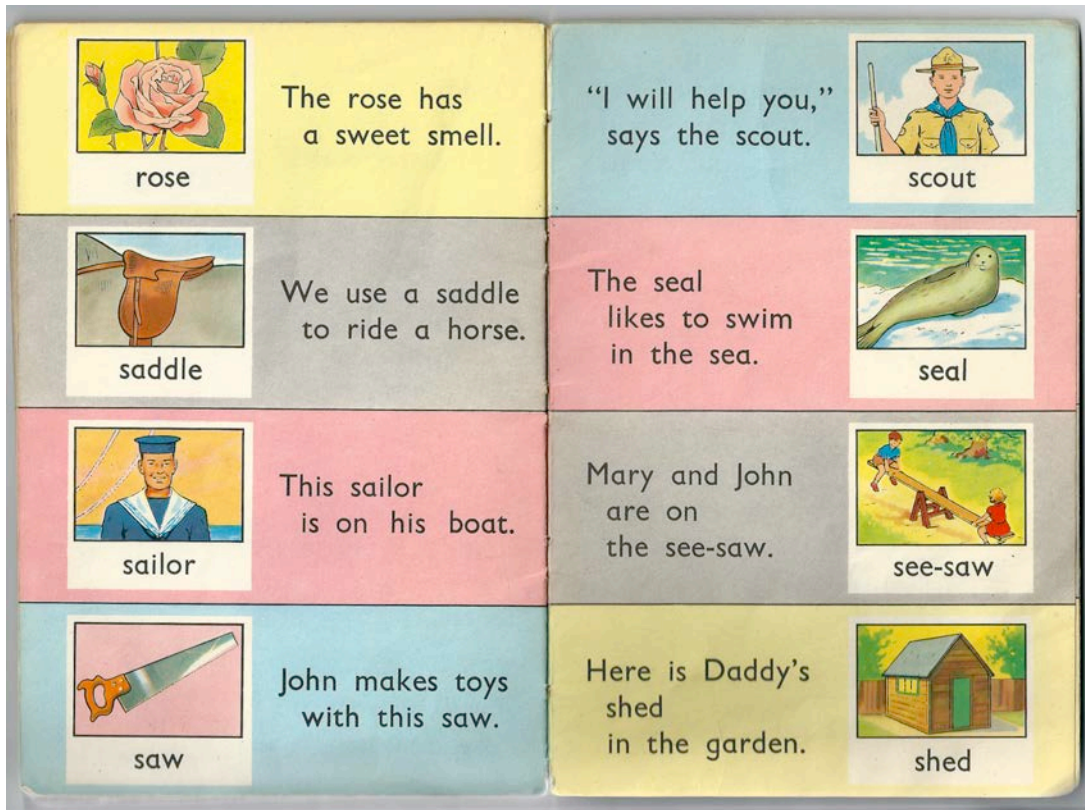


Fig 1, Noel, J. (1954) The Early Word Picture Dictionary.
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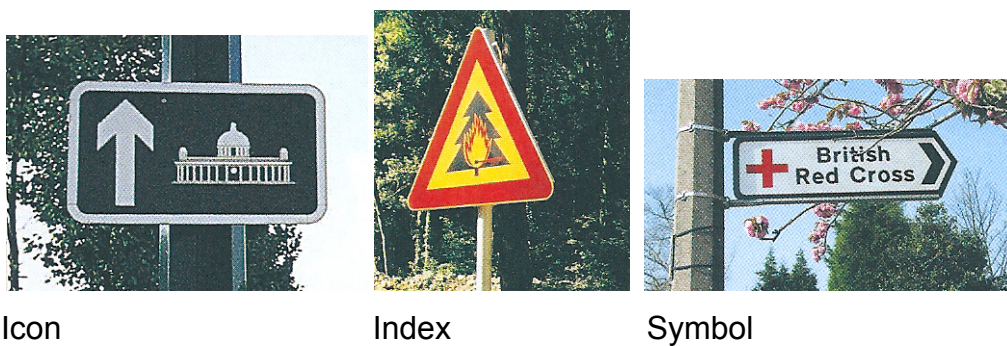


