

# Classic visual storytelling

A brief introduction , some basics and occasional reflections



Visual storytelling is a matter of both tangible expressions on a surface and deeply complex matters related to neuroscience, psychology and culture.

For every complex problem, there is an  
**answer that is clear, simple and wrong**

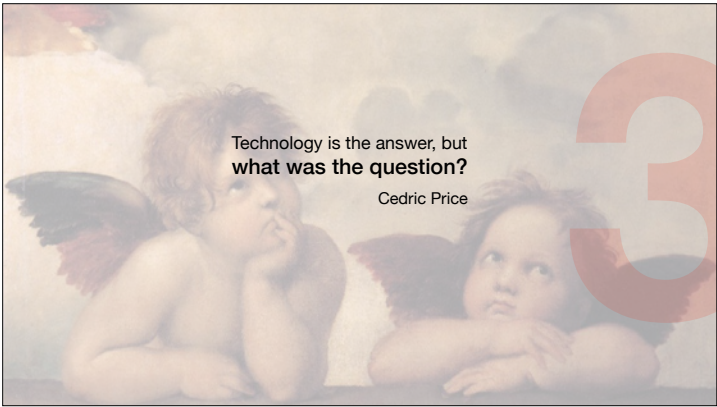
H L Mencken



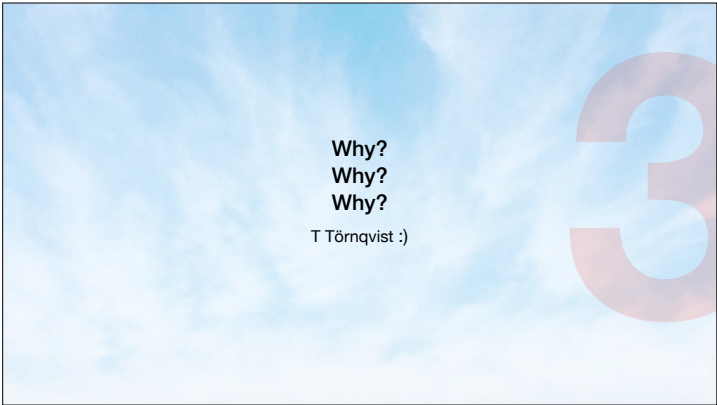
What meets the eye may appear to be an alluringly simple solution...



... but as in all design and communication, the key factor is it's relevance to...



.. the fundamental questions asked, the purpose of the tale in a negotiated communication process with sender, medium and recipient involved.



Not knowing your prior knowledge in this field, or exactly what other lecturers may tell, I beg your pardon for telling too little, too much or totally incomprehensible stuff. If nothing else, I hope to challenge your curiosity and help you remember the three most important questions in any communication: why, why and why.

<b>Concepts</b> Things to know	<b>Flow</b> Processes	<b>Tools</b> Visual elements
<b>Cognition</b> In your mind	<b>Format</b> Packaging media	<b>Types</b> Context again: )
<b>Context</b> External settings	<b>Form</b> Visual design principles	<b>Tips</b> Shortcuts + shortcomings (?)

I will try to briefly introduce a few of the classic essentials in a somewhat less academic way as a series of sketchy touch-downs. Simplified and scattered with many relevant matters omitted but more as matters to consider than systemic rules, hoping that your personal interest and other lectures will develop this further.

## Concepts to know

- Narrative
- Narration
- Narrator



All story-telling relate to the core and developed content, also the purpose and meaning of what is told. This will need an appropriate form, a mode and technique to be conveyed to the audience. The medium itself is key in this but cannot be entirely separated from the narrator as visual and other kinds of communication is a negotiated understanding between the sender/author and the receiving audience also in modalities, media characteristics and channel specifics. Including agreement on the meaning of visual expressions, if you will.

## Concepts to know

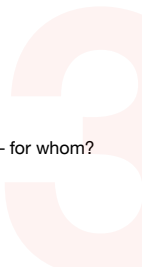
- Narrative
- Narration
- Narrator
- Message/promise
- Packaging/medium
- Delivery/channel



In market communication, messages are turned into communication concepts and developed into creative solutions for delivery to a target group. What is the promise, how can it be packaged in a compelling message and mediated to the relevant audience?

