

# Theoretical Advances in Critical Visual Analysis: Perception, Ideology, Mythologies, and Social Semiotics

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## *Abstract*

*This article discusses how social semiotics is contributing to advancing the field of critical visual analysis. First, the article introduces social semiotics as a discipline, by outlining its theoretical foundations, methodological principles, and scholarly agenda. Second, it discusses how established paradigms such as semiotics, iconography, and cultural studies have approached notions such as meaning and ideology in relation to visual signification. Third, it discusses the distinctive nature of the social semiotic approach to ideology in visual analysis. The article finally argues that the critical ends of social semiotics can benefit greatly from a closer – critical and political – reading of Barthes' *Mythologies* (1970/1990) as well as an increased concern with the role of perception in visual signification.*

## **I. Introduction**

**I**n “Rhetoric of the image,” Roland Barthes writes that “the viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message” (Barthes, 1964/1977, p. 36). He then explains that the “confusion in reading” stemming from this corresponds to the function – and the *communicative power* – of the mass image. This suggests that images are never innocent. However, their messages often are *naturalized* by being associated with a given perceptual object. In analyzing images, then, it is necessary to

account not only for their cultural norms, but also for their perceptual qualities. Visual texts differ from verbal texts, because they are communicative across cultural codes while also carrying culturally specific meanings.

This article discusses how the emerging paradigm of social semiotics is contributing to advancing the field of critical visual analysis, by means of an approach that “aims for both deconstructive and social significance” (Iedema, 2001, p. 186). First, I will introduce social semiotics as a discipline, by outlining its theoretical foundations, methodological principles and scholarly agenda. Second, I will explain how more established paradigms have approached the concept of ideology. In doing this, I will also discuss how each of these paradigms has conceived of the process of signification in visual discourse. Third, I will discuss the distinctive nature of the social semiotic approach to ideology in visual analysis, as this relates (in terms of differences and similarities) to each of the paradigms previously discussed. Finally, I will argue that the critical ends of social semiotics can benefit greatly from a closer – critical and political – reading of Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1970/1990) as well as an increased concern with the role of perception in visual signification.

## II. Social Semiotics

Social semiotics originates from a synthesis of structuralist semiotics and Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics. Social semiotics – and, more specifically, visual social semiotics as defined by Jewitt & Oyama (2001) – is functionalist in the sense that it considers all visual texts as having been developed to perform specific actions, or semiotic work. The structuralist semiotic approach to representation has been typically interested in deconstructing texts in order to identify *codes*, or sets of rules that are agreed upon within a given cultural system, and that thus allow the members of the same culture to understand each other by attaching the same meanings to the same signs. Although social semiotics is interested in deconstructing a text to identify the elements that make up its structure, its fundamental aim goes beyond the mere understanding of the structure of relationships and differences that characterizes a given sign system. Its main aim is to look systematically at how textual strategies are deployed to convey certain meanings. Deconstructing a (visual) text in a systematic manner is a means to subject its meanings to critical analysis (Iedema, 2001). For social semioticians, the key issue is “who made the rules and how and why they might be changed” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p. 135).

For this reason, social semiotics replaces the notion of *code* with that of *semiotic resource*. Unlike *code*, the notion of *resource* accounts for change and power imbalance in the visual signification process, as defined by its two ends: representation (or, encoding) and interpretation (decoding). Only certain

social actors – such as the producers of mass images and *visual grammars* (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) – have the power to establish as well as break the rules of visual representation. This is because semiotic resources are not merely means of communicative exchange, but have been produced in the course of cultural histories, stemming from specific interests and purposes (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The way in which semiotic resources are mobilized in a text creates a field of meaning potentials, that is, “a field of possible meanings, which need to be activated by the producers and viewers of images” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p. 135).

Meanings are not permanently fixed or certain; however, the field of possible meanings that can be attributed to given semiotic resources is limited. This is because those who make and benefit from the rules of visual representation also constrain meaning potentials by favoring certain interpretations or *readings* over others. Conversely, Jewitt and Oyama (2001) point out that semiotic resources are used both by producers and viewers as cognitive resources to make sense of visual messages. An example of this relationship between semiotic resources and meaning potentials can be found in their analysis of the visual representation of masculinity in British sexual health materials aimed at teenagers. They discuss how a resource such as *point of view* can be used – even unwittingly – by the producers of educational materials in ways that affirm hegemonic norms of masculinity and narrowly define male and female sexuality as opposite poles.