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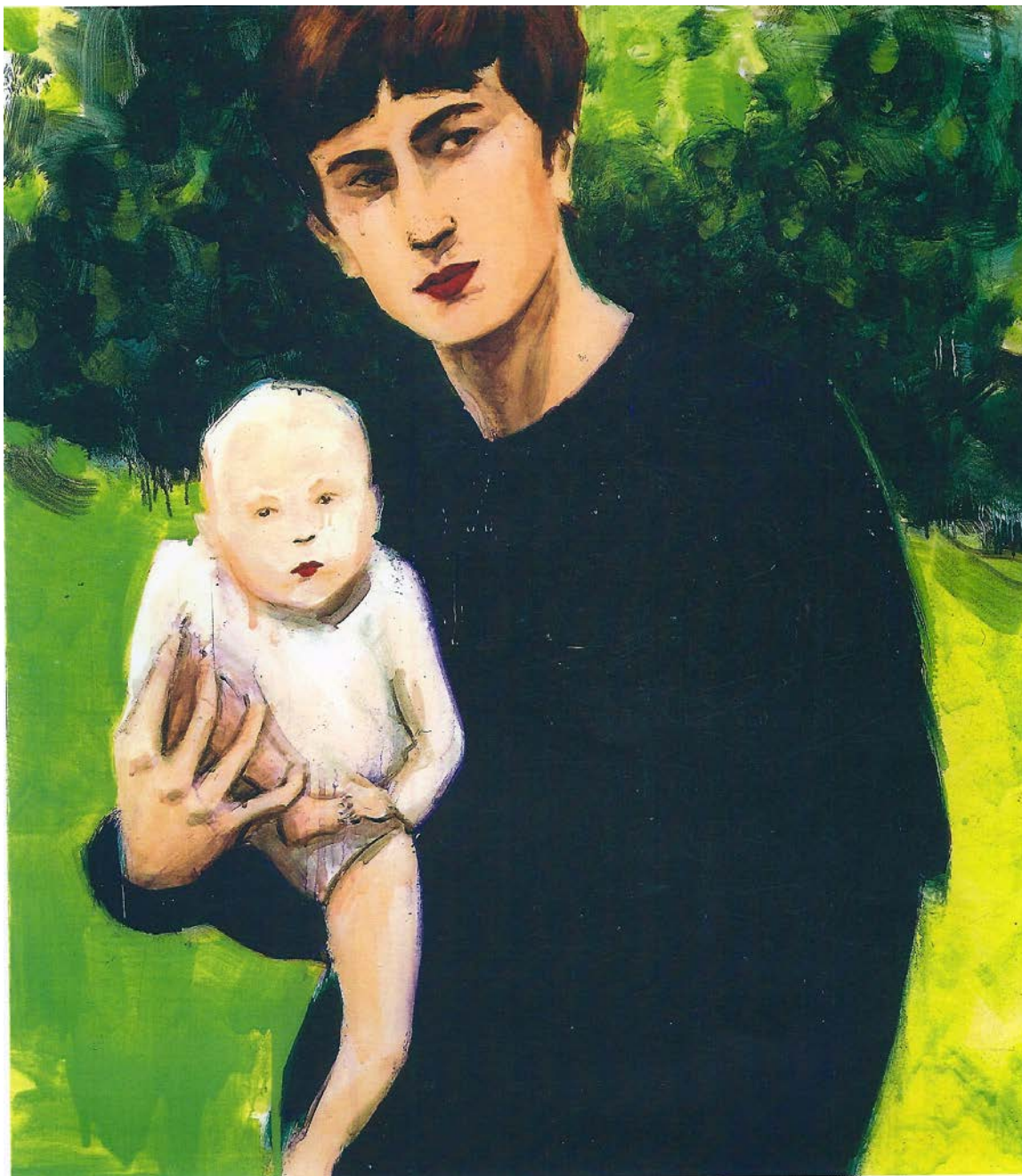


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Chantal Joffe

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