

Chapter 2

The Meaning(s) of Lens Meaning

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Introduction

As a photographer and an art educator, I want to come to a better understanding of how lens images (photographs, film and television) convey meaning. This is not a trivial or purely academic concern. Recently American media educator David Trend observed that Media studies of any kind are virtually nonexistent in elementary and secondary schools. Yet serious studies of film, photography, and video are most needed in these latter areas, as students encounter powerful mechanisms of socialization that will follow them the rest of their lives...Without a pedagogical imperative, the broader mission of progressive culture stands in jeopardy. (Trend, 1988, p. 10).

The argument being initiated here is intended to draw further attention among educators to the meanings conveyed by lens media. To this end this chapter will describe three key metaphors drawn from film and photographic theory and connect them with Peirce's semiotics (1955) to build a foundation for further discussion.

Lens Meaning

In his essay "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" (1984), Allen Sekula suggests that:

All photographic communication seems to take place within the conditions of a kind of binary folklore. That is, there is a "symbolist" folk-myth and a "realist" folk-myth. The misleading but popular form of this opposition is "art photography" vs. "documentary photography." Every photograph tends, at any given moment of reading in any given context, toward one of these two poles of meaning. The oppositions between these two poles are as follows: photographer as seer vs. photographer as witness, photography as expression vs. photography as reportage, theories of imagination (and inner truth) vs. theories of empirical truth, affective value vs. informative value, and finally, metaphoric signification vs. metonymic signification. (pp. 20-21)

Sekula refers directly to two layers of signification (form as meaning and content as meaning) and indirectly to a third (context as meaning). His argument suggests that there is a constant tension between form and content notions of meaning. Sekula's allusion to context outside this struggle suggests that it functions as an over-arching influence on meaning, much as the arena is the larger context in which two boxers vie for domination.

Sekula's tripartite conception of photographic meaning is a useful starting point for discussion. However, in order to expand his notions to include photography, film, and television, I must create a term "Lens Meaning," by which I mean the understanding that results from use (whether through making or viewing) of lens images. By lens images I mean any visual representation, whether projected on a screen (including a television screen), or in the air (as in a holograph), or printed on a page or other surface, that has been created or reproduced with the aid of a lens and any chemically or electronically light sensitive matrix. I hope that I am avoiding the pitfalls that Michael Scriven attributes to redefinition in conceptual analysis (in Jaeger, 1988, p. 138.), simply because Lens Meaning, as far as I can tell, is a new term, not a redefinition of an older one. In one sense the term narrows considerably a large field in philosophy, by limiting concern to meaning only as it refers to lens images. At the same time, by combining the technologies of photography, film, and television, it runs counter to much modernist writing in the aesthetics of these media, which tries to explore the "nature" and uniqueness of each separately.

One purpose of this study is to analyze terminology that people use to critically discuss lens media and imagery, and to suggest that the new term, Lens Meaning, can be applied to much of what has been said about photography,

film, and television. Additionally, I want to argue that collapsing these three technologies into one larger category is both a useful and an appropriate (if not final) step when considering visual signification. Bright (1989), in discussing ideological issues related to mass-media representation, recommends not considering photography as a separate category apart from television or film, or any other mode of "photographic" representation. [She calls] the separation of objects of study by medium...a rather dated conceit of formalist art history which tends to obscure issues of content and history in favour of the seemingly self-evident unity of expressive form and materials" (Bright, 1989, pp. 12-13).

Coleman has applied J. David Bolter's concept of "defining technology" (Coleman, 1986, p. 10) to the lens. Bolter (1984) suggests that:

A defining technology develops links, metaphorical or otherwise, with a culture's science, philosophy or literature; it is always available to serve as a metaphor, example, model, or symbol. A defining technology resembles a magnifying glass, which collects and focuses seemingly disparate ideas in a culture into one bright, sometimes piercing ray. Technology does not call forth major cultural changes by itself, but it does bring ideas into new focus by explaining or exemplifying them in new ways to larger audiences. (p. 11)

It is intriguing that Bolter, in discussing the computer, which he wants to label a defining technology because it has resulted in a "general redefinition of...mankind's [relationship] to the world of nature" (p. 9), uses the metaphor of the lens just in the way that he suggests a defining technology would be used. Coleman starts from this base and traces the impact of the lens from its beginnings to the 16th century. Between 1550 and 1553, Coleman argues, western civilization became a lens culture. In that three year span Girolamo Cardano built the first "modern" camera by affixing a lens to the light-admitting aperture of a camera obscura; Franciscus Maurolycus first suggested that the human eye is like a lens; and two British mathematicians, Leonard and Thomas Digges, designed the first compound lens (Coleman, 1986, p. 13.).