Jewitt and Oyama explain that the semiotic resource of point of view became available in visual representation as a result of the invention of linear perspective during the Renaissance. Although it later became established as the *natural* way of visual representation, the subjective point of view offered to the observer by perspective had become established “in a time in which subjectivity and individuality became significant social values” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p. 136). They then explain how this semiotic resource is currently used in the specific domain of health and sexual education. For example, in a poster promoting safe sex through the use of condoms, a young couple is sitting in a convertible. The man is sitting in the driver’s seat and is positioned centrally and frontally in relation to the viewer, whereas the woman is looking at her partner and away from the viewer. Whereas the man engages the viewer as *active*, the woman is portrayed as *other* and *passive*. The meaning potentials made possible by the way in which point of view is deployed in this text are narrowed down to few hegemonic reading options.

From a methodological standpoint, social semioticians analyze images according to three main *metafunctions*, which allows them to deconstruct texts into three main types of meaning. These are *representation*, *interaction* or *orientation*, and *composition* or *organization* (Iedema, 2001; Jewitt & Oyama,

2001). In Jewitt and Oyama's health poster example, the representational meaning is found in the image's story: a (sexual) relationship between a young woman and a young man in an urban setting. The interactive meaning is found in the relationship to the viewer: the woman looks away while the man makes *contact* with and is thus less socially distanced from the viewer through a frontal point of view. The compositional meaning can be found in the image's layout, where the young man and the condom packet are placed in a salient position (center) and the text anchors the image as a health advertisement.

In his analysis of a documentary about budget management related conflicts between doctors and administrators at a Melbourne hospital, Iedema uses these three metafunctions to highlight that the documentary favors the doctors. These are not only represented as more active (*representation*), but they are also filmed at level with the camera and therefore as less socially distant than the administrators, who are often filmed from a low angle (*interaction* or *orientation*). In addition, each sequence relating to the administrators is consistently followed by a dramatic sequence regarding one of the doctors' patients (*composition* or *organization*). This shows that "organizational, orientational and representational patterns and choices enhance and reinforce each other" (Iedema, 2001, p. 193).

Using these three metafunctions to analyze visual texts is a systematic way to deconstruct them and reveal their patterns. Social semioticians believe that being able to systematically analyze texts "provides the possibility for renegotiating the meanings inherent in such constructs rather than seeing these as fixed, irrevocable and natural" (Iedema, 2001, p. 201). This concern with reversing or changing dominant ideological assumptions through semiotic action is a major distinctive trait of the social semiotic paradigm.

### III. Meaning and Ideology in Established Paradigms

The co-founders of traditional semiotics, Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, were neither interested in visual analysis nor in ideology. However, their philosophical models of how signification works in language laid the theoretical foundations for much later work in cultural theory. Peirce and Saussure's semiotic theories diverged greatly, and in fact started two separate theoretical lineages, rooted in American and French semiotic scholarship respectively. However, these two theorists' models share a notion that is of fundamental importance for a broad and widely used definition of ideology as *a set of socially constructed meanings or norms that become embedded and naturalized in the cultural fabric, to the extent that they become invisible or common sense*. I am referring to the notion of social convention, as expressed by Peirce's concepts of *habit* and *symbol* (Peirce, 1931-1958) and Saussure's *arbitrariness* (Saussure, 1916/1983).

Peirce's main focus was on the relationship between a sign and its object. He identified three main types of signs, characterized by three different modes of relationship to their object, or referent (Chandler, 2002). Firstly, an *index* is a sign that has a direct relationship to its object, in terms of physical or causal contiguity. For example, footprints and photographs are both indexical in that they are both physical *traces* (left by feet and light, respectively), whereas *signals* such as a phone ringing or *pointers* such as a directional signpost literally direct our attention to their objects.

Secondly, an *icon* is a sign that bears similarity or resemblance to its object. A photograph is an icon in that it *looks like* its subject, and so are maps, visual signs that identify ladies' and gentlemen's restrooms and – in verbal language – onomatopoeia (Fiske, 1990). Thirdly, a symbol is a sign that is not directly connected or similar to his object but is purely conventional. Symbols are connected to their objects by virtue of agreement, rules or *habitual connection*. Words, numbers, traffic lights, and specific languages such as morse code are symbols, in that their relationship to an object must be learned (Chandler, 2002). Peirce's typology of signs can be seen as a continuum ranging from most motivated or least conventional to most conventional or least motivated, where indexes are the most motivated and symbols are purely conventional signs (Fiske, 1990).

