

More than a thousand words?
A semiotic analysis of images in online communication

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Abstract

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Title: More than a thousand words? A semiotic analysis of images in online communication

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Aim: To examine the possibilities of using semiotics to analyse images as an integrated part of text-based online communication.

Method: Semiotic analysis

Material: 17 images taken from conversation threads on the message boards *IGNBoards* and *Off Topic*

Main results: Semiotic analysis can be applied fruitfully to the study of images as an integrated part of text-based online communication. Semiotics can be used to highlight cultural aspects of the discourse. However, in-depth study of particular signs or groups of signs is needed to establish how choice of source and context affect the interpretation of images. This in turn necessitates the creation of established semiotic taxonomies of the images available online.

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1. Introduction

We find ourselves surrounded by images. In every direction there are advertisements, logos, art, and constantly flashing flat-screen displays. It seems the number of images we encounter is increasing at the same rate as the technology to display them improves. No longer must our framed vacation-photos be limited to one photo per frame. Buy a digital frame, insert your memory and you can cycle your entire photo album in the same space, constantly shifting. Werner Walter claims that post-modern society has been characterized by its “relentless traffic in images” (2004:64). Moving in a modern urban society we are constantly faced with images, often from other places, times and contexts. This increased exposure seems to be transforming our relationship to images. IT in general and the Internet in particular has led to a massive increase in textual communication, be it through cell phone text messages, e-mail or internet chat rooms. These forms of communication have been widely studied, but one area seems lacking. Since the increase in bandwidth has allowed for the easy distribution of images, they seem to have become a more important component of online communication. This study examines images as an integrated part of conversation, as an extension of language rather than as a complement to it. Semiotician Roland Barthes claimed that *“It is necessary today to enlarge the notion of language [langue], especially from the semantic point of view: language is the 'totalizing abstraction' of the messages emitted and received”* (1977:47). It does not matter if a message is conveyed verbally, through body language or with an image; it can still be seen in terms of signs and signification, of meaning.

This study aims to utilize semiotic analysis to analyze the use of images in conversation on online message boards. To my knowledge, this approach has not been used in this context before. While the semiotic study of images has been conducted for decades, the focus has mainly been on the image from the point of view of the original creator: the photographer (Sonesson 1989). Thus the analysis has become focused on photographic technique and what different photographic effects convey (a blurry picture to convey motion and urgency and so on). However, in the digital world of today, images are used by people who did not create the original photograph. This poses a problem for any analysis intent on finding meaning in photographic technique. In my view, the solution is to focus on the meaning of images as a part of a cultural and linguistic whole. Images online are used in many different ways and thus codes for their use and interpretation are established in the communicative process. Images seemingly appear in direct response to written statements. Images seem to “fit” into the conversation according to certain rules. If this is true, then the images have to be seen as a part of the language. This study will examine the role of images in text-based communication.

Furthermore, images are not universal in the sense that they are not interpreted the same in every language. Whenever an image contains a caption in English, it is relatively easy to argue that it represents part of the English language. When there is no text present the argument is not quite as clear-cut, but Barthes argues that any reading of an image is dependent on the reader's cultural and linguistic knowledge (Barthes 1977:29). In other words, an image read by an English-speaking person might not be interpreted the same way as the same image read by a French-speaking person.

This study aims to apply relevant semiotic concepts on authentic conversations with image-elements. It will be exploratory in nature, a pilot study of the possibilities of semiotic analysis as applied to new practices of image use, to observe the interplay of images and text through a semiotic looking glass.

1.1 The definition of an image

One issue that needs to be addressed early on in this study is the definition of an image. According to Sonesson (1989:38ff), there are several pictorial construction types. The three main ones are photographics (images created by photons hitting emulsion, or the digital equivalent), chirographics (images created manually by someone etching or painting a surface) and typographics (images created by standardized tools, printing presses etc.). However, in the digital age, all of this becomes increasingly more complex and these categories are no longer sufficient. What category would a screen capture from *The Simpsons* be? It would be a digital copy of a digital animation presumably made with some sort of computerized stylus. The use of a stylus would suggest chirography, but is painting on a virtual canvas with a physical tool the same as painting on a physical canvas with a physical tool? To make matters even more complex, what of a fractal drawn by a computer by itself based on a random algorithm? Essentially, definitions of images based on mode of creation are somewhat insufficient and needlessly complex. This study instead opts to use a definition based on pragmatism. I judge anything posted via the message boards' inline image-function as an image. Arguably, in the context of this study, a definition based on what the medium itself defines as an image is appropriate. Any inline graphic that is not text or an emoticon¹ is considered an image.