Coleman's notion of technology's impact on the nature and rapidity of cultural change does not correspond to contemporary theories of culture (Fiske, 1989). His argument does, however, make the important point that in that short, three-year period the groundwork was laid for the lens as a technology to become a defining metaphor. The photographic recording of information; the generation of new visual information in the sense that a compound lens makes it possible for us to see what our eyes naturally cannot; and, perhaps most importantly, the acceptance of the images produced by the lens as being like what our eyes see, have been incorporated into the mass communications network that Hans Magnus Enzenberger has labelled "the consciousness industry" (1974).

Thus...it would seem to be vital to our advancement as a culture that we come to understand the extent to which lenses shape, filter and otherwise alter the data which passes [sic] through them—the extreme degree to which the lens itself informs our information. This influence, though radical in many cases, often manifests itself subtly. Yet even the most blatant distortions tend to be taken for granted as a result of the enduring cultural confidence in the essential trustworthiness and impartiality of what is in fact a technology resonant with cultural bias and highly susceptible to manipulation. (Coleman, 1986, p. 18)

Coleman's concern is for what is often referred to as the "transparency" of lens images. There is a tendency for the constructedness of these images to go unrecognized. As Oakeshott argues, it is reasonable to speak of any human product as meaningful.

A human being is the inhabitant of a world composed, not of "things", but of meanings; that is, of occurrences in some manner recognized, identified, understood and responded to in terms of this understanding. It is a world of sentiments, beliefs, and it includes also artifacts (such as books, pictures, musical compositions, tools and utensils) for these, also, are 'expressions' which have meanings and which require to be understood in order to be used and enjoyed. (1975, p. 19)

But in addition to this general sense, lens images are both systematic and institutional, with the lens providing the system, and the mass media providing the institution. This implies that talking about Lens Meaning can have much the same logic as talking about meaning and language.

Brian Barry, in his discussion of three theories of meaning in *Political Argument* (Barry, 1965), suggests that the most naive notion of meaning is what he calls, "the causal theory" (p. 17). He describes meaning in this context as being conceived in Pavlovian terms. "An utterance corresponds to the dinner-bell and the effect of the utterance to the dog's salivating" (p. 17).

In contrast, the "intentional" theory of meaning keys on the speaker's intention. Somehow, meaning is molded by the speaker and the listener's job is to discover that intention. Barry's own conception of meaning takes into account the linguistic forms and conventions of a language, on the one hand, and the social context of particular speech acts on the other.

Just as an individual word may have different meanings and one discovers which meaning is relevant by seeing which fits in with the rest of the sentence, so a sentence may have different meanings and one discovers which is relevant by examining the context of its utterance, which includes both the linguistic context (what was said before) and the non-linguistic context (when, where and by whom the sentence is spoken, etc.). (Barry, 1965, p. 24)

Barry's tripartite division of meaning, as will be seen, has direct application in the consideration of Lens Meaning. The three categories of Lens Meaning that follow are offered not as definitive or exclusive so much as potentially plausible and useful.

In *Speech Acts*, John Searle (1970, pp. 12-13) argues that the linguistic characterizations of one who is deemed to have mastery of his or her native tongue are a valid representation of that language's structure. While Searle's approach has been problematic for some (Derrida, 1977), on the grounds that it side-steps some ongoing theoretical debate regarding structure and intention in communication, it has the advantage of being useful. We have overwhelming evidence that languages are conventional. Similar evidence for the conventionality of Lens Meaning is an important foundation for this thesis.

Though the theoretical grounding [in Lens Meaning] for most members of this culture is skimpy at best, the direct experience with lens systems and lens imagery is extensive for most of us. Thus, to borrow a concept from Noam Chomsky, the visual equivalent of linguistic competence in the language of lens imagery is now commonplace in western society and, increasingly, to be found world-wide. (Coleman, p. 10.)

Material provided by Searle, Chomsky (1972), Coleman, Barry and John Wilson, who suggests that meaning is the sum of the various ways that a concept is used (Wilson, 1966, p. 26.) allows me to claim the lenticular competence necessary to make valid representations of Lens Meaning. By describing the various ways in which lens images are used, I hope to build a framework for discovering Lens Meaning(s).

