**Narrative, Storytelling, and Their Impact on Us**

*Media in Society* is an innovative new book that explores the relationship between mass media and our lives. At its core, *Media in Society* is about storytelling: how the mass media form and shape narratives, and how these narratives, in turn, affect the way we live. *Media in Society* introduces and defines the concept of narrativism in Chapter 1, and discusses ways in which narrativist criticism relates to constructionist and reflectionist points of view.

*Media in Society* then examines these storytelling issues through three particular lenses:

**Technology**

The mass media have made the digital turn from the outgoing analog world to the incoming digital world. Widespread access to digital technology has changed the delivery, consumption, and convergence of media that still maintain strong links to their individual industry histories. *Media in Society* explores how the Internet has affected the ways other media tell stories; how we, as a society, tell stories about the media; and how technologies like social media, mobile content delivery, and interconnected devices shape us personally, socially, culturally, politically, and economically. Chapter 10, for example, discusses the origins of the Internet as we know it, while Chapter 8 explores innovations in online pop-culture fandom.

**Democracy**

New digital technologies have also opened new channels for people to organize political narratives and for the media to report on those narratives — the Arab Spring uprisings and the Occupy protests of 2011, for example, offer striking examples of democratic organization enabled and unified through new media forms. *Media in Society* pays special attention to these relationships between technologies and narratives, placing them in historical context, and poses questions about how the media function in a democracy. In particular, Chapter 5 covers the creation of political narratives in the mass media, and Chapter 6 covers journalism's historical and current role in interpreting these narratives.

**Capitalism**

Even in today's vast and often specialized mass media landscape, business — capitalism — still shapes and helps to define our media experiences. In a capitalist economy, advertising has traditionally supported both news and entertainment programming, and we are sold media products just as we are sold other consumer goods, through narratives. *Media in Society* pays attention to these complex connections throughout the book, as in Chapter 3's treatment of visual literacy and the application of visual composition principles to ads, and Chapter 7's coverage of media industry economics.

The themes of technology, democracy, and capitalism are woven throughout all eleven chapters of *Media in Society*, enhancing your ability to read and interpret the stories media and society tell about each other.

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**Media in Society**

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If every picture tells a story, what’s the story in this photo? The photo itself reveals only certain information. It appears to be two soccer teams in a ceremony, presumably before the game begins, in a huge outdoor stadium filled to capacity (at least in the part of the stadium we can see) on a sunny day (evidenced by the shadows). Both teams—one in white jerseys, one in dark jerseys—are giving a raised arm salute. The photo’s black-and-white graininess tells us this is an archival photo, and we can also tell the photo was taken by a photographer at field level.

But there is a lot more to understand in the story of the photo. What is it about the composition that makes it so striking? What does it mean when a row of soccer players raise their arms in a uniform salute? Does the time and place of this photo, and our time and place as viewers of the photo, make a difference in how we understand the gesture? What is the truth behind the photo’s story?

Here’s what the historical record tells us about the image: The two soccer teams weren’t crosstown rivals but instead the national teams from England (in white) and Germany. The event was an exhibition match in Berlin’s enormous Olympic Stadium. The date was May 14, 1938. The era was a time when sport, especially soccer, was increasingly becoming a commercial spectacle (the first World Cup was played in 1930, and the third one would come to Paris in June 1938, just one month after this match in Berlin). It was also an era of sociopolitical drama and heightened tensions in Europe. Hitler’s Germany had just invaded and annexed Austria two months earlier in the Anschluss, a violation of the Treaty of Versailles signed at the end of World War I. In England, the government of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, terrified of Germany’s growing power and grasping for ways to avoid war, took a cautious approach of diplomatic appeasement.

The English team was entering Berlin at a moment laden with international politics. In the locker room just minutes before England’s team entered the field, British Football Association officials ordered the team to perform the salute during the German national anthem to “ensure a friendly reception by not only the huge


swastika-waving crowd present in the Berlin stadium” but also by the even larger radio audience in Germany and beyond. What the photo doesn’t show is that the English players voiced their strong opposition in the locker room. Although they may look like Nazi sympathizers in the photo, none of the English players were saluting willingly as they faced the dignitaries’ box, which included top Nazi officials such as Goebbels, Goring, and Hess.

Interestingly, the photo also tells us nothing about the game itself. Going into the match, Germany had been undefeated for twenty-six straight games (one ended in a tie). The team had undergone an unprecedented two weeks of intense training in the Black Forest and had an overwhelming home advantage: 110,000 fans in a stadium filled to capacity. Meanwhile, the English team had just finished an exhausting league season and had undergone no special preparations. Nonetheless, England performed brilliantly, beating Germany 6 to 3. But a big win for the English team is not how the exhibition match of May 14, 1938, is remembered. It’s not the story told by this photo.

Versions of this photograph appeared in nearly every British newspaper the next day. The British public was outraged by the image and what they believed to be Germany’s demand that their soccer team perform the “Hitler salute.” In his 1946 autobiography, former English team captain Eddie Hapgood said the salute and the subsequent public indignation disturbed him for the rest of his career. The photo disappeared from public view but emerged sixty-five years later in a BBC documentary, Football and Fascism (2003), to renewed British outrage in news outlets and blogs as a “moment of shame” that still haunts British sport.

In this chapter we will investigate how images tell a story, which in turn connects to a larger narrative about our culture, values, and society. We will explore an image’s narrative on multiple levels: on the level of composition, on the level of symbolic meaning, and also in terms of its ability to evoke realism. In doing so, we will visit the themes that guide our critical process: communication technology and the constantly changing media environment, democracy and the role images play in fostering democratic thought, and capitalism—how our image comprehension and construction are inextricably linked to the visual languages of advertising and photojournalism.