Neither of the boards examined allow embedding of video files. However, one further aspect needs to be address. These boards allow the posting of short animated images in the form of .gif-files. For instance, in the thread on which the "images of reaction" are based (see section 4.2), 34 of the posted images are animated while eight are still pictures. The potential problem with including animated content in the analysis is that, in having a temporal element not found in the still-image,

¹ Arguably, emoticons are also images but they are not the subject of this study.

² For full-disclosure it should be mentioned that I have been a registered member of *IGN Boards* since 2000.

³ This is one of the reasons the more notorious *4chan.org* is not the subject of my study. Regardless of the amount

with the possibility for a narrative (beginning, middle end), they could prove to require a very different analysis. However, in the case of the particular images used for this study it does not necessarily pose a methodological problem. This is due to the fact that the file format used (.gif) limits the content to very short animations, a few seconds at the most. Thus, any “narrative” is bound to be so simple as not to provide any significant hurdle. Consequently, the term *image* is used to denote both short animations as well as still images. Without further research, it is hard to establish an exact benchmark as to when an animated image ceases to be an image and becomes something else, necessitating other modes of analysis. For the purposes of this study, however, I would argue that clips only lasting a few seconds can be analyzed using the same model as images.

2. Material

2.1 Choice of sources

The choice to analyze the use of images on *message boards* in particular was based several factors. Firstly, as long time user of message boards, I repeatedly came across images being used in unconventional ways. Images seemed to not only illustrate things, but also complement and even replace text-based messages. Secondly, the nature of the message board as an open forum where any thread could have any number of people responding (as opposed to 1-on-1 conversation), promotes a sense of community, where in-jokes and codes concerning images and their meaning can flourish. Thirdly, while the image-text interplay could be found in other channels (for instance real time chats, instant messaging and so on), these channels are less likely to include image use due to their rapid-fire nature. Finally, the message board format allows for significantly simpler data retrieval.

The selection of which message boards to be analyzed is based mainly on the rankings performed by *big-boards.com*, a site that specializes in comparing internet message boards by post count, members, traffic and so on. Two sites have been selected: *offtopic.com* and *IGN Boards*.² Both sites are in the top ten English boards when ranked by post-count (*Forum Rankings 2010, Big Boards* [online]). Post count was chosen as a deciding variable since it is the most direct indicator of actual activity. The choice of popular message boards, rather than boards that are more explicitly geared towards image posting, was made in order to avoid having peculiarities of small internet sub-cultures skew the results.³ Using large forums ought to minimize the risk for communication

² For full-disclosure it should be mentioned that I have been a registered member of *IGN Boards* since 2000.

³ This is one of the reasons the more notorious *4chan.org* is not the subject of my study. Regardless of the amount of questionable content of the site, *4chan* moves at such a pace and with such a high reliance on established social codes

that is so obscure as to be impossible to interpret. Another factor was that boards geared exclusively towards images are less likely to feature interplay between text and image, making linguistic aspects harder to integrate in the analysis.

2.2 Description of sources

Offtopic.com is a site entirely dedicated to message boards. The site revolves around a main *Off Topic* forum, which is by far the most active board. There are also sub-boards dedicated to everything from politics and religion to pornography and weaponry. Full membership is awarded those who write an interesting enough introduction as their first post or those paying a monthly fee.

IGN Boards is a sub-site of *IGN.com*⁴, which is a network of videogame related sites. The boards themselves, however, are not exclusively related to videogames. Full membership is gained by subscribing, but there are many public boards that users can access for free. The most prominent of these is *Teh Vestibule* [sic]⁵.

Table 1.1: top four boards on offtopic.com according to total post count.

Top message boards – offtopic.com	Post count
Off Topic	2,409,188
Gamer’s Pulse	1,065,996
Fitness & Nutrition	943,502
Weapons of Minor Destruction	480, 506

Table 1.2: top four boards on IGN Boards according to posts in the last 30 days.

Top message boards – IGN Boards	Post count
Teh Vestibule	424,010
WWE Smackdown!	65,540
Football	49,556
PS3 Lobby	33,629

that it becomes very opaque to an outsider. It should be mentioned, however, that many of the signs created on *4chan.org* appear on both of the sites being studied.