Three Key Metaphors

Three key metaphors have grown out of film and photographic theory which emphasize how viewers use images. Images are conceived of as windows, as frames, or as mirrors (Andrews, 1984, pp. 12-13). Perhaps the most common and most disarming way of using lens images is as a window. Film theorist Andre Bazin (1967, and photographic theorist John Szarkowski (1966) have each described this metaphor. Lens images are construed to be windows on the world. What we see in the image is unmediated reality, which we can respond to (i.e., use) accordingly.

It is questionable whether we can even discuss, in terms of meaning, lens images responded to as a window. There are two basic opportunities for the mediation of meaning in lens images: the first is in the production and distribution of the image, and the second is during the reception of the image by the viewer. If the entire filmic or photographic process is unmediated, then both the producer and the consumer of the image can be seen as looking

through the same "window on reality". At that point lens images correspond to Peirce's (1955) notion of indexical signs (see Figure one, pg. 30), and viewing lens images is like being a hunter trying to decipher the meaning of tracks in the snow. If the viewer's response to a lens image is seen as unmediated, then Lens Meaning may be described in the Pavlovian terms of the causal theory discussed by Barry.

The subtlety of the effect of the window metaphor can be seen any evening on the television news. We tend to respond to the various news stories as thirty second facts, without much thought of the impact that various framing and editing devices have had on reducing that item of news to thirty entertaining seconds. Consider the often-broadcast scenes of twisted automobile wreckage, followed by the blanketed and barely visible form of a victim/survivor being whisked away on an ambulance gurney. This type of scene (subgenre?) is typically bracketed by the words of a trenchcoated and microphone-clutching reporter. We, the viewing audience, feel that we understand the reality of that accident and yet, based on what we have (and have not) seen, we have no conception of the ramifications of that tragedy. How painful is it to see one's family injured or killed on television? For how many months or years will the survivor of an accident be dealing with the physical and emotional damage? Entertainment must be "tasteful"; it isn't until we experience a tragedy like one in the news that we come to realize how much of the "reality" has been left out. The argument here is not that televisual news could or should offer a global image of an event. Considering Lens Meaning through the window metaphor draws attention to the limitations that function to frame in and frame out visual information. The window metaphor becomes troublesome when those limitation go unrecognized.

A different example can be seen in family photographs. If film and television are "windows on the present", then photography is a window on the past. Consider the boxes of family snapshots gathering dust in most households, those images judged too poor to be placed in a photo album. It is difficult for most people to destroy even poorly photographed or duplicated images of family members. Even those visually inferior images refer strongly to personally significant people, places, and events. In this sense, photographs take on the indexical significance of a religious relic. Like the sliver from the "true cross", the family photo can be perceived as being one step closer to "what was" than would a drawing or another more iconic representation. In talking about an indexical sign, significance is derived from the causal or physical relationship between a sign and its referent. Virtually every writer in film, photography, and television has had to deal with the apparent "reality" of the lens image. The point being that, regardless of our lenticular sophistication, we (in the west, and increasingly the rest of the world) continue to use lens images as evidence of past events and even as literal emanations of them.

In using a photograph or film as a framed image, we respond to the image as a construction (like a painting) by an artist. This corresponds to Barry's description of the intentional theory of meaning, but using what Peirce would have called iconic signs (see Figure one, pg. 30). Along with the indexical signs of the artist's labor in, for example, a painted portrait, iconic signs have a qualitative connection with their referent (the subject of the painting) that is meaningful. Our task as viewers of this art-image is to discover the layers of meaning that the artist has intentionally (and occasionally unintentionally) built into the image. Early theorists who subscribed to this notion of filmic meaning include the Russian filmmaker and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1949) and Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1974).

A film released in the late 1980's in North America, *Commissar* (Askoldov, 1967), specifically draws attention to this tradition through the heavy use of montage in combining unlikely imagery and musical fragments for metaphoric effect. As a specific example, consider the following three-shot sequence: In shot one three young children squirm naked in their bathtub with their mother in attendance. Off-stage a clatter of hoofs on cobblestone is heard. Shot two cuts to the front of the children's home where the three children, still wet and naked, are watching the road. The camera pans from eye level down to ground level as a horse drawn caisson carrying a cannon pulls noisily along the road. As the shot progresses we see alternately the wheels of the wagon, which are rolling between the camera and the children, and the three children's genitalia effectively stop-framed by those same wheels. The third shot dissolves to ground level looking up as the caisson rolls over the camera's position. As this final shot progresses the huge and

unavoidably phallic cannon advances across the screen. Indexically this sequence shows children watching a noisy procession, but the shifting point of view so common in montage alerts us to an iconic level of meaning. Our task as viewers is to make sense of these images of innocence and war, sexuality and power. There is no reason why any lens image cannot be used in this way. Any time that we recognize and try to interpret (in a literary sense) the "signs of suture" (that is, the work of the cinematographers, actors, editors, directors, etc.) "by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity on their viewers" (Silverman, 1983, p. 195), we are using that image in a framed and intentional sense. To the extent that studio portraiture or family photo albums function as historical fiction presenting an ideal self-image or an ideal family narrative, they are being used as iconic signs.