**COMPOSITION: THE VISUAL’S AESTHETIC POWER**

Composition is the creative activity of placing objects within a frame. When painting a picture, we’re choosing where to place shapes and dots and lines on a two-dimensional plane. When we create a book or Web page design, we arrange images, words, and graphic elements, most typically filling some sort of rectangle. Whether we do this using construction paper and glue or digital software, we’re directing viewers to notice certain elements within a frame, purposefully communicating our ideas through visual language. When taking a photographic or video image, we arrange external objects within the dimensions of a viewfinder, panning left and right or crouching down to get the desired perspective. As visual communications scholar Herbert Zettl points out, understanding the aesthetics of composition does not necessarily mean knowing how to create a beautiful image; it means knowing how to structure both still and moving screen images for “maximally effective communication.”

The best photographs and graphic designs do that: They dictate a reader’s comprehension. Michael Rabiger discusses good composition this way:

> While it interests and delights the eye, good composition is an important organizing force when used to dramatize relativity and relationship, and to project ideas. Superior composition not only makes the subject (content) accessible, it heightens the viewers’ perceptions and stimulates his or her imaginative involvement, like language from the pen of a good poet.

To understand this “organizing force,” then, we must understand the various elements we need to organize when creating images: color, form, line, and movement. Every choice can be a powerful way to both convey and understand meaning.

**Color**

Color choices have great impact on an image. We consciously and unconsciously respond to color every day, and we are constantly making aesthetic choices related to color. We decide to wear a blue T-shirt over a yellow one, pick an orange cereal bowl over a white one, or choose a pen with blue ink over black ink. Most of us have a favorite color or are drawn continuously to the same color palette. We also have intense emotional reactions to color. We may love the color orange but hate the color blue. We may walk into a room that makes us feel uncomfortable, feel the intense urge to leave, and then realize upon reflection that its color was the thing that turned us away. Virginia Kidd, who teaches media production at California State University, has an emotional response to Room 317, the room in which she holds her classes:

> I have a theory that the University obtained paint for room 317 at an enormous discount because nobody with any choice in the matter would have purchased it. Three walls are battleship gray. The impact is dismal. I am reminded of battered aluminum cooking pots and galvanized garbage cans. Apparently in an effort to counter this, the fourth wall was painted yellow; not, however, a soft banana yellow, which happens to be my favorite color, but a glaring mustard yellow that could have come straight from a French’s jar; this covers an entire classroom wall.
and oppressively dominates whatever is happening. If nothing else, the choice of paint for room 317 at least graphically demonstrates the power of color.7

The power of color was also evident during “tulipmania” in seventeenth-century Holland. The Dutch were so taken by the vivid colors of tulips (an import from Turkey) in the gray Dutch landscape that they became intoxicated; a frenzy of financial speculation followed and a single tulip bulb could cost a thousand Dutch florins (the average annual income was 150 florins).

The fact is, humans are physiologically programmed to respond to color, and we respond to certain colors in particular ways. We see red especially easily, not because it’s a bright color but because our eyes are designed to block the opposite of red: ultraviolet electromagnetic waves that can be harmful to our retinas. Red and orange light wavelengths pass through our retina more easily, making these colors the most noticeable: Stop signs and traffic lights are red for a reason. Correspondingly, violet is the least noticeable color. Thus, as we make our own images or respond to the images of others, we can understand how color works for maximum effect. Red works well as an accent color to draw attention to a certain part of an image. Photojournalists are pleased, for example, when a person in a crowd they are documenting happens to be wearing a red scarf or shirt, allowing them to use that individual as a focal point in their frame: “Look here.”

Advertisers are also keenly aware of red’s power: The color will lead a viewer to a particular corner of the page, clarifying a message or saying “this is important.” Consider how red is effectively deployed in corporate logos, signage, and national flags.

Red juxtaposed with blue simulates depth—the warmer color will appear closer (more noticeable) while the colder blue tones will recede (appear less noticeable). This is why intense blue and red fields on the same two-dimensional surface will seem to pulse back and forth in a third dimension. Thus, color helps to bring three-dimensionality to the two-dimensional frame.

Colors can also be used to generate more emotional responses. If red can agitate or provoke, then green can soothe; blue can yield to emotions of melancholy and coolness; gray can lack emotional commitment. Because light colors have soft and cheerful associations, we tend to surround babies with various shades of pastel; we tend to demonstrate dark and moody emotions through dark colors. This all makes color a powerful, if sometimes ambiguous, tool for directing visual messages.

Form

Form has to do with the object inside the frame, how big it is, and where it is placed. The simplest form is a dot, and placing a dot within the four walls of a frame commands attention: We look at the dot before we look at any blank space within a frame. (Even if a form does not have an explicit frame—imagine a sculpture in the middle of a vast plain—it is still implicitly framed by our field of vision.) Moreover, with the act of framing, something rather magical happens, something we refer to as frame magnetism. When a dot is closer to one side of a frame, that side seems to pull the dot toward it. Notice the diagram below.

The dot is being pulled upward in the first panel. In the second panel, the dot is being pulled to the right. The result, not surprisingly, is a bit of agitation, or at least interest. Place the dot in the absolute center of the frame and it becomes inert—all four sides of the image are pulling equally at the dot, making for a rather boring composition.

Depending on how large the dot is and where it is placed, the four sides of the frame impact form (in this case, the dot) in significant ways. Consequently, we can use the pull of the frame to add drama or significance to our message. We can create tension between two individuals, for example, by placing them close to the edges of each frame. Or we can do the opposite, framing figures so they are not pulled by the sides of a picture but are comfortably balanced within the frame. TV producers usually strive to achieve this kind of balance: They routinely make talk show hosts and their guests sit (or stand) uncomfortably close to each other so that they aren’t pulled apart by the sides of the video frame. The result is to have them fake their comfort in order to make us comfortable: As viewers we feel as if these individuals like each other and are having a pleasant conversation, not pulling away from the

The interview pair on the left look uncomfortable in part because the frame’s magnetic forces are actively pulling them away from each other; the pair on the right stand uncomfortably close to each other (in real life), but the shot itself is more balanced and centered, causing us to perceive a “friendly” relationship.
each other. If we return to the Nazi salute photograph, we can also see that the two dominant shapes (in this case, each soccer team) are cohesively clumped without being pulled to one side of the frame or another, creating a sense of pictorial balance.