Unlike Peirce, Saussure was “concerned primarily with the relationship of signifier to signified and with one sign to others” (Fiske, 1990, p. 51). In other words, Saussure's conception of meaning was *structural* and *relational*, whereas Peirce's was primarily *referential*. Saussure's *sémiologie* brought social life into the semiotic equation. Saussure claimed that every sign is the result of an arbitrary connection between its signifier (form) and its signified (content). In addition, the meaning of a signifier – for example, the color red meaning stop in a traffic light – is defined by its relationship of difference to other signs – for example, the color green – in the same system. In this sense, signs “do not possess a fixed or essential meaning” (Hall, 1997a, p. 31).

Saussure's notion of arbitrariness, then, “establishes the autonomy of language in relation to reality” (Chandler, 2002, p. 28). Language does not reflect reality; on the contrary, language constructs reality. Unlike the Peircean sign, the Saussurean sign is always fixed by cultural codes and is intrinsically defined by its being part of a system of other signs – the language system. In this sense, there is no natural or inevitable reason why a given signifier and its signified should be permanently connected.

This implies that meanings can be *unfixed*, since they are historically and culturally constructed (Hall, 1997a). Saussure's notion of arbitrariness and Peirce's idea that symbolic signs are defined by means of habitual connection are thus fundamental for a discussion of ideology. Social conventions must

be established and learned, and they can change across cultural contexts or over time. Thanks to its emphasis on the historical and cultural situatedness of meaning, the Saussurean approach to signification has been widely adopted in cultural theory and visual analysis. However, in the last part of this article I will emphasize that Peirce's typology can be very helpful when looking at the interaction between perception and culture in visual signification.

Saussure's follower Roland Barthes was the first semiologist to look at signs and signification as dynamic elements of any given social and cultural fabric. Whereas Saussure had looked at signification in culture in a *synchronic* manner (as if frozen in time), Barthes was interested in how meanings change across cultural and historical contexts. I refer to his discipline as semiology, then, not only because he worked within the French paradigm, but also because under his influence the term *semiology* has become more broadly associated with an interest in the analysis of cultural practices and, specifically, popular culture. Barthes was particularly interested in the role of photography in mass communication.

In "The photographic message" (1961/1977) and "Rhetoric of the image" (1964/1977), Barthes uses a linguistic approach for the study of visual communication, claiming that visual signification can be articulated into the two separate levels of *denotation* and *connotation*. The level of denotation corresponds to the literal meaning of an image, the immediate meaning relating to *what is objectively* represented the image. The level of connotation corresponds to the symbolic or ideological meaning of an image, which corresponds to the meaning – or range of possible meanings – inscribed by cultural codes. The same denotative meaning can be associated with different connotative meanings, according to the historical and cultural context in which the message is produced and interpreted. Conversely, the same symbolic meaning can be expressed through different denotative meanings.

A now classic example used by Barthes (1964/1977) is that of an ad for a pasta brand. The denotative meaning (which is hard to describe without adding connotation) of the "Pasta Panzani" ad is roughly this: a fishnet shopping bag full of packaged pasta, canned tomato sauce, onions, peppers and mushrooms and, on the right side, a package of grated cheese, a tomato and a mushroom. All of this is displayed against a red background. Its connotative meaning is that of *Italianicity*. Barthes also points out that this ideological association between a simple shopping bag bursting with Mediterranean vegetables and pasta (along with the name Panzani) and the essence of being Italian generally works for the French, whereas Italians might not even associate a connotation of *Italianicity* to this message.

In this sense, the ideological meaning of the image is context-dependent, and to achieve the same ideological ends in different contexts the denotative

meaning may need to be differentiated. The denotative message, then, functions as a necessary support for the connotative message, which is therefore seen as “the imposition of second meaning on the photographic message proper” (Barthes, 1961/1977, p. 20). Given this analytical distinction, ideology is seen as a second order of signification. Rhetorical visual analysis has relied heavily on Barthes’ distinction between denotation and connotation. The “set of connotators” (Barthes, 1964/1977, p. 49) that make up the rhetorical framework of an image have been studied as being super-imposed to the level of denotation (Barnhurst, Vari, & Rodriguez, 2004). From this perspective, ideology has thus been treated as a parasitical sign, attached to – by means of cultural coding – the denotative image.