⁴ IGN was originally launched as Imagine Games Network, a network of game-oriented publications by Imagine Publishing. IGN Boards is now run by IGN Entertainment inc., a subsidiary of News Corporation (*IGN 2010, Wikipedia* [online])

⁵ The unconventional spelling is probably a joke on the part of the administrators. When IGN made their message boards subscription-only in 2002, the board was created (then called *The Atrium*) as a free-for-all trial board. This led to it not only becoming the most frequented board but also the wildest, most immature one. The intentional typo is indicative of the community’s view of *The Vestibule* as being a board with low quality posting.

While the data here are not comparable between the two sites, as one is based on a 30-day sample and the other is not, they still provide a clear image of the relative popularity of the individual boards on the respective sites.

2.3 Choice of images/materials

The validity of this study is dependent on images being analyzed in context. Images are analyzed as part of the conversations on the selected message boards, the raw data being the images themselves on the one hand, the text on the other.

Due to the nature of this essay as a pilot study, I have opted to use a judgment sample rather than a random sample. That is to say, rather than collecting thousands of images and choosing a representative sample, I personally selected relevant images based on my own experience as a message board poster and the perceived importance the images have for the study. The message boards chosen are meant to be typical, but a study of two specific boards is not likely to provide material that would support generic claims regarding frequency on a global scale. Thus, little would be gained in spending time and effort to create a statistically valid random sample to extrapolate from. In order to provide a platform for further study, a manual survey of the images and a selection based on judgment ought to be sufficient. The object of this pilot essay is not to determine which images are used the most, but how the images that do appear are used. It is my hypothesis that the manner in which images are used as components of a conversation is likely to be universally applicable.

Nevertheless, a sampling process involving some elements of randomization was used. The forums were examined on a thread-by-thread basis. That is, all threads on the front page were opened simultaneously, regardless of subject matter. Should a thread be very long, consisting of more than 100 posts, the final 100 were examined. The reason for choosing the final 100 rather than the first 100 was that some threads, particularly on offtopic.com, were months old. In the hope of finding patterns among the images, this choice was made in order to only examine posts published roughly the same time period, hypothetically increasing the chance for finding the same images used in different threads. The threads were scanned for images and any images found were saved along with a copy of the thread for later reference. During this process the images were examined and relevant categorization was conducted. Images were grouped together based on their features, similar content, similar captions and most importantly: similar contextual use. Images with similar features found in similar contexts (see for instance the images in chapter 4.2) were given priority as they gave the highest promise in terms of analytic possibilities. This process was repeated until enough categories had been found to serve as the basis for the analysis. The categories showing the most potential were then examined through semiotic analysis.

3. Method - Semiotic Analysis

The theoretical basis of this study is primarily the field of semiotics. The relevant concepts are sketched out below.

3.1 Denotation & Connotation

There are many definitions and terminologies regarding signs. This study will mainly be using the model introduced by Peirce (as presented in Chandler, 2002: 29ff).

1. Representamen – the physical form or expression of the sign. Sometimes called a *sign vehicle*.
2. Interpretant – the interpreted meaning or concept of the representamen, created in the mind of whoever is reading the sign.
3. Referent – something that the sign denotes. The referent can be both physical and abstract. Peirce himself uses the term *object*, but for this study, the more intuitive term *referent* will be used.

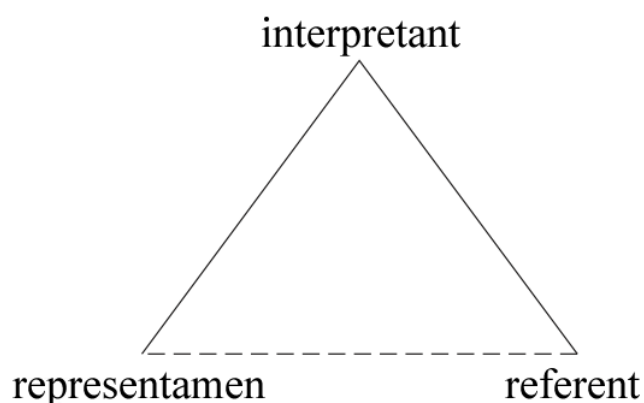


Figure 1: Peirce's model of the sign, as presented by Chandler (2002:30)

Peirce calls the creation of meaning taking place in the interplay between the three elements *semiosis* (Chandler 2002:30) The *representamen* has a weak connection to the *referent* it denotes but it also creates an image in the mind of the reader: an *interpretant*. The *interpretant* in turn connects strongly back to the *referent*, which the representamen denoted in the first place. However, it is important to note that the representamen does not directly connect to the referent; it is only through the intermediary of the interpretant that the relationship between the representamen and referent is understood.