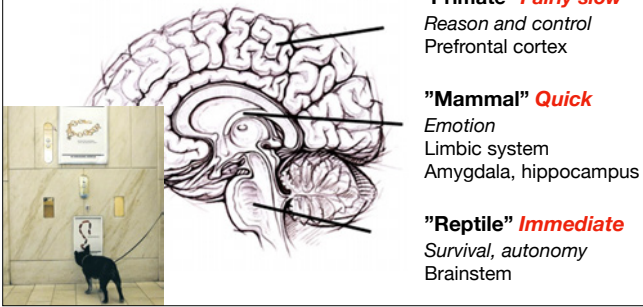
## Concepts to know

- Narrative
- Narration
- Narrator
- Message/promise
- Packaging/medium
- Delivery/channel
- What?
- How?
- By whom – for whom?



Each and every part of the process will benefit from a clear understanding of and focus on the essentials steps and the consequences for the visuals.

## Cognition



A lot can be said about how we perceive and understand visual impressions but let's state a few basic things. We are pre-attentively and consciously biased. We can respond to visual stimuli before we actually feel and we feel much quicker and much stronger than we think.

Depending on the story and the audience, it can be...

## Kiki/takete



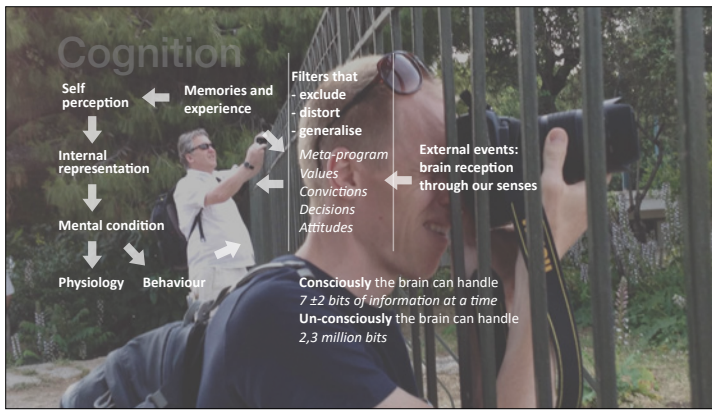
.. useful to consider also for humans how to address the three "brains" for effective storytelling on multiple levels.

Also note how we may perceive visual objects to be threatening or aggressive not by what they depict but merely by shape and colour as in this graphic "violation". While the kiki or takete features appear sharp and hostile...

## Baluba/malemma



... the soft and rounded characteristics of baluba or malemma are perceived to be more inviting, harmless and friendly even when applied to dangerous predators.



Hence, images can be deceptive and eye-witnesses are not to be trusted. We filter, interpret and may distort what we see to create meaning in our minds. Successful visual story-telling need to consider not only the content and message, the sender's intentions, the media modalities and the audience's ability to perceive but also the entire context of the visual communication and acknowledge the active minds of an audience.

## Framing & priming

- Setting place, time, characters, props as keys for interpretation
- Planting: pieces of information leading to
- Pay-off: result / punch line / Call to Action



What we perceive of an image is also affected by our prior knowledge and expectations. Efficiency in storytelling and desired achievement will increase by the author defining the frame of interpretation and preparing the audience by early hints of what's to come.

## Context



The frame of interpretation includes not only the formal encoding and decoding of the content, media literacy and perceptual factors but...

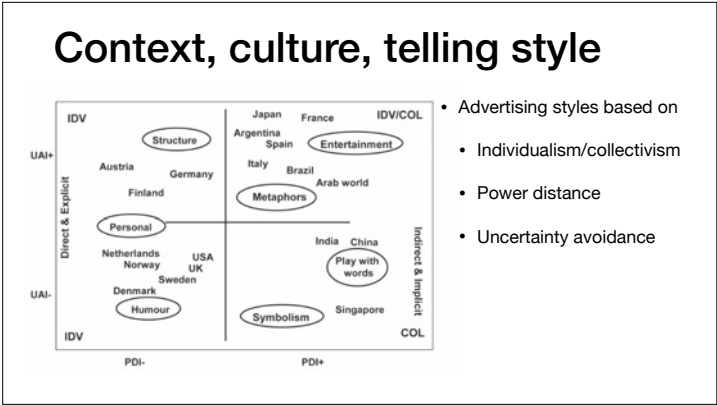




... also culture and values. High-context cultures and sub-cultures use symbols and intimations, often in elaborate style and with a collectivistic approach. Acknowledgement by the collective matters more...