The realities of frame magnetism have led to certain framing conventions. One is headroom: framing an image so an individual has a bit of space over her head to convey that she is not cramped by the frame or pulled up by frame magnetism. Headroom creates the illusion that the figure is in a larger setting rather than a box. Another framing convention is the rule of thirds, a well-known principle of photograph and image composition. By breaking an image down into thirds (both horizontally and vertically), and by placing elements on the points of intersection, we can avoid both the uncomfortable pulling when the form is too close to the frame and the boring inertia when the form is too central.

Knowing the rule of thirds is to create images that are balanced yet interesting. However, knowing when to break the rule—to add tension—is also an essential part of the artistic vocabulary and a means for conveying narrative.

Shape is tied to form. The most basic shapes—square, circle, and triangle—are often connected to the three basic (primary) colors, red, blue, and yellow. Each shape in turn has an expressive quality. Squares convey stability, solidity, support, confidence, and strength but also boredom. They carry a heavier weight in the frame than circles or triangles and tend to be imposing, dominating an image. Rectangles—part of the square family—usually feel slightly less stable and slightly more interesting than squares. In contrast, circles are fluid instead of solid, expressing wholeness, completion, happiness, unity, and motion. Circles are more interesting than squares, but nowhere near as interesting as triangles, our most dynamic shape. Triangles are stimulating because they point, leading one’s eyes to various areas within the frame, adding tension with diagonal lines and energy to the entire visual composition. Like the color red, triangles are useful in isolating ideas and identifying the significance of an element within the frame. For example, a photograph of two basketball players jumping up toward a ball completes the shape of a triangle and dramatizes the ball’s significance. A photograph of a bird landing on a gutter—the bird’s wings outstretched—shows two triangles: each one pointing in a different direction and asking the viewer to follow the direction of both invisible lines. In the Nazi salute photograph, the flags in the stadium point upward, lifting our eyes out of the narrative. As designer and theorist Johannes Itten commented about shapes, “The square is resting matter, the triangle is thought, and the circle is spirit in eternal motion.”

Line

A line embodies a narrative significance of its own. Horizontal lines evoke calm and stability; vertical lines convey energy and upward thrust. Diagonal lines, like triangles, are dynamic, exciting, somewhat unstable, and for these reasons are advantageous toward visually communicating complicated ideas. It’s an important strength, when creating an image, to be aware of how lines divide a frame. For example, telephone lines can slice a frame into numerous boxes and rectangles against the sky, or dramatically slice a frame at a diagonal, directing viewers to various points of interest. Photographers can also intentionally create diagonals by cocking the camera—making what we call a Dutch angle—and destabilizing an otherwise sturdy image to make a visual point. In advertising, Dutch angles are used constantly to add excitement or to juxtapose instability (e.g., discomfort in the doctor’s office) with stability (e.g., relief after taking a certain pill).

A tilted horizon or a flagpole make obvious lines within a frame, but lines can also be inferred: A look between two figures—gaze meeting gaze—creates an invisible line linking characters. A person (or in the case of the Nazi salute photograph, a group) pointing in a particular direction produces a directional force that we can follow, perhaps even beyond the frame. Two figures working in a vast field, one in the foreground and another far off in the background, are invisibly connected by a diagonal line; we look at the foreground figure first and then are drawn to look at the second. Thus, diagonal lines both offer directional force and convey depth. Lines, whether visible or invisible, help us understand spatial arrangements and the corresponding relationships within the visual narrative.

The angle from which the image is taken offers more invisible lines and another means for communicating depth—the more extreme the angle, the more intense the feeling of depth. The invisible lines that angles create are also infused with meaning. A very low angle intensifies the stature of a figure or inanimate object. A child portrayed from below can look like a giant, a monster can appear even more scary and powerful, and an armed tank all the more menacing. When shooting *Citizen Kane*, for example, Orson Welles was so intent on portraying Kane with as much grandeur as possible in certain scenes that he dug holes in the floor of sets and shot from below the floorboards, creating extreme low angles for maximum effect.

Shooting at a low angle also tends to create directional lines toward sky, clouds, windows, and the vigorous thrust of buildings, all of which can bring powerful associations. The opposite is true for high angles. People shot from above tend to look weaker, diminished, and victimized; a high angle correspondingly leads one to focus on ground, dirt, feet, and litter, all of which can bring a negative energy to an image. Line thus helps define perspective and lead a viewer to points of emphasis within a frame. Other ways to communicate spatial organization in an image include high-contrast lighting, sound, and, as we discuss next, the temporal elements of motion.
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Movement

Western cultures tend to read lines (and other images) the same way we read this text, left to right. This has compositional implications, giving lines additional energy that we read into them; we automatically assign movement to lines.

Because of our Western left-to-right orientation, our eyes tend to rest or linger on the right side of the frame, so whatever appears on the right side seems to dominate the image. This is why advertisers and graphic designers typically place product logos on the right, the last place a viewer's eye will rest. We read diagonal lines according to this left-right orientation as well. For example, we understand a slope that starts at the bottom left-hand corner of a frame and ends at the top right as an "uphill" slope; we easily interpret a slope that begins from the top left and ends at bottom right as "downhill" (even though it could easily be uphill).

In Western cultures, then, placing critical elements on the right side rather than the left can become a forceful tactic in planning visual compositions. If we grew up speaking and reading Arabic, we would learn to read images from right to left, and we would plan our visual compositions differently.