As an example, the word *ball* is a representamen of a referent or class of referents. When someone hears the word *ball*, they create a mental image of *a* ball, not necessarily the one intended by the speaker. But if both speakers happen to have a ball in front of them, the interpretant will connect to that particular ball. Through the interplay between all three elements, that particular instance of the word denotes that particular ball.

To recapitulate: a word has a graphical or aural form (representamen), and a conceptual counterpart which people relate to when they hear or read a word (interpretant), lastly it also refers to something in the real world, be it abstract or concrete (referent). In principle this is also true for images, but not as simple. Barthes argues that images “comprise two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it” (1977:17).

An image might only be a representamen of what is in frame but the image also carries with it a second set of representamens through *connotation*.⁶ Connotations are more fluid connections than representamen-referent connections. So while the word *ball* might represent spherical objects, the interpretant *ball* might make up representamens for other interpretants, such as *sports*. This chain of connotation can go on virtually forever, growing further and further distant to the original sign.

Barthes calls connotation a *second order* of signification, separate from the original representamen-referent relationship (Chandler 2002:140). Potentially, there can be an infinite number of orders of signification, where each interpretant gives rise to new connotations and new representamens, as illustrated in figure 2.

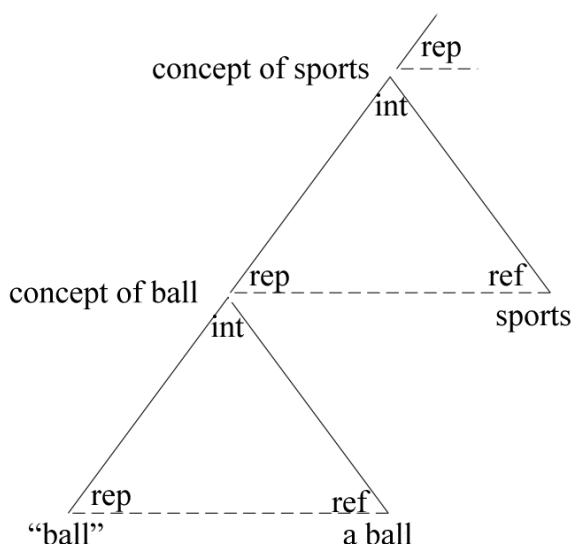


Figure 2: Connotation using the Peircean model of the sign

⁶ Note that Barthes actually uses Saussure’s dyadic model of *signifier/signified* as opposed to Peirce’s model. This study uses Barthes’ ideas of connotation but as applied to the Peircean model of the sign. While the two models have distinct differences, both allow for a model of connotation.

One way to apply the theory of connotation to images is to look at the imagery used in propaganda. Sergei Kruk (2008:40) explains how the Russian communist party used visual semiotics to their advantage. By using religious art as a template for their depiction of political leaders they preyed on the people's connotations, for instance implying Stalin as a messiah-figure by making frescoes reminiscent of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. The interpretant of the image of Stalin becomes the representamen of an interpretant of *The Last Supper* and so on until Stalin is connected to Jesus.

Barthes describes the role of connotation as follows: "The language of the image is not merely the totality of utterances emitted [...] it is also the totality of utterances received" (1977:47). The entirety of all the images we have seen and our interpretation of them serves as a point of departure for the interpretation of every new image. The fact that ball can come to mean sports in Figure 2 is based on the fact that we have encountered the image of the ball in many different contexts. Not just as a physical object, but as a logo, and so on.

3. 2 Modes of signs

Signs can be categorized based on how they relate to their referent. According to Chandler (2002:33), the most commonly used taxonomy is that of Charles Sanders Peirce. These modes are:

1. **Symbolic:** the representamen does not resemble the referent in any way. The connection between them is arbitrary and ruled by convention.

Ex. Words (not onomatopoeic words), letters, the on/off symbol etc.