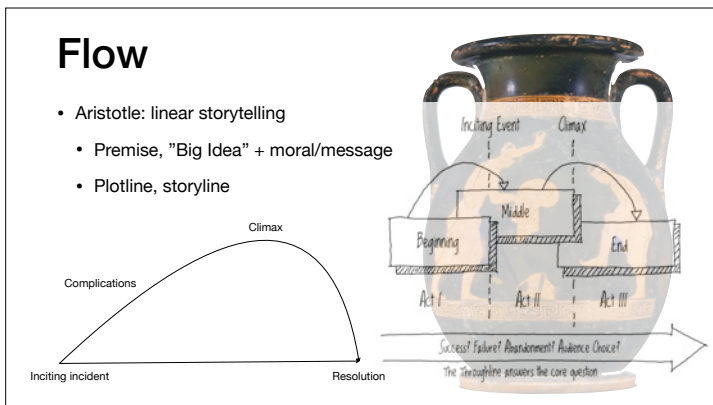
... than personal satisfaction. Low-context cultures appreciate straight-forwardness and demonstration of competitiveness may be considered appropriate here while rude elsewhere. Likeability or persuasion is a crucial matter of choice in the marketing storytelling and "tone-of-voice" is also visual.



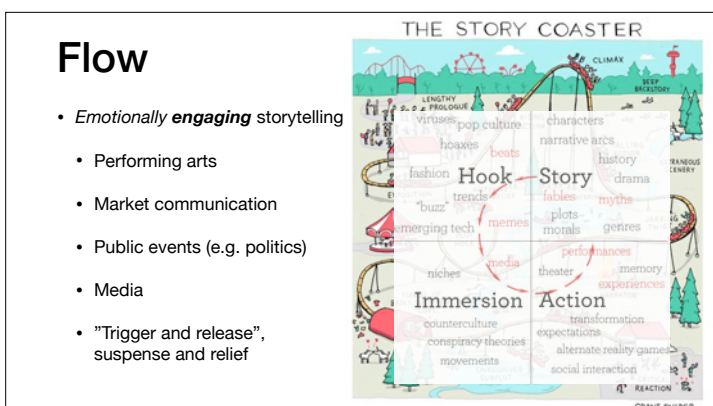
Cultural value parameters affect both the narrative and the narration so typically different advertising styles are more or less successful in different cultures.



Culture is sometimes compared to an iceberg. The tangible media design "above the surface" is merely a small part of it and good communication design needs to pay attention to what lies below. It's not just "how it looks" but "why it looks", what drives the story and motivate the expressions.



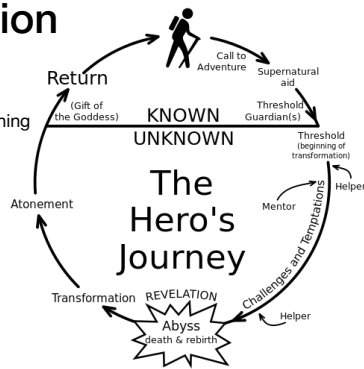
Visual flow is about process in time, cognition and in space... Already in ancient times, the Greek philosopher Aristotle stated a story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Also, the series of events played out need to be founded on a core idea for coherence and forward drive. Aristotle's basic principles are still applied in the contemporary "Hollywood" type of drama and many other kinds of storytelling although the dramatic arc may need more of suspense and sensation...



... to meet the cravings of modern audiences. Emotion precedes reason and may be key for attracting attention and cultivating interest in the content. It's very much a matter of show and tell, the importance of visuals has grown immensely with the technical media development. For the spectator, recognition and relating are key factors for engagement but so are elements of surprise. The story, no matter what kind, needs a hook.