With these directional forces—also called vectors—at play, lines within a frame can either compete with our natural desire to read left to right, causing tension, or flow with the left-right momentum. For example, car advertisers use these tendencies to their advantage: If the message is "speed," they might show a car driving left to right and preferably downhill, as if to increase the speed of the car. The car is traveling in the same direction our eyes are naturally traveling. If the message is "rugged and powerful," advertisers might show the car (or more probably, truck) traveling right to left and uphill: By going against the grain it appears that the truck is working harder and is twice as tough.

These kinds of continuous vectors extend beyond the frame and cause anticipation: We don't know if the motorcycles will crash at the bottom of the hill or if the Chevy truck will ever reach the top of the mountain. In the Nazi salute photo, arms raised and flags pointing upward also cause anticipation, leading our eyes outside of the frame. Converging vectors, where two forces converge together in the same frame, tend to evoke a sense of calm because the forces are pulling together and a sort of resolution is taking place. Diverging vectors—two forces moving away and out of the frame—can be deeply troubling. Indeed, the directional force of lines, combined with our left-to-right orientation, can yield considerable drama and storytelling to a still image.

When that image moves, as in film or video, the narrative possibilities multiply. Panning (horizontally swiveling from one side to another) to the right tends to evoke a sense of panic; we are already reading to the right and the rightward sweeping pan doubles the speed of our reading. Panning to the left, on the contrary, has a more calming effect.

Similarly, following a character moving left to right within the frame is invigorating but troubling if the filmmaker or videographer doesn't supply enough lead room—the extra space to suggest a character is traveling toward something outside the frame and not slamming into the frame's edge. To frame an individual in the most flattering conditions, a videographer might pose a subject—say, the president—walking left to right (i.e., "forward," not backward), walking with extensive lead room (i.e., they are open, comfortable, and in control of their environment), and at a low angle (i.e., they are powerful). In contrast, a videographer also has the power to do the opposite, portraying a political official in extreme close-up, walking left or against the edge of the frame, and looking up at the camera rather than down, as if to portray the official as cramped, uncomfortable, squirming under pressure, and belittled.

Narrative structure in film and video is, of course, propelled forward through editing: the juxtaposition of long shots, medium shots, and close-ups. Perhaps it's easiest to think of individual shots as sentences and sequences of shots as paragraphs. Each shot delivers a new idea to a cohesive storyline: A long shot (sometimes called an "establishing shot") establishes place and context; a medium shot draws attention to a particular character or object; and a close-up describes that character/object in terms of emotions, actions, or other details. Think of these first five sentences in Rohinton Mistry's novel A Fine Balance (1995)—a story about India in the 1930s—as a series of five edited film shots:

1. (long shot) The Morning Express bloated with passengers slowed to a crawl, then lurched forward suddenly, as though to resume full speed.
2. (medium shot) The train's brief deception jolted its riders.
3. (medium shot) The bulge of humans hanging out of the doorway distended perilously, like a soap bubble at its limit.
4. (close-up) Inside the compartment, Maneck Kohlah held on to the overhead railing, propped up securely within the crush.
5. (extreme close-up) He felt someone's elbow knock his textbooks from his hands.

The image on the left conveys speed, while the one on the right focuses on power.
Similarly, a fully edited film could be broken down, shot by shot, into a stream of descriptive sentences and paragraphs.

The pacing of editing combined with shot size can also dramatically affect meaning. Quickly edited shots and sequences accelerate tension, especially if the shots are all close-ups, conveying a feeling of entrapment or suspense. In contrast, numerous slow-paced long shots side by side slow down the narrative and give room for reflection. Finally, the juxtaposition of extreme shots—long shot to close-up, slow-paced to fast-paced, moving to still—is a chance to create a jarring scene in the narrative, where the viewer has to work extra hard to figure out what the story is.

Indeed, juxtaposition is a way to induce meaning not through the actual content of individual shots but through the coupling of two or more shots. The famous Russian film theorist Lev Kuleshov demonstrated the power of juxtaposition by coupling the same expressionless headshot footage of a prominent actor, Ivan Mozzhukhin, with three completely different film segments: first, a bowl of soup; then a coffin in which a dead woman lies; and finally, a little girl at play. Kuleshov presented the three juxtapositions to an audience. According to Kuleshov's colleague V. I. Pudovkin, the viewers commented on Mozzhukhin's superior acting ability: "the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup," "the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman," and "the light happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play."

Even though the headshot never changed, the Kuleshov group concluded that "with correct montage, even if one takes the performance of an actor directed at something quite different, it will still reach the viewer in the way intended by the editor, because the viewer himself will complete the sequence and see that which is suggested to him." In other words, authors of visual material can create meaning by connecting two or more separate elements, providing competent continuity, and asking viewers to fill in the blanks. "The challenge," writes visual theorist Gretchen Barbatis, "is to theorize, study, and create visual narrative in ways that we appreciate its sense-making function as a way to better understand disordered, raw experience; as a powerful way of constituting reality and not a way of merely recording it."

While the Nazi salute photo is not a moving image edited in relation to other images, it effectively communicates meaning and movement through its composition. The photograph's color contrasts (black and white), spatial organization of subject matter within the frame, use of line, and sweeping vector movements suggest a controlled drama of binary opposites and leading lines. This is a story of opposites, order, and balance. Both teams balance each other in terms of frame placement and contrasting uniform colors (dark vs. white). The flags are equidistant. The stadium line and the row of athletes—particularly their waistlines—rest comfortably on the horizontal thirds, suggesting interest but little tension, until one considers the vectors. With arm and gaze vectors pointing out of the frame and flags pointing up to an open sky, there is an edginess to this picture, a story of anticipation: We don't know what's going to happen.

If the photograph had been cropped or taken from a different angle, meaning would change drastically. Indeed, different versions of the photograph, such as the example below—unearthed in a German archive in 2008—are cropped and angled in ways that don't communicate the same conflict, balance, and anticipation. Without the context of the opposing German team and evidence of a crowded stadium, the image is more passive, less oppositional. The outstretched arms have less potency from the frontal perspective.