2. **Iconic:** the representamen resembles the referent in some manner.

Ex. a painting, onomatopoeic words, sound effects, cartoons etc.

3. **Indexical:** the representamen is directly connected in some way to the referent without resembling the referent itself.

Ex. smoke-fire, thunder-lightning, clock-time, pointers (a pointing finger, an arrow with "bathroom" written on it), recordings (photographic, audio, filmic)

It is important to note that signs are rarely exclusive to one of these categories. A photograph of a cross can be both an indexical representamen of a cross, the result of photons reflecting off of the cross and onto the emulsion, but the same sign carries with it both symbolic and iconic relations. It has an iconic component because it resembles a cross and a symbolic aspect because a cross is a symbol of Christianity. However, a painted image of a cross would not feature any indexical relationship to a cross since the sign itself does not have a direct connection to the cross. Chandler

notes that signs can only really be categorized by mode through comparison of the internal relevance of different modes, rather than looking for one-to-one relationships (2002:44).

3.3 Anchorage & Relay

Images posted on internet message boards are often captioned. The interplay between text and image is analyzed using the model introduced by Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, text in an image fills one of two functions: *anchorage* or *relay* (1977:38ff).

Barthes claims (1977:38ff) that images by their very nature are open to interpretation. Many different meanings can be inferred from a single image. When someone adds a caption to an image, they *anchor* its meaning. The number of ways in which the image can be interpreted is reduced. Barthes claims that a caption can take referents that are already linked loosely to an image through connotation and bring them closer. Effectively bringing connoted referents closer to being denoted referents (1977:27).

Relay on the other hand works differently. Unlike anchorage, the text is not outside the image guiding us. Rather, the text and the image are part of a cohesive whole. (Barthes 1977:41). If an anchoring text describes an event, the relaying text *is* the event. For instance, in comic books, both the drawing and the speech bubbles containing text constitute equally important parts of the image.

3.4 The commutation test

Barthes describes the commutation test as a method of examining signs (or sequences of signs) in order to identify their significant units (1964:66ff). The commutation test is usually described using a Saussurean model of the sign. Chandler describes it in terms of looking for “distinctive signifiers” (2002:89).⁷ This is achieved by changing elements on the level of the signifier (representamen) and determining if this creates a change on the level of the signified (referent). If an element can be substituted on the level of the representamen without changing the referent, it is not *distinctive* (e.g. color, Color, colour,). Changing a *distinctive element of the representamen* will result in a change of the referent (e.g. rise, rice). By using the commutation one can figure out which elements are optional, and which are essential to the meaning of the sign. This can also be applied to images.

⁷ Since this study uses Peircean terminology, there is a slight gap in the translation of the Saussurean version of the commutation test. The term *distinctive elements of the representamen* is used instead of *distinctive signifier*. The reason for the slightly more elaborate term is *distinctive signifiers*, while efficient for text-analysis where the levels of signs are clearly defined (letters, words, sentences, paragraph etc.), images are not that clear on what is a sign and what is an element of a sign. Therefore images will be examined as a single representamen (potentially combined with a text-based representamen) containing many different elements, rather than different levels of signs.

3. 5 Intertextuality

An important tenet of semiotics is that all texts⁸ are intertextual. This means that all texts are dependent on other texts. This can be very explicit, in terms of literary techniques of allusion and reference (Chandler 2002:202ff). However, this idea goes even further. All texts have to relate to texts before it, whether they want to or not. Whenever someone writes a text, they are bound by genre conventions, styles, codes and so on. Even if a text is explicitly opposed to an established style, it nevertheless relates and positions itself to that text. Allen explains that “[a]uthors do not create their texts from their original minds, but rather compile pre-existent texts” (2000:35).

Barthes, in *From Work to Text* paints a picturesque image of himself on a hill, embellished with laughing children, trickling streams and so on. He then comments that “[a]ll these incidents are halfidentifiable [sic]: they come from codes which are known but their combination is unique” (1977:159). Thus, a basic definition of intertextuality is the combination of previously known codes in new and unique combinations.

Allen further argues that intertextuality is applicable to photography as well. The meaning of an image is defined largely through “its deployment and its viewers recognition of established codes and conventions” (2000:177).