## Flow: progression

- Visual expressions of processes
- Symbolic representations of meaning
  - People/roles
  - Objects/magic
  - Places/shrines
  - Events/rituals



The essence of maturing and paths of life are quite similar in cultures all over the world and so are representations in the archetypal myths and characters. The core structure and storyline of overcoming challenges to achieve what needs to be done is consequently familiar to most audiences as described by Joseph Campbell in "The Monomyth" or "the Hero's Journey".



The typical elements are key in Norse sagas as the Sigurd saga, displayed in this millennium-old rune carving not far from here and later re-used in Wagner's operas, in strikingly timed visual expressions.



These typical themes and symbols are also prevalent in national myths and culture stories about uniqueness and historic destiny world-wide. Shared archetypes may be turned into distinguishing stereotypes. The power of visual stories as shortcuts to the public mind is frequently made obvious in contemporary media.



## Flow: progression



Fictional media, such as the box-office mega-hits Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, may use it with all the hereditary visual symbols and references on display...

## Flow: pro(?)gression



... but it also works with a more complex contemporary cast and setting. An ironic twist uses visual deterioration of character and a car to externally represent the internal action in the film titled Sideways.

## Visual flow



Running sideways from left to right, the Western reading order allows series of still images to represent time and motion by using space in a comic strip format. Top-down order seems to work well anywhere...



...and right to left will do well in cultures where this is the established reading order but combinations may cause conflict..

### Visual flow

Source: Global Interface Design – Tony Fernandez, p.26  
FIGURE 2: Different colour palettes depending on culture.

.. unless being well-known and expected as in these Japanese mobile GUIs.  
Flow of motion and time can be perceived as circular but are rather impractical in writing systems and may give a static impression in visuals.

### Frozen moments

- Before?
- Now!
- After?

A single still-image may also visually represent a flow, a process. A frozen moment in time where the before and the after may be indicated by visual cues and clues but essentially are played out in the mind of the spectator. Too much or too little information may block the imagination, the classic rule of thumb is to give “80%” and let the audience fill in the rest.  
Here, the shapes and directions of the image composition contribute to discovery and expectation.

## Frozen moments



Our interpretation of the moment is affected by how we perceive the context.

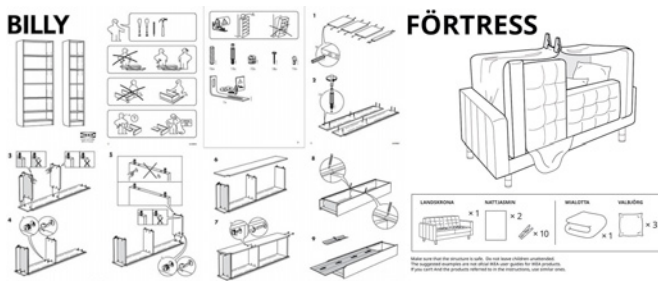
Cropping an image may alter how we feel about and understand the situation and the story told.

## Semi- and non-linear storytelling

- Inter-active (explorative, navigable, etc.)... Other lecturers?
- Demonstrative: show and tell, theme and examples... Instructions, etc.
- Circular/epic structure: intro, elaboration, return and conclusions... Lectures?

A lot can be said about non-linear structures but I believe others will tell you more about it so I'll skip to the two later types.

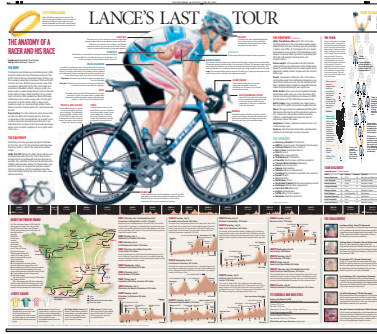
## Semi- and non-linear storytelling



The IKEA assembly instructions are presented in a distinctive order. First things first but it allows users to go back and forth. The visual style is about as impersonally factual as possible for maximum clarity and considered to be part of the brand story.

Simplicity also invites make-overs, implying new meaning and further developing active participation in the visual storytelling.

