The meaning of any sign is affected by who is reading that sign. Peirce recognised a creative process of exchange between the sign and the reader.

Although we can see many similarities between Peirce's 'interpretant' and Saussure's 'signified' it is clear that Saussure wasn't concerned with the relationship between the signified and the reality which it refers to. The reality that Peirce calls the 'object' does not feature at all in Saussure's model. Saussure was concerned only with language and he does not discuss the part played by the reader. His theories concentrated instead on the complex structures of language which we use to construct words and sentences.

'...A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek semeion "sign"). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place is staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts.'

However the meaning of words can change depending on who reads them. In the USA Peirce had created a theory which saw the reading of signs as part of a creative process.

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Whereas Saussure saw linguistics as forming one part of semiology, Barthes turned this idea upside down and suggested in fact that semiology, the science of signs, was in fact one part of linguistics.

In Europe it was Roland Barthes a follower of Saussure’s who took the theoretical debate forward. In the 1960s Barthes developed Saussure’s ideas so that we could consider the part played by the reader in the exchange between themselves and the content. For Barthes the science of signs takes in much more than the construction of words and their representations. Semiology takes in any system of signs whatever the content or limits of the system. Images, sounds, gestures and objects are all part of systems which have semiotic meanings. In the 1960s, Barthes described complex associations of signs which form entertainment, ritual and social conventions. These may not normally be described as language systems but they are certainly systems of signification.

Whereas Saussure saw linguistics as forming one part of semiology, Barthes turned this idea upside down and suggested in fact that semiology, the science of signs, was in fact one part of linguistics. He sees semiology as:

"...the part covering the great signifying unities of discourse."^2

Barthes saw that there was a significant role to be played by the reader in the process of reading meaning. To do this he applies linguistic concepts to other visual media which carry meaning. Like Saussure and Peirce before him Barthes identified structural relationships in the components of a sign. His ideas centre on two different levels of signification; denotation and connotation.

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2. Barthes R. *Elements of Semiology* (1968)
Denotation – what is pictured

This first order of signification is straightforward. It refers to the physical reality of the object which is signified. In other words a photograph of a child represents a child. No matter who photographs the child and how they are photographed, in this first order of signification, they still just represent ‘child’. Even with a range of very different photographs the meanings are identical at the denotative level.

Connotation – how it is pictured

In reality we know that the use of different film, different lighting, framing, soft focus etc. all change the way in which we read the image of the child. A grainy black-and-white or sepia-toned image of a child could well bring with it ideas of nostalgia, a soft focus might add sentiment to the reading of the image and a close-up crop of the face will encourage us to concentrate on the emotions being experienced by the child. All these differences are happening on the second level of signification which Barthes called connotation.

The reader is playing a part in this process by applying their knowledge of the systematic coding of the image. In doing this the meaning is affected by the background of the viewer. Like Peirce’s model this humanises the entire process.

Connotation is arbitrary in that the meanings brought to the image at this stage are based on rules or conventions which the reader has learnt. The consistent use of soft focus for example in film and advertising has found its way into our consciousness to a degree that it is universally read as sentimental or soft-hearted. As the conventions vary from one culture to another then it follows that the connotative effect of the conventions, the rules on how to read these images will also vary between communities.
Convention

This is an agreement about how we should respond to a sign. We have already mentioned conventions such as the close up and the high-grain black-and-white image. Conventions such as these pepper all the images we read today. We instinctively know that slow motion footage does not mean that the action is happening very slowly. We understand that we are supposed to use this as a signal to study the skill of the action or admire its beauty. The roughly rendered typography of the rubber stamp gives it a gestural immediacy. It suggests the informal. We can almost sense the sound that the stamp would make when the image was made. So much of the meaning comes from convention that signs with little convention need to be very iconic in order to communicate to a wide audience. Another way of describing this is to say that a sign with little convention needs to be highly motivated.

Motivation

This term is used to denote how much the signifier describes the signified. For example, a photograph is a highly motivated sign as it describes in detail the subject in the image. It looks like the thing or the person it represents. Using the term provided by Saussure and Peirce it is "iconic". A highly motivated sign is a very iconic one. Using the complimentary terms, an arbitrary sign (Saussure) or if you prefer a symbolic sign (Peirce) could be described as unmotivated. Using the example we used earlier, a photograph of a child is highly motivated whilst a cartoon image of a child is less motivated. In the photographic example the arbitrary element is confined to the framing, focus and so on where as with a cartoon the author has more freedom to take liberties with the reality of how the child actually looks. However, the less the sign is motivated the more important it is that the reader has learnt the conventions which help us to decode the image.
boy
boy in a bear suit
boy with big hair
monkey
4. **text and image**

For linguists codes must be digital, that is to say that they are composed of a fixed number of digits or units. In ‘Image, Music, Text’¹, Roland Barthes asks whether it is possible to have codes which are analogical.