### SEMIOTICS AND SYMBOLIC MEANING

Beyond a pure compositional reading, we can also read deeper into the image and acknowledge that every element in the frame conveys an independent symbolic meaning. In other words, we can add more narrative layers through our understanding of the signs implanted within the image.

What is a sign? A sign is simply something that conveys meaning beyond the object itself. Flowers are a sign of spring; dark clouds are a sign that it might rain; yawning is a sign indicating fatigue or boredom. We know these things because we are familiar with weather and human nature.

Other signs are not quite so obvious, requiring more knowledge of cultural norms to understand their meaning. For example, what does a child dressed in a princess costume, holding a bag of candy mean? If we live outside U.S. culture, we could probably deduce that this costume represents some sort of event or festival. But one has to know more about the special role of Disney characters in U.S. culture and the cultural traditions surrounding Halloween in order to clearly decipher the true meaning of the costume: that the child has gone trick-or-treating as Cinderella. Similarly, different cultures read gestures, like publicly spitting or picking one's nose, in different ways. These actions are perfectly acceptable in many countries, but in the
United States, they often mean improper personal hygiene, a sign of being distasteful, antisocial, and unclean. A child might not know this, however, unless he or she learns it from parents or teachers. A right arm raised at an angle above one's head may be someone's way to say hello or hail a taxi, but it is mostly a gesture loaded with negative meaning, symbolizing Nazism, one of the most appalling political ideologies of the twentieth century. For something to be a sign, Paul Lester writes, "the viewer must understand its meaning. If you do not understand the meaning behind the orange color of a jacket, it isn't a sign for you." 13

Semiotics, the study of signs, was developed in the early twentieth century by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Both studied signs by breaking them down into their fundamental parts—the word, image, gesture, or sensory cue ("signifier") and the concept ("signified")—and asked important questions about how something comes to stand for something else, and how a sign is connected to the object to which it refers. For example, English speakers call a four-legged domesticated animal with a wagging tail a "dog"—here, the word "dog" is the signifier—and we associate this word with our concept of a dog, the thing signified. Together the signifier and signified constitute the sign, which is differentiated from the object—in this case, the dog—out there in the world. Now suppose that our language had developed differently and the signifier "cat" signified the idea of a dog instead? This wouldn't change the nature of dogs, just the word we use to talk about them. The relationship between language and meaning is arbitrary and learned and this is what interested both Saussure and Peirce. Visual communication scholar Sandra Moriarty notes that Peirce's work has become particularly helpful in reading images because he emphasized representation as "a key element in how a sign 'stands for' its object." 14 Peirce formulated three different types of representation, "iconic," "indexical," and "symbolic," which range from the most easily interpreted signs (iconic) to the most complex (symbolic).

Iconic signs are the most basic sign types because they closely resemble the thing they represent: a photograph or film, or a pictogram like those shown below.

![Pictograms for women and garbage](image)

Because iconic images represent a tangible gesture, action, or thing, they are easily understood across cultures. They also can be a part of more complex indexical or symbolic images.

One step up in complexity, index (or indexical) signs are less straightforward but still logical representations of an object. A deer hoofprint in the woods is a sign that a deer passed by. A bullet hole is a sign that both a bullet and a gun were present at a certain time to create the hole. The whistle of a tea kettle is a sign that water is boiling inside. A map is not as literal as a photograph but is a logical representation of a landscape nonetheless—an index sign pointing to a terrain. As literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes described index signs, "they point but do not tell." 15 One has to have a certain amount of lived experience to recognize indexical representations: experience boiling water in a tea kettle or going to the woods looking for deer, for example, to fully understand what a tea kettle whistle or a hoofprint mean.

When reading index signs in media images, we also borrow from our own lived experience to determine how the signs contribute to the overall narrative. If a car advertisement, for example, cuts from an image of a shiny new car to some black-and-white, grainy, flickery footage of cars not recognizable on today's roads, we can read that footage—based on our own experience with today's cars and the media—to mean "old." Besides their inherent connection to spoken and written words, symbolic signs include other cultural indicators: socially defined gestures, collective practices, styles of dress, national emblems, and cultural innuendo—all the things that are learned through one's upbringing, education, and interactions with specific social groups. In the category of socially defined gestures, for example, one hails a taxi differently in Paris (point down) than in the United States (point up); one has to learn through cultural practice whether to point up or down. Similarly, in the United States and elsewhere, red, white, and pink together signify Valentine's Day; orange and black mean Halloween; and red and green mean Christmas. As cultural studies scholars Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall have observed, the meaning of an image "is not in the visual sign itself as a self-sufficient entity, nor exclusively in the sociological positions and identities of the audience, but in the articulation between viewer and viewed, between the power of the image to signify and the viewer's capacity to interpret meaning." 16
The Semiology of "Heil Hitler"

- Compulsory greeting enforced by Nazi regime in 1933
- Civil servants were legally obligated to use the salute as a formal greeting and to end all paper correspondence with "Heil Hitler."
- Greeting was considered a "civic duty."
- Nazi SA (storm troopers) said "Heil Hitler" while clicking their boots.
- Understood as hail but also indicated health, safety, and best wishes, and thus implied "Health to Hitler."
- The greeting framed Hitler as a "Supreme Being" who could in turn grant good health to a greeter's recipients.
- All people of Jewish descent banned from saying "Heil Hitler" by 1937.
- Through racial exclusion, the salute became symbolically linked to German unity and racial superiority.
- Posters throughout Germany proclaimed "Germans use the German Greeting!" So if a German didn't use "Heil," then he or she was "not German." Since Jews were forbidden to say "Heil Hitler," Nazi propaganda implicitly stated that a person could not be both Jewish and German.