## Semi- and non-linear storytelling

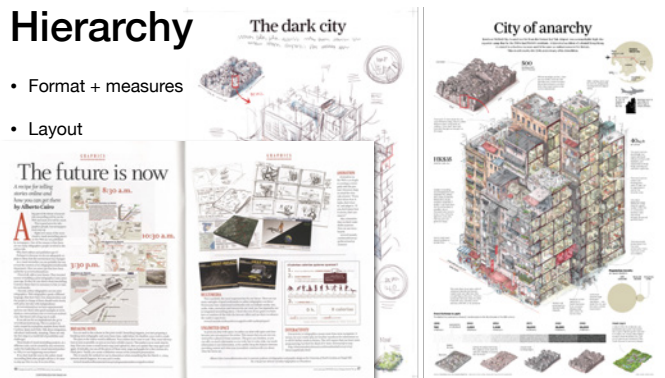


- Point-of-entry?
- Gaze pattern?
- Point-of-exit?

A circular model, as epic storytelling, sets a theme, often by an intro, elaborates on details and will return more or less to the start by conclusions or wrap-up summaries. Attracting attention is fundamental for the ability to develop interest. The most important matter can be made the first thing noticed not by placement but by contrast in size, colour, brightness and style.

## Hierarchy

- Format + measures
- Layout



Being first observed can also be used as a point of entry to the content and a scale of expressions used to guide attention in due order. Visual hierarchy can be based on information hierarchy.

Dynamism in storytelling will require clear priorities in organizing the content also visually. The requirements of legible text in combination with striking or explanatory news graphics underpin this.

## Formats



Structured visual storytelling applies to all kinds of media but the basic forms may need adaptation to the specific format. Not only modalities, form factor or technology matter but also how it is to be consumed.



## Formats



Any parent having “read” childrens’ picture books by the bedside knows the publishing format itself can be of utmost importance. Turning pages is always an adventure but particularly here with the die-cuts as an integral part of the “What happened next” storytelling.

## Layout

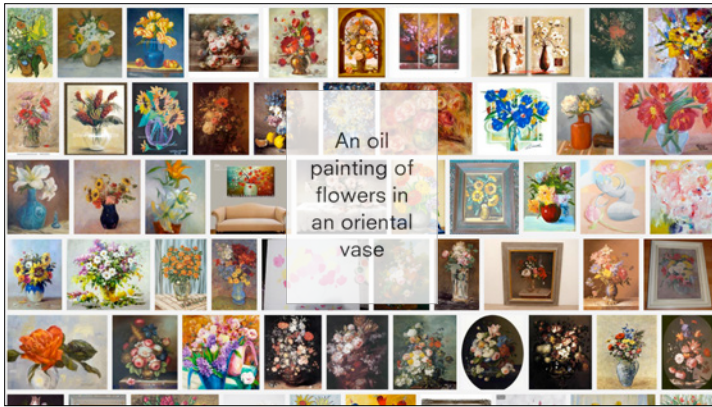


Frames on a page, pages in a spread, sections in a paper, a magazine or a book. Layout is about organizing attention with a purpose. Will Eisner uses placement, size and direction not only to attract and guide but also to create movement and set the mood for his graphic novel. Also by type.

## Layout

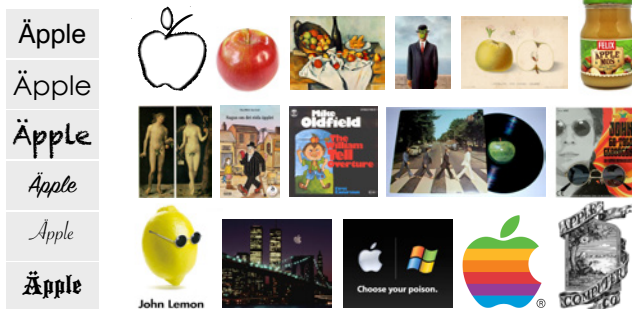


Width, height and perceived depth can be used not only to frame and stage stories. Two-dimensional depth and sense of motion in still images structure and communicate space and emotion differently but efficiently here.



Form is telling by itself as is the lack of it. The carefully edited content needs to be made tangible, appropriately packaged and presented to the audience.