⁸ *Texts* in semiotic terms essentially means “anything that can be ‘read’” (Chandler 2002:263). Thus movies, photographs, pieces of music are all texts.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Categories of images found

The main categories of images chosen for analysis are the following

- Images of reaction – “owning”
 - Images posted as a reaction to an exchange between two users on a message board. The images relate to the exchange itself. All images depict or relate to one individual defeating (“owning”) another individual.
- Images of reaction – laughing
 - Images posted as a reaction to an exchange between two users on a message board. The images relate to the users’ reaction to the exchange, as opposed to the exchange itself. All images depict people laughing in various contexts.
- Images of simple indexical denotation - portraits
 - Images that do not rely on connotation to convey their messages. Content and meaning are the same. The images depict different celebrities, and are posted as an alternative to simply writing their names.
- Viral images – Dat Ass
 - Images or image macros⁹, which rely on established sociolinguistic conventions and practice to convey their message. This is exemplified using images based on a viral image macro called *Dat Ass*, which depicts various people biting their lower lip as a symbol of desire.

The analysis of each category is presented in the same order as above, with a concluding discussion towards the end of the chapter.

⁹ An *image macro* is a popular term for images with superimposed text according to certain rules, e.g. LOLCat images, demotivationals and so on (*Image macro* 2010, *Wikipedia* [online]). As with many other terms in this field, there is no definite source of the term, nor a proper definition, but the above Wikipedia article points to it being created by users on a message board called *somethingawful.com* in order to describe the creation of new image-text combinations.

4.2 Images of reaction

4.2.1 Context

Unless otherwise stated, the images discussed in this section are all taken from a single thread from *Teh Vestibule*. The thread is about the hypocrisy of KFC criticizing McDonalds for putting chicken burgers on hamburger buns while KFC at the same time is offering a sandwich using fried chicken as buns. What is interesting however is the third and fourth reply shown in example 1.

- 1) a. ghostchild23: “I hate going into KFC because the fat white trash take up so much room.”
b. Logic-: “So leave your gf¹⁰ in the car”

This exchange leads to the thread going off topic with the majority of the following replies referencing the insult rather than the intended topic. Most of the replies used the message board’s quoting function to include the exchange between *ghostchild23* and *Logic-* in their reply, followed by a comment.

- 2) a. Fliesguy2981: “Thus let it known that on October 24th, 2010 ghostchild23 was owned.”
b. darthgundam004: “OOH SICK BURN”
c. tweeds_69: “Oh ****”
d. SecondStranger: “Ouch baby. Very ouch.”
e. profscam: “SHOTS ***** FIRED!!!”
f. tehamazingbagman: “VINTAGE Logic-”
g. Lepoth: “el oh el”
h. Amuz3d2Derth: “I laughed so hard I choked”
i. Sham365: “LOL”

The replies dealing with the insult seemed to belong to either of two categories: those appreciating the wit of the insult and those merely laughing at it. Examples 2a-f represent the first category, 2g-j the second. Interestingly, the images used also followed the same pattern.

¹⁰ Read: *girlfriend*

4.2.2 Images of reaction – “owning”

Table 2: Image content for images of reaction – “owning”

Image	Content
Image 1	Cat biting dog, with the caption “PWN3D!!!”
Image 2	Bird stealing food from a wallaby
Image 3	Five judges showing score cards. Four give 10s, one gives 9.7, the lower scoring judge gets pummeled.
Image 4	Basketball player Kobe Bryant showing a 10 point score card.
Image 5	President George W. Bush giving a thumbs up under a banner reading “Mission Accomplished”.
Image 6	The character Kevin Arnold from <i>The Wonder Years</i> giving a thumbs up

Images 1-6 all denote some sort of achievement. They do it in different ways with a slightly different focus and different expressions, but all share a common theme.

Image 1 is a picture of a cat biting a terrified looking dog, captioned with the text “PWN3D!!!”. The caption is very interesting, since it carries with it a chain of connotation. The term “pwn” has a particular meaning in online contexts. According to the Online Slang Dictionary (Rader 2010b 11/11) to “pwn” is a variant spelling of “own” which means “to defeat someone severely, as in a verbal argument or in a competition, often to the point of humiliation” (2010a 11/11). The text serves to anchor the content, reducing the number of possible readings. The eclectic spelling serves to indicate that this expression of the sign is connected to gaming culture. Rader notes that the form “pwn” is mostly used by computer gamers and comes from the fact that the key for *P* is adjacent to *O* on most keyboards and that the form probably originated from frequent typos. In this case, though, one must assume that the author made a conscious choice. Thus the image carries with it connotations not only of defeat, but defeat specifically as it is typically expressed in videogames. Considering the nature of IGN Boards as a community centered on gaming, the choice of expression is natural.