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¹ Barthes R.
Image, Music, Text (1977)
Digital codes are paradigms where each of the units in the set are clearly different from each other. (As we saw in chapter 2 the two basic characteristics of a paradigm are that the units in the set have something in common and each unit is obviously different from the others in the set.) The alphabet is arguably the most common example of a digital code.

Analogue codes are paradigms where the distinctions between each unit is not clear, they operate on something more like a continuous scale. Music or dance, for example, could be described as analogue codes. However many analogue codes are reduced to digital codes as a means of reproducing them in another form. Musical notation, for example, reduces the analogue qualities of sound to distinct notes with individual marks.
To examine the relationship between text and image, Barthes chooses to focus on compositions from advertising. In advertising the reader can be sure that signification is always intentional. Nothing is left to chance. It is the purpose of the advertisement to communicate the positive qualities of the product as clearly as possible to the chosen audience. This is demonstrated by Frank Jefkins' three basic principles of effective advertisement writing:

1. The advertisement should be of interest and value to the reader. The writer should ask himself, 'How can I interest my prospects in my proposition? How can my offer be of service to prospects?'

2. The advertisement should be precise, that is, get to the point as quickly as possible; hence the success of the most hard-worked word in advertising, FREE!

3. The advertisement should be concise, saying what it has to say in the lowest necessary words, remembering that an encyclopedia of many volumes can be concise compared with a verbose novel.

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2. Jefkins F. Advertising Writing (1976)
The Linguistic Message

Barthes sets out a system for reading text/image combinations which comprises of three separate messages. The first message is described as the ‘linguistic message’. This is the text itself, usually in the form of a slogan or a caption to the image. Reading the linguistic message requires a previous knowledge of the particular language employed i.e. French, German, English. The linguistic message can also carry a second order signifier by implication. For example, an advertisement featuring the word ‘Volkswagen’ tells us the name of the manufacturer but also signifies certain national characteristics. Notions of high design standards and precision engineering are read at the same time as the name.

The Coded Iconic Message

The second message is the ‘coded iconic message’. This is a symbolic message and works on the level of connotation. The reader is playing a part in the reading by applying their knowledge of the systematic coding of the image. An image of a bowl of fruit for example might imply still life, freshness or market stalls.

Paul Davis
Wasteland

The text answers the question ‘What is it?’. Our attitude to the humble cracker is fixed by the addition of a copy line in a parody of advertising (see Anchorage p. 76).

Alan Murphy
Feline Hell

The innocuous drawing of the cat and the flames are changed by the addition of the text calling for an end to the breed. Without the text the cat could almost be keeping itself warm. The advertising parody is reinforced by the addition of the stylised ‘HEL’ which has the character of a brand name.
the three messages

The Non-Coded Iconic Message

The third message is described as the 'non-coded iconic message'. A photograph for instance could be described as a message without a code, one simply reads the medium as itself; it is a photograph. This works on the level of denotation.

Although the linguistic message can be easily separated from the other two messages Barthes maintains that the other two cannot be separated because the viewer reads them at one and the same time. In other words, the medium cannot be separated from the message; a phenomena Marshall MacLuhan pointed to in his book 'The Medium is the Message'.

Text, according to Barthes, constitutes what he calls a 'parasitic' message on an image, designed to quicken the reading with additional signifieds. Hence the addition of text can be a powerful method of altering or fixing the meaning of an image. This is something which is present in a great number of the images we read; in captions, subtitles, film dialogue, comic strips etc. However it seems that neither the length of the linguistic message (the text) nor its position are particularly important, but merely the presence of the linguistic message. Indeed it is possible that a long text may only comprise of one message, a single global signified. When coupled with an image, text has two possible functions, anchorage and relay.

Anchorage

Anchorage, says Barthes, directs the beholder through a number of possible readings of an image, through what he calls a 'floating chain of signifiers' and causes the reader to ignore some of the signifiers and read others. The text answers the question 'What is it?'.

To the connoted image (the coded iconic message) the text helps the reader to interpret the signifiers they are presented with. To the denoted image (the non-coded iconic message) it aids recognition. He describes the way in which the reader is remote controlled to a meaning which has been chosen in advance. He points out that this often has an ideological purpose. Anchorage text has then a repressive value in inspecting an image.

Relay

The second possible function, 'relay', is much less common. The text is usually a snippet of dialogue and works in a complimentary way to the image. It can be found in things like comic strips and is particularly important in film. Relay text advances the reading of the images by supplying meanings which are not to be found in the images themselves, as in film dialogue.

3. MacLuhan M. and Fiore Q. The Medium is the Message [1967]
anchorage and relay