In *Mythologies* (1970/1990), Barthes introduces an additional ideological layer to signification: myth. Whereas connotation is the ideological meaning that is *attached* to a specific sign, myth relates to ideological concepts that are *evoked* by a certain sign. These correspond to a worldview (Chandler, 2002) or “a culture’s way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding it” (Fiske, 1990, p. 88).

Barthes gives a striking visual example to explain this point. He looks at the cover of a popular French magazine, *Paris-Match*. On the cover, a young black soldier in a French uniform “is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour” (Barthes, 1970/1990, p. 116). The denotative meaning of this image per se is simply *a young black soldier giving the French salute*. The connotative meaning of the image is a combination of Frenchness and militariness. However, the combination of denotative and connotative meaning of this image (to which Barthes refers simply as *meaning*) becomes *form* for a third layer of meaning that is evoked (not symbolized) by the image as a “chain of related concepts” (Fiske, 1990, p. 88). This third order of signification is: “that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors” (Barthes, 1970/1990, p. 116).

Barthes explains that the young black soldier giving the French salute is not a *symbol*, namely – in his definition of symbol – something that has acquired “through convention and use a meaning that enables it to stand for something else” (Fiske, 1990, p. 91). The young black soldier giving the French salute does not *stand for* the concept of French imperialism. This is because the function of the mythical sign is not to represent, but to naturalize an historical and cultural concept. Myth causes an immediate impression and is thus experienced as *innocent and eternal speech*. However, what appears as a natural justification is in fact an historical intention (Barthes, 1970/1990). Barthes claims that bourgeois norms are propagated by means of representation, and the more these



representations are propagated – by means of repetition and through multiple signifiers – the more they are experienced as universal laws. This process of normalization causes myth to be “read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system” (Barthes, 1970/1990, p. 131).

Barthes’ semiology is not the only approach that sees signification as a layering of meaning. In the *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, van Leeuwen (2001) compares the distinction between denotation and connotation to the three layers of meaning found in iconography. Whereas semiology focuses on deconstructing the text, iconography also incorporates contextual analysis, by means of intertextual comparison and archival research (van Leeuwen, 2001). *Representational meaning* is roughly equivalent to denotation. However, since iconography has overwhelmingly been used to analyze figurative art of the past (vs. the predominant application of Barthes’ semiology to photographic images found in contemporary popular culture), describing the representational meaning of an image often requires deciphering rather than immediate recognition. van Leeuwen explains that the key issue is “to see this kind of recognition as separate from the understanding of the conventional meanings that may be associated with what is represented” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 100).

*Iconographical symbolism* corresponds to the accepted conventional meanings. Iconographic analysis allows to “connect artistic motifs and combinations of artistic motifs (compositions) with themes or concepts” (Panofsky, 1970, p. 54). *Iconological symbolism* corresponds to the ideological meaning. The goal of iconological analysis is to integrate the knowledge about visual images’ textual, intertextual and contextual features in a way that “provides the ‘why’ behind the representations analysed” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 116). More specifically, iconological analysis seeks to “ascertain those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” (Panofsky, 1970, p. 55).

A prime example of this approach is Panofsky’s groundbreaking work (1927/1991) on linear perspective, which has brought about a critical understanding of Western art. Since the Renaissance, Western culture has increasingly naturalized linear perspective, to the extent that this has become accepted as the most accurate approach to the representation of objects in space. However, Panofsky argues that linear perspective is a cultural construct, which was built by means of convention and around specific interests and agendas. Therefore, it is not a natural or necessary approach to pictorial illusionism. This is demonstrated, among other things, by the fact that there exist several other convincing or effective types of perspective, even within Western art history.

Cultural studies has approached visual analysis by creating a theoretical link between semiological and discursive concerns (Hall, 1997a). In studying



visual signification, then, cultural studies does not only focus on the text as a self-enclosed unit, but it rather sees visual texts as part of the broader *circuit of culture* (Lister & Wells, 2001). This is similar to what iconography does. However, cultural studies – which focuses mainly on contemporary popular culture – places a greater emphasis on contextual elements. This paradigm’s focus is thus de-centered from the text, while emphasizing both the *symbolic and material practices* that underlie its production and reception contexts.

From this perspective, visual analysis entails a number of considerations relating to the different moments of an image’s social life. This entails not only an analysis of the properties of the text (i.e. pictorial and photographic conventions, cultural codes), but also of its institutional and social context of production, its context of viewing (how a given image is experienced in different contexts), its materiality (in terms of its size, location, grain) and the psychoanalytic implications of the relationship between the image’s subject and the viewer’s gaze (Lister & Wells, 2001). Stuart Hall defines this multifarious approach as analyzing “the whole *discursive formation* to which a text or a practice belongs” (Hall, 1997a, p. 51).

