# Editorial Preface

# The Amalgamation of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric

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Visual rhetoric (VR) examines visual texts (movies, ads, websites, and so on) as manifestations of rhetorical strategies, which are intended to persuade or impress. VR is now its own academic discipline, but is also an analytical framework adopted by various fields, including psychology, anthropology, art criticism, graphic design, culture studies, and the like. As Phillip Yenawine (1997: 845) has observed "the ability to find meaning in imagery" is the primary target of study of VR—a target that connects it clearly to semiotics.

Three key works can be seen to prefigure the emergence of VR: Roland Barthes' "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), Rudolf Arnheim's *Visual Thinking* (1969), and Jonathan Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972). All three showed how visual images and texts, from drawings to ads, conveyed nuances of connotative meanings that paralleled (and even surpassed) rhetorically-focused verbal texts. Psychologist Eleanor Rosch then conducted research that linked visual cognition to various modes of cultural conditioning (Rosch 1973, 1975, 1981). For example, people living in western cultures tend to interpret the equilateral triangle as the prototype of the triangular form, with other types (obtuse, right-angled, and acute) as subtypes. Abigail Housen (2002) argued that visual thinking was the core for developing critical reflection and skill at analyzing problems of all types. But already in the first decade of the twentieth century, pioneering psychologists like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky carried out research showing that visual reasoning correlates with language development (Piaget 1923, 1936, Vygotsky 1931, 1962, 1978). From this historical paradigm, semiotics expanded its intellectual domain to include *visual semiotics* as a major branch (Santaella-Braga, 1988; Sonesson, 1989; Saint-Martin, 1990; Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok, 1994; Trifonas, 1996; Handa, 2004). Visual images are particular kinds of holistic signs whose meanings are filtered or shaped by cultural parameters (Taylor, 1995; Lotman, 1991; Uspenskij, 2001).

As mentioned, Barthes' article, "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), laid the foundations for both visual semiotics and VR. In it, he identified two levels of meaning in the psychological processing of an image. The level of denotation is where we simply recognize the image as standing for something specifically, such as the photo of a lion. However, the animal in question bears cultural meanings, such as masculinity, virility, regal-ness, power, and the like, connecting it to such expressions and cultural allusions as "Richard the Lionheart," "lionesque," among others. This interconnected and unconscious network of cultural meanings occurs at the level of connotation. Barthes (1957) had previously indicated that the connotative level could be deciphered only by those who possessed the appropriate cultural code. So, the denotative level is "non-coded" while the connotative one is "coded." The ways in which the image leads the viewer to the coded meaning was termed anchorage.

Barthes' simple, yet insightful, model was criticized on several counts, since it ignored that the image can be understood across cultures in ways that do not involve specific forms of coding (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). Nevertheless, his overall approach has proved to be useful in several areas of cultural analysis, such as in advertising (Bachand 1994, Beasley and Danesi 2002). Visual images and texts became major targets of analysis in semiotics after Barthes' essay (Group μ 1970, Santaella-Braga 1988, Sonesson 1987, 1994, Saint-Martin 1991, and Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1994). It was actually Saussure (1916: 16) who had used the word image in his binary model of the sign, consisting of a signifier (physical form) and signified (mental concept)—a verbal signifier such as the word cat generated a "sound image" (a sequence of distinct sounds) and its signified (a type of mammal) a "conceptual image." The contemporary view of image may be somewhat different, but the Saussurean view prefigures it in its essence.

As is well known, one of Charles Peirce's (1931-1958) key insights with respect to sign creation and interpretation, which he called semiosis, was that our sensory and emotional experiences influence how we process signs. Especially useful is Peirce's tripartite typology of signs—the icon, the index, and the symbol—and especially the idea that icons are signs that resemble their referents in some way. In a basic sense, visual images are icons that are interconnected with other aspects of semiosis (including symbolism). The study of iconicity (visual and otherwise) opened up the field of visual semiotics considerably (Tomaselli, 1996; Dillon, 1999; Uspenskij, 2001; Bogdan, 2002; Moriarity, 2005; Warschauer, 2007; Cattuto, Loreto, and Pietronero, 2007; Huang and Chuang, 2009; Crow, 2010; Jappy, 2013; Ma and Cahier, 2014; Zantides, 2014).

Mental images serve important cognitive functions (Kosslyn, 1983, 1994). People can imagine faces, voices, places, scan game boards, arrange things in their minds, and so on easily, albeit differentiated subjective ways, but within a range of common perception. Culture plays a role in constraining mental imagery. The equilateral triangle, as mentioned, is a prototype in western culture. The image of a cat that comes typically to mind in the same culture is that of a household cat, because it is the most typical type of feline in it.