## Expressions form impressions



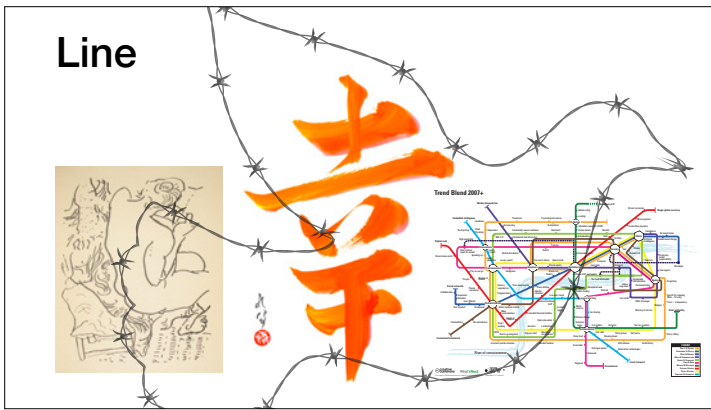
The elements of the story turned into visual representations and arranged according to purpose and cohesive principles. An apple is not just an apple as we associate looks with meaning.

## Form elements and principles

- Visual elements/features (point and line, shape, texture, space, value, color...)
- arranged (layout, typography...) according to
- principles (unity, balance, scale/proportion, contrast/emphasis, rhythm, hierarchy...)

So, we have a number of tools in the visual designer's toolbox, to be used with awareness. I will only touch briefly on a few matters here.

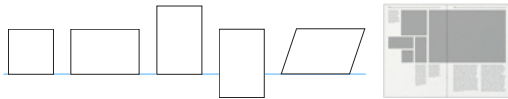
## Line



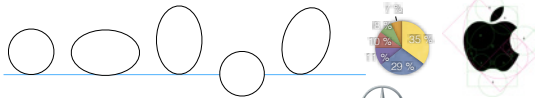
A line is not just a line. It can enclose or connect. Its visual properties may be a message in itself.

## Shape

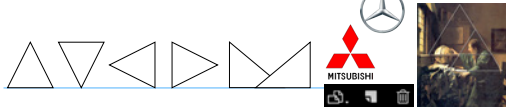
- Square



- Circle



- Triangle

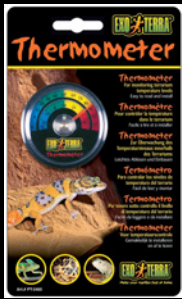


The fundamental geometric shapes are not only effective building blocks for graphic objects, image composition and layout. They are also visual directors and affect our impressions of motion, weight and other physical properties.



Negative shape, or white space, can be just as valuable as positive shape for visual priorities and harmony.

## Colour

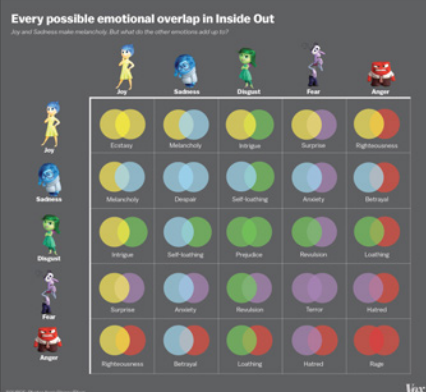
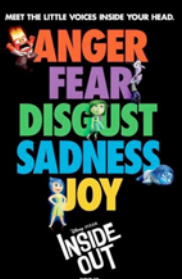


Colours may energize or cool off, express conflict or harmony and by themselves set the mood for a story.



Hue, value and chroma can model space and help visual priority by holding back or bringing objects forward.

## Colour



Colours may communicate naturally by their properties but may also be used as specific symbols as attempted here by Pixar's animators.

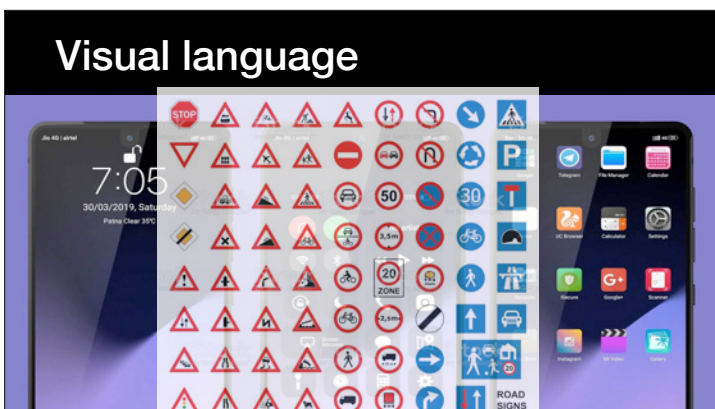




As visual expressions of emotion are to a large extent based on culture and heritage, the colour representation intended here may not have the same meaning everywhere.