Symbolic Storytelling

Symbolic signs can be highly charged and emotional simply because they reflect or comment upon culture. As such, they can be a very powerful means of storytelling, bringing a deeper meaning to an image as viewers are asked to make cultural connections to understand the symbolism. Beer advertising, for example, is often loaded with phallic and sexual imagery that are symbolic indicators for a highly sexualized beer culture (particularly in the United States but also evident in other countries), not so subtly connecting beer (and, given the advertising context, the purchasing of beer) to male sexual conquest. The advertisements that represent this culture have also become part of the culture itself: Beer foam, the sweat on the beer bottle, the angle and direction a male model holds the bottle of beer, allusions to the cultural practice of bachelor parties, the disappearance of wedding rings—all are typical narrative symbols to connect male sexuality to beer.

Symbolic signs can be so charged with meaning, however, that they can easily be misinterpreted. Take a Danish print ad for Tuborg beer that attempted to represent a bachelor party with beer bottles standing in as men. In the ad, seven beer bottles with labels on (signifying dressed men) encircle a beer bottle with no label (signifying a woman just completing a strip tease). The words "bachelor party" are intended to clarify the scene. But the label-less beer bottle might be understood as an undressed man—an awkward message for the heterosexual target audience Tuborg is intent on reaching.

Like any textual message, visuals can thus be complicated and fraught with controversy. They can be extremely evocative, but also extremely vague. Therefore, context is always a critical part of the story and meaning behind any visual message. Let's consider the context of this Carl's Jr. Western Bacon Thickburger commercial, starring Top Chef's Padma Lakshmi. (See the ad online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQDi9-z1Xw.)

The commercial, which was created and released in 2009, shows Lakshmi (who is originally from India, was raised a vegetarian, and is known for her discerning palate) walking through a food market to her own voice-over: "I've always had a love affair with food. And after traveling the world and writing two cookbooks, I think I've tasted every flavor imaginable." She is sweaty, and hikes up her skirt as her voice-over says, "But there's something about the Western Bacon. It reminds me of being in high school, sneaking out before dinner to savor that sweet, spicy sauce, and leaving no evidence behind." The semiotic meaning is not subtle: She's having a sexual liaison with the burger, as the burger (coded "male") drips its "sweet, spicy sauce" on her—a pornographic story served up for the male, teenage target audience for Thickburgers. Lakshmi could be any woman wearing a sheer, low-cut, and clingy dress on a hot summer day. But the fact that she's a celebrity, and also someone known for being on a food show about high cuisine, and a famously self-controlled Top Chef judge at that, gives an ironic intertextual context to the ad, which strategically exploits the notion that she is losing herself sexually over a Carl's Jr. Western Bacon Thickburger.
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REALISM: TRUTH AND PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the most controversial aspects of visual imagery is the relative truthfulness of images and the ease with which images can be manipulated—the question of whether visuals can be trusted. Some visual theorists, like Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag, have repeatedly raised suspicions over the merit of visual representation as an illegitimate replacement for the "real thing." Writing in the 1930s, German cultural critic Walter Benjamin was appalled, for example, that films could replace live theater. For him, "fake" screen performances in front of a "mechanical contrivance" were no match for authentic theater performances, where actors could respond and adapt to a live audience. Sontag made a similar argument with photography. For her, taking a picture was the same as capturing something live and committing "sublimated murder." In other words, photographers rendered something real into a representation and thus detached it from the truth. Both of these cultural theorists were deeply troubled by mass production and consumerism—brought on by industrial-era technology such as film and photography—and the potential for erosion of authentic experience. Photographs are mere mirrors of the real scene at hand.

But what if the people in a scene are not even being truthful in their actions when a photograph was taken? For example, in performing the Nazi salute the English soccer team was not being truthful to their real positions about the Nazi regime. French literary theorist Roland Barthes talks about the nature of the pose and how the presence of a camera—and the fact that one is aware of being photographed—affects the captured image, even if the intent is absolute realism. But what is a "real" pose? Is it a smile?

If you look at photographs from the mid-1800s, particularly daguerreotypes, you'll notice that people's typical expressions are serious: They don't smile. In the
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In the early days of daguerreotype technology, photographic subjects had to keep very still for up to twenty minutes so the image could fix on the copper plate. Apart from this technical limitation, there were also social reasons. Since photography was so new, it was also scary, and many people had their photographs taken with the underlying fear that the camera was capturing their souls, serious poses marking their inner panic. Smiling was also considered vulgar and lower-class. In fact, a popular expression before a picture was about to be taken was “Say prunes.”

This all changed, at least in the United States, when Kodak—trying to aggressively market their new $1 Brownie camera in 1900—sought to make cameras less intimidating and more integrated into people’s everyday life. Kodak did this by celebrating the ease of new technology (“You press the button, we do the rest”), associating the consumer camera with the Kodak girl (“so easy even a girl can do it”), teaching Americans to take pictures of happy events in their lives (celebrations, vacations), and suggesting that the “normal” pose to assume when having one’s picture taken was a smile.

Kodak brought a new era of documentation into our lives. But what kind of documentation? Even today, we don’t tend to take pictures of our happy moments such as people crying, arguing, or attending funerals, and we tend to smile when people point a camera at us, even though we’re not necessarily happy. Are many of the snapshots in our albums, then, fake? On the other hand, the photographs taken before Kodak introduced the smiling standard could also be read as a misrepresentation of reality.

Image Misrepresentation and Manipulation

Photographers, in fact, have been intentionally misrepresenting reality since the earliest days of photography. One of the first concocted photographic poses dates back to the 1830s when Frenchman Hippolyte Bayard, bitter that his photographic process wasn’t recognized before Daguerre’s (who created the now famous daguerreotypes), posed as if he committed suicide.

The very earliest photographers also altered backdrops (and thus altered reality). Civil War photojournalists dragged corpses to different locations and added props to magnify the drama of the battlefield. Early art photographers dangled items from imperceptible threads so that objects seemed to float into the frame, and photographers used all sorts of props to enhance their photographs. Many of the famous Farm Security Administration photographs taken by Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange to document the Dust Bowl and the extreme poverty of the Great Depression were staged, albeit in very subtle ways.