The most complex of the three metaphors is that of the lens image as mirror. A mirror not only reflects a viewing subject, but also a context (the viewer's environment). A mirror is a site for self-examination and fantasy, for critical realism and narcissistic self-absorption. Like a mirror, the lens image reflects, and some would argue constructs, social conventions, and, like a mirror, is a site for viewing subjects to work out (consciously or subconsciously) their relationship to those conventions. The mirror metaphor corresponds to Peirce's understanding of symbolic signs (see Figure one, pg. 30).

Drawing from psychoanalysis and Freud's appropriation of the myth of Narcissus, lens images can be seen as reflecting back on their spectators. In *The Imaginary Signifier* (1981), Christian Metz combines semiotic theory with Freudian psychoanalysis in an analysis of film meaning. The issue becomes one of discovering the nature of spectatorship in relation to lens images. If one assumes, as Metz does, that there is a deep structure driving, or at least guiding, our relationship with lens imagery, then understanding from this perspective can only be derived through the careful discovery and analysis of that structure. Whether working from a Saussurian linguistic mode, as Metz does, or a multiple systems model, such as Peirce's, arguing for the lens media's status as a symbolic language has proven to be difficult. The referential nature of lens images gets in the way of the arbitrariness that is basic to symbolic language systems.

Kaja Silverman (1983) uses semiotic analysis and Lacanian psychoanalysis to discuss what she calls suture. In her sense of the term, suture is a metaphor for narrative. Just as castration creates an absence, and presumably a dissatisfaction or desire, awareness of the limited vision implied by the film frame creates a dissatisfaction that can only be healed (just as literal sutures help a wound heal) by helping the spectators feel that they are a part of the filmic narrative, so that they will forget about themselves. The shot/ reverse shot sequence, the camera movement and editing commonly used when filming a conversation between two people, is offered as an example of this strategy at work. By allowing the viewer to see the second person involved in the conversation, the person occupying the viewer's (the camera's) position, is nudged toward adopting that new character's persona. Our dissatisfaction over our inability to control the images that are being presented to us can be temporarily relinquished (or appropriated) in favour of a voyeuristic projection of ourselves into one of the characters. (See footnote 1).

The Complexities of Lens Meaning

Many writers using semiotic analysis in the context of the cinema set photography outside the discussion. For them the basic unit of signification is the shot (one continuous run of a movie camera), which may literally be the result of thousands of individual photographs. Their concern is less with the visual, per se, and more with narrative flow and its signification. Max Kozloff (1987) argues that much advertising photography, and some art images as well, work in a narrative way. He describes the ambiguous sexual relations depicted in the bedroom scenes used by Calvin Klein to sell blue jeans and cotton underwear. Using dramatic stage lighting, young, muscular male and female models, poses that dramatize triangular (and even more complex) relationships, and various degrees of nudity, the ads create a world that is lurid and desirable and into which we are drawn as spectator/consumers.

One approach to criticism recognizes the active interplay of the conscious and unconscious within the receiver of a visual sign, that sign being a product of a signifying system at work in a cultural context. This multi-dimensional conception of communication creates problems for adherents to a "pure" semiotics. But, as Julia Kristeva has argued: One phase of semiology is now over: that which runs from Saussure and Peirce to the Prague School and structuralism...The theory of meaning now stands at a crossroads: either it will remain an attempt at formalizing meaning-systems by increasing sophistication of the logico-mathematical tools which enable it to formulate models on the basis of a conception...of meaning as the act of a transcendental ego, cut off from its body, its unconscious, and also its history; or else it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operations characteristic of the two sides of this split. (Kristeva, 1973, p. 1249)

This kind of approach can imply a kind of rigorous analysis of lens images that would have a very narrow, academic application. Semiotic analysis of film, television or photography is simply too arduous a task to expect of a general viewing public. If, however, we relax the metaphor somewhat (use a larger mirror!) this critical analysis implies, in a general sense, merely that we become aware of ourselves in front of the lens image and in a social context. From the theatre of Brecht, Walter Benjamin drew much of his inspiration for his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, 1935), wherein he celebrated the lens media's potential to replace art with something more like visual communication, in which the audience played a conscious and critical part.