Although it is a “compound field” (Lister & Wells, 2001, p. 63), or a “set of unstable formations” (Hall, 1992, p. 278), cultural studies is unified – or *centered* – by an underlying political agenda. Cultural studies is interested in everyday “forms and practices of culture (not only its texts and artefacts)” (Lister & Wells, 2001, p. 60). More precisely, it is interested in how these forms and practices are related to groups with different cultural values and social interests, and how power relations between such groups shape and are shaped by everyday culture.

One of cultural studies’ key assumptions is that *reality* is not *reflected* in language and representation, but that it is actually the result or effect of how things – for example, events and identities – are signified (Hall, 1982). This reflects a constructivist perspective, since signification is seen as a meaning-making practice that allows us to make sense of and thus also *constitutes* our reality.

From a cultural studies perspective, then, signification is not only seen as a process rooted in language, but also as a social practice. According to Stuart Hall, one of the fundamental questions asked in cultural studies is “which kinds of meaning get systematically and regularly constructed around particular events” (Hall, 1982, p. 67). The key idea here is that meaning is not a given, because all language is *polysemic*. This means that all forms of representation – including visual texts – can be “variously accented” (Hall, 1982, p. 77) in their meanings. Different viewers can interpret the same image in different ways according to variations in their cultural and social backgrounds.

However, those who have access to the means of signification – i.e. media institutions – are also able to privilege and thus also impose a *preferred meaning* on images (Hall, 1997b). This closure of meaning, though, is subject to negotiation and even resistance. Hall identifies three different kinds of reading that can take place in response to a media message: a dominant (or hegemonic) reading, which accepts the preferred meaning; a negotiated reading, mediating the preferred meaning; or, finally, an oppositional reading, which rejects the preferred meaning and thus opposes resistance.

For these reasons, Hall defines ideological power as “the power to signify events in a particular way” (Hall, 1982, p. 69) and ideology as a site of negotiation and even struggle over competing meanings. Cultural studies focuses on revealing how dominant cultural norms become embedded in media messages in ways that allow them to be reinforced, internalized, and ultimately also become *hegemonic*. This perspective is therefore not only interested in revealing ideological meaning, but also in understanding how consent is manufactured.

Hall explains that the role of popular culture’s visual discourse in naturalizing dominant norms is key, due to the *reality-effect* produced by the wide cultural availability of the systems of visual recognition on which such discourse depends (Hall, 1982). In “The spectacle of the ‘other’” Hall (1997b) discusses how racial stereotyping was established in popular visual culture over time. During slavery, popular visual representations *fixed* racial difference – and subordination – as *natural*. Visual themes and motifs based on these assumptions are still widely used in contemporary visual culture as matter-of-fact statements, especially in – often sexualized and exoticized – images of black athletes.

#### IV. Social Semiotics in Visual Analysis

Not unlike cultural studies, social semiotics sees signification as social practice, that is, as a process deeply embedded in and affected by existing cultural norms and power structures. However, social semiotics’ emphasis is on the specific semiotic resources that are mobilized in a given text. Its focus is primarily on the ways in which given visual strategies can be deployed within and across texts to achieve ideological ends. One of the main goals of social semiotic analysis is “to provide usable descriptions of major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of Western visual semiotics, and to analyse how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 1).

In the dialectic between text and context, this approach entails a shift of focus onto the text. In this sense, like semiotics and semiology, social semiotics adopts a formal approach. However, social semiotics does not see ideology

as one of the components or layers of signification, but rather as its premise. Iedema (2001) emphasizes that social semioticians believe that texts are never made *by accident*. Like cultural studies, social semiotics assumes that “the power to signify is not a neutral force” (Hall, 1982, p. 70).

However, in studying visual signification as a power-laden process, social semiotics focuses on the syntactic relations between the elements of a visual text (e.g. people, objects, places, editing). Whereas cultural studies focuses on the institutional contexts of visual production and different contexts of viewing, social semiotics is primarily concerned with textual structures (Iedema, 2001) or arrangements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Social semiotics can be seen, in a way, as an extension of iconological analysis. However, whereas iconological analysis aims to understand what social conventions and ideological goals stand behind given visual motifs, social semiotics aims to systematically reveal conventions in order to promote social change. Social semioticians claim that “the signs of articulation” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 41) found in texts form the basis for later articulations of the same ideological discourses into other texts. This is because they are immediately available for perception and interpretation by others, who are then likely to re-articulate them into a variety of texts and by means of various semiotic modes. Being able to systematically analyze texts, then, allows not only to renegotiate meanings that would be otherwise re-articulated “as fixed, irrevocable and natural” (Iedema, 2001, p. 201), but also to use resource inventories as tools for design promoting social change (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001).