Still, as Barthes noted, even if photographs are a mere representation, at least they do offer some sort of proof that the people or objects photographed were there. For example, even if we weren’t at the stadium in 1938 to witness the pregame ceremonies and the infamous Nazi salute, the photograph of the English soccer team at least offers some documentation that the English players were there, in Berlin’s Olympic Stadium. Or were they? Perhaps the stadium was fake—the real backdrop was really just a field in England, and the football players were digitally pasted into the stadium.

In the left-hand photo above we have done the opposite: using digital manipulation to place the British team onto a 1926 soccer match between England and Jamaica/Haiti. The point is that with the proliferation of programs like Photoshop and other digital image manipulation techniques over the past twenty years, what constitutes reality in photographs has become anyone’s guess.

But while most people associate photo manipulation with new digital technology, it also dates back to the earliest days of photography. This 1917 photograph, for example, fooled many people who actually thought the fairies, which were superimposed using clever dark-room techniques, were real.

Which image is manipulated and which isn’t?
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The two photographs of Charles Dickens above illustrate that, even in 1867, photographers were altering and tidying up publicity photos. Dickens looks disheveled and fatigued in the original photo (left), taken originally in 1861. He was transformed into a quaffed gentleman in 1867 after numerous touch-ups in a photography studio (right). Additionally, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Fidel Castro, and Mussolini all saw the value in retouching photographs to adjust the truth. In many cases they retouched people out of photographs who had fallen out of favor with them.

Retouching photos by hand has, of course, been replaced by far more sophisticated digital techniques. Part of reading images today means reading against the likely possibility that a photograph has been "Photoshopped," or digitally altered. In advertising and promotional imagery especially, nearly all photographs are altered: Bodies are elongated, slimmed, arched, retextured, and colorized. Men's biceps and pectoral muscles are inflated, women's arms and legs are thinned, wrinkles are ironed out, teeth are altered and whitened, and separate heads are often placed onto different bodies.

These practices have generated vigorous discussions about the ethical nature of Photoshop manipulation. Slimming down already too-thin female models or adding more pronounced washboard abs to perfectly fit male models creates false ideas about beauty. Weight obsession and steroid use among teenagers should not come as a surprise given that we are awash with highly distorted images of what it means to be attractive, which build up our anxiety levels and encourage us to buy beauty and health products to "fix" the problem, which is ultimately our inability to ever measure up. Digital manipulation in advertising plays into the most egregious aspects of our consumer culture: Products marketed under false pretenses. How ethical is it for a beauty product company to fake antiwrinkle cream results in their before and after images?

Digital manipulation is also used prolifically in public relations materials and, as with advertising, stirs up controversy about the ethical nature of digital manipulation. Consider the ethics, for example, of a university's public relations department that adds images (via Photoshop or other software) of minority students in their admissions brochure in order to sell the notion of campus diversity to donors or prospective students. Consider too the ethics of a government publicly releasing an image of a missile launch that has an additional missile image digitally inserted (as in the case of Iran in 2009). Today, these practices are routine.

The largest area of concern, however, involves photojournalism, which is based on the notion that a photograph is real. In recent years, some photojournalists have been caught tweaking images for various reasons. Some have strived for a more dramatic composition (and thus front-page status) by compositing two photographs together or eliminating unwanted elements from the frame, thus altering reality. Others have color-corrected photos to, as they say, more closely reflect what their eye actually saw at the time they snapped the picture. Since cameras can't as easily adapt to the green hue of fluorescent lights, for example, or for the competing exposures of a dark inside and a

Hitler, 1937: Joseph Goebbels was removed from the photo on the right.

Stalin circa 1930: The man to the right of Stalin is eliminated in the second photo.
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74  brighter outdoors, some photojournalists defend the use of Photoshop because it makes their images more realistic. To date, the mainstream press has responded to these practices by adopting a zero-tolerance position on any kind of digital manipulation or posing—so as to protect the integrity of their product. Indeed, numerous media establishments have fired photojournalists for tampering with their photos—even those who have tried to make their photos more realistic. For example, the Charlotte Observer suspended Patrick Schneider in 2006 for adjusting the background of a silhouetted firefighter against the morning sun. Schneider argued that he had underexposed the original photograph and was trying to recapture what his eyes really saw. The Observer, however, cited a strict policy against altering colors from the original scene photographed. Meanwhile, the blogosphere has exploded with “fake or photo” or “fauxtography” detection Web sites, ratting out unethical photojournalists or uncannily manipulative public relations firms and alerting readers to the easy of manipulation of journalistic photos in the media.

All of these concerns have led Fred Ritchin of the New York School of Photography to create an icon for digital manipulation and to advocate that all photographers acknowledge any image tampering in their advertising, publicity, art, or photojournalism. The icon is meant to represent a camera lens and should be placed, according to Ritchin’s guidelines, “outside the bottom perimeter of the image, either on the left or right corner.”

But perhaps the real problem is simply the intent to mislead. As filmmaker and photographer critic Errol Morris notes, the extreme response from the mainstream press to ban any kind of photo manipulation is grounded in the notion that there is something true about photography in the first place. “It allows the false assumption: if we can just determine that this photograph wasn’t Photoshopped, then it must be true,” he writes. “But Photoshop serves as a reminder to us of something that we should have known all along: photographs can deceive.” Indeed, an unaltered photograph, like the “objective” treatment of a news story, is no proof of a particular reality. Like any text, it is an interpretation reflecting both the photographer’s point of view and the subject’s. The opposition to digital manipulation—while helpful in developing a critical eye in reading images—also gives us a false sense of consciousness about the supposed truth of any visual image that has not been perceptibly tampered with.