Depending on culture, death may be black, purple, white or pale blue. Or even colourful. Red can within the same culture symbolize anger, love, danger or luxury depending on the situation. Knowing the context is paramount for understanding symbols.

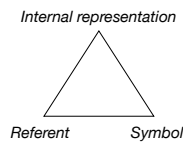


Selected visual elements and principles can be coordinated into designed visual languages. The semantics of elements and objects with specific meaning organized in a system, a syntax for how to use them. GUIs, visual information systems and brand communication are but a few examples.

## Semiotics (simplified)

- Sign
  - Transfers meaning, the graphics
- Code
  - A system within which the signs are organized
- Culture
  - The culture/system of reference within which the sign and code works

The semiotic triangle:  
three parts of a **sign**



Visual semiotics originates from linguistic theory but serves well for practical analysis of visual messages made tangible as "signs". It is also useful for visual design decisions. The sign itself uses a tangible visual symbol which will be meaningful only if the maker and the audience share the same reference in the external world and the audience has the keys to de-code and understand it.

## Semiotics (simplified)

- Analysis in three orders
  - Denotation
  - Connotation
  - Myth, personal or ideological frame



Denotations are really simple observations of the objects, literal identification of the recently mentioned elements and principles. Connotation adds associations and perceptions, decoding emotions and meaning. Myth is a third and higher order, relating to the dominant ideology or set of values in which the sign may be made or interpreted, e.g. propaganda, feminism, etc. You can try analyzing this Nazi propaganda poster by the what's, the how's and the why's in these three orders, if you like.

## Semiotics: three types of signs

### Icon

*Depicting, the signifier looks like the signified concept.*

### Index

*indicates/correlates to the signified, points to the cause/effect, e.g. smoke indicates fire and a lifted nose indicates smell.*

### Symbol

*An arbitrary, agreed-upon, signifier for something that may look totally different or be invisible.*



To make things a bit more interesting, the same shape may have different meaning depending on the type of sign, if it is iconic, indicative or symbolic. Is it a salami sausage? Evidence of a wolf passing by my children's primary school? Or a warning sign within a system of stated significance?

## Genre code

Icon, index, symbol...

- *Form is not enough*
- *We look for meaning, overt or covert/hidden messages*
- *This is often domain related*
- *Contextual awareness provides the tools for interpretation: narrators may use framing and priming*
- *Audience may use...?*



I also must mention that in visual storytelling, certain genre codes have evolved. The classic A-shape moved in the public mind from the saluting "present arms" symbol to a first person point-of-view representing...



...masculine dominance typically representing the Wild West genre and eventually all kinds of thrilling, cheap pulp fiction. No longer only genre code but also an attitude, a style statement perceived to be cool in a more modern ironic context.

## Style

- Narrative
- Visuals + modalities
- Contextual



Together the tools of elements and principles can tell a story by not only presenting content but also adding layers of visual information and qualities of emotion. Appropriately chosen they can form a coherent style with purpose and meaning. Fun as they are, these 1970's comics by the French cartoonist Jean Ache play with the visual signature styles of identified famous artists on top of the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale but they stay on the surface and don't tell anything about the reasons behind the looks. Watch out for style over substance, content may be king but context is imperial.

# Visual storytelling

- Form follows function
- Structure
- Use the right tools with awareness
- Ask the right questions



This brief lecture gave a simplified overview of various aspects on visual storytelling, while omitting a lot. I expect you noticed the importance of the number three in visual storytelling and particularly remember the three most important questions. Pictures also displayed visual metaphors, puns and un-explained elements on purpose. I hope you feel encouraged to invest a little bit of your time and attention to explore this further. Practice makes the master...



... so this is to be continued in practice by you.