Social semioticians see all semiotic action as social action, as embedded in larger economic and cultural practices and power relations. However, what makes social semiotics distinctive is its belief that *all social action is semiotic*, because changes in social practices are heavily affected by changes in discursive practices and their textual renditions (van Leeuwen, 2005). Having the power to *break the rules* of semiotic production also means having the power to intervene and possibly change the ideological currents that characterize the public domain (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Analytically, social semiotics is not only able to relate texts to contexts, but it is also able to dynamically speculate on related social tendencies and their political implications.

## **V. Enhancing the Critical Ends of Social Semiotics: Barthes’ Semioclasms and Perception**

From a theoretical standpoint, social semiotics is arguably carrying out Barthes’ original agenda. The critical scope of Barthes’ work has been underplayed. For example, a common reading of his distinction between denotation and connotation has been one that sees connotation as a super-

imposed layer of meaning, as a parasitical sign inscribed onto the image by culture. However, Barthes (1964/1977) explains that this distinction is just an analytic device, and that in fact the denoted image naturalizes the connoted image and is thus inseparable from its ideological implications. In *Mythologies*, Barthes expands on this by ascribing naturalization to the mystification that turns the bourgeois cultural norm into universal law. Barthes' critical goal is to struggle over the meanings established by the bourgeois norm, which he defines as "the essential enemy" (Barthes, 1970/1990, p. 9). In order to carry out this denunciation, he argues, it is necessary to create "an appropriate method of detailed analysis" (p. 9). He claims that the role of semiology must be, ultimately, to function as *semioclasm*. The goal of a formal science of signs is to break apart from the meanings established and perpetuated by the status quo.

Barthes' critical – and overtly political – ends are shared by social semiotics. I believe that social semiotics could benefit greatly from referring more explicitly to Barthes' work, especially in relation to the role of denotation – i.e. the perceptual qualities of an image – in naturalizing cultural or connotative messages. In using the photograph as a perfect example of the virtual separation of denotation and connotation, Barthes is somewhat a realist. He posits photographic denotation as the *purest* kind (Barthes, 1964/1977). Barthes maintained this general view in his later work. In *Camera Lucida*, he claims that every photograph "is a certificate of presence" (Barthes, 1981, p. 87), whose "power of authentication exceeds the power of representation" (p. 89).

However, Barthes also acknowledges that there is something in excess about visual texts, which cannot be reduced to a linguistic structure based on the arbitrary relationship between a signifier and a signified. Barthes calls this a "third meaning" (Barthes, 1970/1977) and a "punctum" (Barthes, 1981). This resonates with Fiske's statement that "[s]ometimes it is difficult to determine the relative parts played by convention and iconicity in a sign – that is, how highly motivated or constrained a sign actually is" (Fiske, 1990, p. 53). The scale of conventionality vs. motivation offered by Fiske (1990) as an elaboration of Peirce's notion of iconicity can be useful in a social semiotic analysis integrating considerations about the perceptual nature of visual resources.

Although the *syntax* of any given text is always organized by a certain ideological discourse situated within a given cultural and historical context, it is important to note that images do not appear real to us simply because of internalized conventions (Messaris, 2003). When researching the ideological import of visual images, it is crucial to think of them not as completely arbitrary. For example, both Gombrich (1982) and Livingstone (2002) show how artists

can and do take advantage of the characteristics of our visual perception to *work* on us (for example, through effects of motion, such as flickering).

Since social semiotics is concerned with how visual resources are and can be mobilized to *act* and work on the viewer, it can benefit from integrating considerations about the perceptual qualities of images into analyses aimed at revealing culturally and historically situated ideological implications. The specific details of how this can be done should be left to further systematic research on this topic. In general, however, this would entail an assessment – as a first analytical step – of the degree of motivation or iconicity of specific semiotic resources. Given the nature of our visual perception, the range of visual resources available is broad but also limited or *constrained* (Fiske, 1990). Some of these visual resources are selectively chosen to naturalize cultural meanings and thus, in this process, also become established as conventions and are used to achieve ideological ends.

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