Images in Context

To fully read an image, then, we need to understand the context in which the image was produced, as well as the context in which it continues to exist. Context can include the way the photo or image was made; who made it and why; the historical circumstances under which it was made; the extent to which the image was circulated, altered, and reconfigured; and the way the image continues to be interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals and publics. For example, when George W. Bush, as the governor of Texas, was videotaped in the mid-1990s flipping his middle finger to the cameraman as he sat in a local television studio, the real meaning of the clip was lost as it circulated (without proper context) over the next decade. The image was true (it happened), but it was also false. Without proper context, one couldn’t understand the real story: that Bush was joking around before (not during) a live public television appearance and before he thought the cameras were rolling.

More often than not, the context surrounding a photograph or image exists in written form. (Barthes has argued that an image is forever dependent on verbal text for comprehension.) As such, an image’s context often appears as a caption below or beside it, or within the pages of a book, the news media, or a Web site. The Nazi salute photograph, for example, first appeared in newspapers with various captions and accompanying articles explaining the event. It was later reinterpreted (and given deeper meaning) through the autobiographies of at least two people who were there: national team caption Eddie Hapgood, and younger player Stanley Matthews. Without these verbal accounts—for example, if we were to discover the Nazi salute photo in a box somewhere—we might be at a loss to what the story is. We could infer that the black-and-white photo is a historical record of the Nazi era, assuming we know something about that era. On its own, however, the solitary photograph does not adequately communicate the historical turmoil in which it was created.

The photograph would also not communicate the fact that it went out of circulation for sixty-five years and was resurrected for public consumption by a BBC documentary in 2003. Again, the image took on new meaning. Recast as the “Moment of Shame” in the British news media and in the blogosphere, the picture and the story behind it have become a reference point for understanding government conciliation in the face of power and authoritarian rule. “That picture of impressionable footballers obeying orders from mutton-headed apparatchiks went round the world and became a lasting source of shame to this country,” wrote British columnist David Mellor in 2008. Without mooring or a backstory, a photograph is thus a slim measure of evidence that something happened, and it can have a huge range of interpretations.

If interpreting a photograph is often dependent on verbal descriptions, we must be critical readers of these accounts as well. Captions, accompanying articles, and autobiographical accounts surrounding a photograph can be misleading or utterly false, and quotes can be taken out of context. For example, Eddie Hapgood’s personal recollections about his team’s locker-room dissent before the 1938 soccer match, which appear in his published autobiography (1946), may have been shaped by historical hindsight. Was his own visceral protest what really happened, or did he perhaps alter his story after the photograph was published, after the British press
made a big deal out of the photo (initially blaming Germany for requiring the salute) and after World War II revealed the horrible truths about Nazi Germany?

To successfully read an image, we need to understand:

- the compositional forces (either intended or unintended by the image’s creator);
- the various signs within the image that are either evident, learned, or culturally imbued;
- the possibilities of posing or digital manipulation (especially when photographs are concerned);
- and perhaps most important, the context in which these images were produced, as well as the context in which they continue to exist.

Every choice a creator makes in terms of framing, content placement, manipulation (whether ethical or unethical), and textual mooring affects the way the image operates in our social discourse. Visual literacy is thus a way toward interpreting the stories behind the image and attempting to make sense of our image-laden culture.

| CRITICAL PROCESS 1 | Composition in Photography |

This exercise is about aesthetics and the power of the photographer, videographer, or film director to create emotion and meaning through framing choices alone. Select a professional photograph from a Web site, newspaper, or magazine or, if you want to be slightly more ambitious, a three-to-four shot clip from film or TV. Your goal is to think about how this visual text uses the principles of composition described in this chapter. What choices did the photographer make in terms of depth, arrangement of space, and other aesthetic principles?

Describe the choices the author of the image made. Think about the use of color, form, line direction, depth, foreground versus background, frame magnetism, and rule of thirds. If it is a moving text, describe the movement and shot juxtaposition. Do these uses conform to the principles of composition described in this chapter? If they do, what principles do they use? If they don’t, how do they differ?

Analyze the function of the choices made in presenting the image. What is the intended audience of the image, and how do the aesthetic choices affect that audience? Did the photographer want the audience to feel a certain way?

Interpret what the photographer or artist might have meant in creating these feelings or audience reactions. Why do you think the photographer wanted to make the audience feel this way?

| CRITICAL PROCESS 2 | Semiotic Analysis of Visual Texts |

Undertake a semiotic textual analysis of a magazine advertisement showing how meaning is constructed. Choose an ad with people in it, one that is rich with cultural meaning. The more interesting and complex the ad, the more there is to talk about. Forget that this is an advertisement created by an ad agency trying to sell you something, and just focus on the image as a complicated visual text.

Describe the composition of the ad; then describe the various signs (icon, index, symbol) and the way the ad is anchored (or not anchored) through text. What ideologies do you think are communicated through the advertisement?

Analyze the patterns of meaning: How do the cultural signs you identify point to a general message?

Interpret what the individual signs mean (and ultimately what the general message of the entire image means). Start with individual signs: If the ad contains a woman with blond hair, then describe the meaning of blond hair in our culture. If the ad portrays a man with a muscular physique, then what does that say about our attitudes toward masculinity and the pressure men are under to stay in shape? If someone has a crew cut, then what does this say about that person? Does this image make you think “military,” and can you address the “military culture” that seeps into U.S. culture at large? Do you think James Bond? State trooper? Rock star? Are there any intertextual references to other media texts within the image? If so, what might they mean? In short, dig deep into the core signifiers of your culture and explain what they signify, as if you are talking to aliens who know nothing about our culture.

Evaluate the meaning of the image. To what extent is the ad manipulated, either by photo-editing software, or in terms of a manipulated rendering of reality? Does this image reflect or challenge mainstream values? Is it sexist? Is it racist? Does it convey positive or negative body-image or gender-role connotations? What can you say about the ideology behind the image and its relation to your own ideological position?

Engage in a discussion with your classmates about your semiotic interpretations. Did your image communicate the same kind of “common sense” narrative as many of your peers’ images? Why? How?