Interface Design
in the Context of
Visual Culture and Semiotics
Visual Culture

N. Mirzeoff (1999):

- **Pervasiveness** of images in everyday life

- Visual **technologies** increasingly regulate our lives

- Image **production of** per se invisible and **non-representable objects/ideas** (simulation)

- We increasingly use visuality as a **source of reference** for making meaning of our lives (identity)
"Human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before, from the satellite picture to medical images of the interior of the human body.

In the era of the visual screen, your viewpoint is crucial.”

Nicholas Mirzeoff
Ceci n'est pas une pipe.
Semiotics

- Semiotics: the study of signs and their meanings

- Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

- Semiotics is about all cultural artefacts that have an encoded meaning

- Good introduction: David Chandler's "Semiotics for Beginners"
  http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/
The Sign

• A sign is made up of two components: the signifier - that which is perceived (heard or seen) - and the signified, the ‘message’

• The signifier is also referred to as the material aspect (a spoken or written word, a picture, an icon) and the signified is also referred to as the mental concept, the idea of something.

• Meaning of a sign is only possible in differentiation to another sign. There is no inherent meaning.
The Arbitrariness of a Sign

- The signifier is not engendered by the signified

- Signifier and Signified have conventional relationships

- “No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs. Both signifier and signified are purely relational entities” (Saussure cited in Chandler 1981)

- “Seeing is not believing but interpreting.” (Mirzoeff 1999, p.14)
Icon, Index, Symbol

- Pierce: Classification of Signs
  - **iconic** signs (resemble the object or person that they signify)
  - **indexical** sign (gives some concrete reference to the signified object)
  - **symbolic** signs (are completely arbitrary)
Connotation & Myth

• Connotation: ‘associative relationship’ or second meaning (signified) of a signifier

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Making References

Visual Synecdoche

Using a part (Statue of Liberty) to represent the whole

Works vice versa as well
Making References

Visual **Metonym**

Using an image that evokes association with the intended subject (yellow cab = New York)
Visual **Metaphor**

Using a well known signifier (an apple) in order to refer to an unknown signified (the idea of a fresh and bright city).

(see Ambrose 2005)
Icon: an "abstract or pictorial representation of ideas, objects or actions (see Sassoon 1997, p.12)

- Icons can be iconic, indexical or symbolic
Icons

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• Using spatial metaphors: e.g. Browsing, navigating the Web, going back, forward, being ‘home’

• Critique: metaphors are constraining idea of the associated signified. Using metaphors is like “using old half-ideas as crutches” (Ted Nelson), quoted in Preece 2002, p.57)
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- Logos: “half hidden, half recognizable” (Heraclitus)

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**Concluding Thoughts**

**Visual Culture** is the embedding context of what we are doing in this module: producing computer graphics and pieces of visual communication.

The study of **Semiotics** delivers tools and vocabulary in order to read, interpret and deconstruct the complexity of signs and visual artefacts.

**Icons** and **logos** are established signs in our visual everyday experience. They are often carefully constructed and can communicate complex messages effectively and subtly.