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. (Benjamin, 1985, p. 688)

Whether the potential for a fusion of criticism and reception is often met, it is still argued that the lens media can be used for critical reflection on both self and society. DeLauretis (1984), writing on the semiotics of film from a feminist perspective, has argued that a more complete understanding of Peirce's semiotics must include a conception of a viewer or reader. Peirce describes the semiotic chain as including what he called an "interpretant" (1955), which is a new sign created in the mind of the reader/viewer. This new sign is a result of the original or external sign, and has three classes of effects, according to DeLauretis.

1. The first proper significate effect of a sign is a feeling produced by it. This is the emotional interpretant. Although its "foundation of truth" may be slight at times, often this remains the only effect produced by a sign such as, for example, the performance of a piece of music.
2. When a further significate effect is produced, however, it is "through the mediation of the emotional interpretant"; and this second type of meaning effect he calls the energetic interpretant, for it involves an "effort" which may be muscular exertion but is more usually a mental effort, "an exertion from the inner world."
3. The third and final type of meaning effect that may be produced by the sign, through the mediation of the former two, is "a habit change": "a modification of a person's tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experience and previous exertions." (DeLauretis, 1984, pp. 173-4)

Figure one on page 30 incorporates DeLauretis' recognition of the role of the viewer by introducing the three categories of response (emotional, energetic, and habit changing). This enriches Peirce's semiotic categories by including the use that viewers make of visual imagery. As DeLauretis describes them, interpretants, the viewer's new internal signs, are based on an increasingly profound response to an external sign. The viewer is described as progressing from a simple and immediate emotional reaction, through a more physically or intellectually engaged energetic response to the life/culture altering level of a habit change. The overlapping layers represent visually the

progressive quality of interpretants as DeLauretis describes them. The vertical and horizontal dimensions created by these categories of signs and interpretants create a system of cross-references. One of the functions of the survey of the literature in Chapters three, four, five, and six will be to discover the ways the intersection of different signs and viewer responses draw attention to issues and concerns that can expand understanding of Lens Meaning

Summary

The term Lens Meaning can be seen to involve three overlapping sign systems and three progressively more profound degrees of response. A lens image's indexical meaning is determined by the process of that image's manufacture, as well as our belief in its physical "truthfulness", a belief not unlike our belief in the reality of what we see through a window. The extent to which a lens image has a physical relationship with its subject determines the image's capacity to function within the window metaphor. Of significance to critical study of media is an appreciation of the limits of the indexicality or "truth value" of lens images. The extent to which a lens image has (or is perceived to have) a qualitative relationship with its subject determines the image's capacity to function within the "frame" metaphor. The perception of an image's qualitative similarities with its subject can cause the viewer to consider intention on the part of the image-maker or to weigh the significance of what the image reveals about its subject. The extent to which a lens image can function as a symbolic sign that reflects or inflects its social context determines the extent to which we can understand its meaning in terms of the "mirror" metaphor. It is possible and reasonable, by way of conclusion, to describe these three metaphors in combination. In the perhaps dimly lit room of our experience, we peer through our window at a darkened landscape. We are conscious of an external reality that is not entirely clear because poorly lit. We are also conscious of the window's frame and the carpenter's or architect's decision as it influences our view. Finally, because it is slightly darker outside than in, we see, mixed with the "out there", dim reflections of ourselves and our room. All three layers of significance function at once, though in all probability we can only focus on one of them at a time. In almost every instance of our experience with Lens Meaning, "reality" is a combination of what is being described through the metaphors of window, frame, and mirror. For the purposes of this thesis we will continue to focus on these different layers one at a time.

That the visual qualities of a lens image can all be influenced by physical contexts such as sequencing, accompanying words, music and general noise, gives some sense of the further complexity of response to the mass media. Add to this the fact that each of us, as a viewer, brings a personal context of desires, beliefs, and experiences that contributes to the construction of meaning and it becomes clear why trying to come to grips with Lens Meaning is a substantial task. Whether a viewer of the mass media becomes a critical user of lens imagery, as described by Fiske (1989), or remains simply a consumer of those images, is determined, in part, by the breadth of critical understanding that that viewer brings to the viewing experience.

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