Cognitive linguistics introduced the idea of image schema into the intellectual mix in the 1980s (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; Lakoff, 1987; Johnson, 1987), defined as an unconscious mental outline of a recurrent shape, action, dimension, orientation, object, that aids how we conceptualize abstractions. For example, consider the image schema of an obstacle. Experience informs us that we can go around it, over it, under it, through it, or else remove it and continue on. It could also impede us, so that we would have to stop and turn back. All of these real-world actions inform relevant image schemata guiding the formulation of common metaphors such as: "They got through a very difficult period," "I felt better after I got over my cold," "Everyone should steer clear of financial debt," "With most of the work out of the way, I then was able to watch TV," "The rain stopped us from enjoying our outing," "They cannot go any further with that plan; they'll just have to turn back," and so on. These make sense because they are based on the image schema of an obstacle, which maps physical experiences onto abstract ones.

One of the first areas of anthropological research in the late 1960s with regard to visualization was color perception (Berlin and Kay, 1969; Hatcher, 1974; Hilbert, 1987; Davidoff, 1991; Hardin and Maffi, 1997; MacLaury, 1997; Tufte, 1997). At a denotative level, colors are perceived as gradations of hue, and are named in English with specific terms such as red, orange, yellow, green, blue, or violet. It is estimated that we can distinguish perhaps as many as 10 million hues. The naming of colors in terms of a small set of words is thus an economizing strategy—otherwise we would need millions of words. To expand the lexicon we use figurative language and other kinds of semantic strategies—pea green, sky blue, maroon, burgundy, and so on. Moreover, at a connotative level, color names have rhetorical force—red with anger, green with envy, etc. The archeological record actually suggests that sensory and emotional meanings may have been the source for the color terms themselves (Wescott 1980). In Hittite, for example, words for colors initially designated plant and

tree names such as poplar, elm, cherry, oak, etc.; in Hebrew, the name of the first man, Adam, meant "red" and "alive" (see also Sebeok and Danesi, 2000).

Two types of visual texts that have become key targets of interest within visual semiotics are diagrams and charts (Stjernfelt, 2007; Roberts, 2009). The former are schematic drawings using basic visual elements (points, lines, shapes, etc.) to indicate how something works or to clarify the relationship between the parts of a whole; the latter are tables or graphs designed to organize and display information. Diagrams in particular are powerful sign forms—for instance, diagrams of the atom are *de facto* theories of the atom, allowing scientists to envision an invisible thing in an imaginative way.

On the coattails of the expanding work in visual semiotics, VR crystallized as an autonomous field at the start of the 2000s (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004; Handa, 2004; Hill and Helmers, 2004; Olson, Finnegan, and Hope, 2008; Benson, 2015; Gries, 2015). The basic methodological mindset of VR, however, derives from Barthes's observation that we read images at a connotative level and thus rhetorically. Its goal is to show how this level of meaning influences everything from ethical and political ideas to actual social behaviors. The approach in any application of VR is always the same—link the rhetorical force of the visual images to each other in a chain of connotations that lead to a coded meaning. It is this chain that has persuasive force. Hariman and Lucaitis (2011) used this very approach to show how photographs are powerful rhetorical texts capable of influencing public opinion and shaping political actions, recalling Barthes (1977, 1981).

The work of the Belgian Group μ, founded in 1967, cannot be underestimated in the emergence of both visual semiotics and VR. The members of the group have attempted to show how visual imagery is as critical to understanding human mental forms as is verbal rhetoric. Group μ's 1970 publication, *A General Rhetoric*, revised classical rhetorical analysis semiotically, classifying images according to their different iconic modalities. In *Traité du signe visuel* (1992), the group elaborated a systematic analytical apparatus for studying rhetorical images.

The *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric* was founded to allow scholars and researchers in various fields to bring forth their ideas and findings on the explicit or implicit rhetorical modalities of images and signs in general. As such, it constitutes an amalgamation of VR and semiotics, but also embraces work in cognate fields such as psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, linguistics, and the like. Its mission is particularly critical in the Internet Age and thus, its importance cannot be overstated. As Todd Gitlin (2001: 22) has aptly observed, "Images depict or re-present realities but are not themselves realities. The late Jean Baudrillard (1983) introduced the terms hyperreality and simulacrum to refer to the images we see on screens, which imply that we can no longer distinguish, or want to distinguish, between the real world and the hyperreal one (the world beyond the screen). Clearly, IJVR can be utilized to penetrate and inform meaning structures in a densely visual technological world.

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