The fact that the caption relates to gaming is important in an intertextual sense as well, since this alludes to another genre of communication further connecting it to the social context: in-game chats. This is a very different text genre compared to the one found in the picture of President Bush. The image is not just a mix of text and image; it is a mix of a *specific genre of text* and image. The choice of the unorthodox spelling and indeed the choice of word in the image are both part of an attempt to draw on the relevant codes fitting the context. The spelling itself suggests a rushed and frantic response. While the substitution of the letter *3* for *E* is more of an in-joke than anything, the substitution of *P* for *O* and *l* for *!* suggest typos due to rushed typing. The number *l* is on the same key as *!* and when writing several exclamation marks after each other in rapid succession it is easy

for one or two to be pressed without also holding down the shift key. This has likely led to the practice of substituting ! for I in order to indicate a higher degree of emphasis.

One further implication of the parallel with videogames is the fact that the users seem to equate their message board interactions with gaming in some sense. This use of images and themes from competitive videogames applied to conversation suggest that these insults and their reaction are part of this message board culture. This is clear when looking at example 2b: “OOH SICK BURN”, which directly comments on the insult itself rather than the situation. The ritual give and take of insults seems to be a part of the socio-linguistic conventions of this genre.¹¹ Note that the same phrase was used in text-based replies as well (see example 2a).

The image itself has an *iconic* relation to the event. It is similar to the event it denotes. However, it also carries an *indexical* relationship to the actual contents. Both Image 1 and Image 2 are *iconic signs* denoting someone being “owned”, but they are *indexical signs* denoting the specific contents (the cat being owned, the wallaby being owned). The specific manner in which it is expressed (the form of the representamen) is variable. Both signs interpreted iconically represent essentially the same thing, but in different ways. Image 1 can be read with the same meaning free of context due to the caption but image 2 certainly achieves its preferred reading from being posted in proximity to the referent (the situation in the thread). The distinctive element of the representamen, the one element that needs to be constant for it to be interpreted as an *owned-sign*, is the *act of defeating someone*. The components of the sign are transferred to the situation it concerns through connotation and iconicity. In Peircean terms, the semiosis occurs when the representamen (the image of a cat or wallaby being owned) creates the interpretant of them being owned in the mind of the reader. However, since they also share an iconic bond with the events of the message board thread, in addition to the events pictured, the interpretant serves as a representamen of the concept *someone* being owned. This interpretant is connected to the referents (the situation in the thread). The meaning is created as a two-step process.

Consider images 3 and 4 in the appendix. Both feature scoreboards being lifted to indicate 10/10, with image 3 adding a joke with the judges scoring 10s assaulting the judge scoring 9.7. These images both have connotations to sports where athletic achievement is rated on a scale. Both images share very little except the scoring itself. Hence, one can assume that the distinctive element of the representamen is *the act of giving (a perfect) score*. The use of scoring here is intertextual, it is the taking of a convention from another genre (sports) and applying it in the conversational context of the thread. Thus the speakers frame the conversation as being a contest, where outsmarting an opponent is valued. They are in a way equating *Logic-’s* achievement in insulting *ghostchild23* with that of sportsman.

¹¹ For further examples of carefully contrived insults see examples 3e, 3g in chapter 4.3.1.

Image 5 and 6 continue in a similar but different fashion, utilizing a well-established symbolic sign, *the thumbs up*. They are of George W. Bush and the character Kevin Arnold from *The Wonder Years* performing the gesture. Seemingly, the image serves to be a replacement for the lack of face-to-face contact where the users could use body language themselves. Similar to images 3 and 4, they are a form of congratulation on a job well done. Just like the first four images, these are variations on a theme, suggesting that the thumbs up itself is the distinctive element. The most prominent difference in the expression is that in the picture of Bush, you can see a banner reading “Mission Accomplished” hanging overhead. The phrase creates connotations to military operations and force, as does the fact that he is on a military ship, should the reader know the context of the image¹². Similar connotations can be found in the textual replies (e.g. ex. 2a: “SHOTS ***** FIRED!!!”). This particular instance of the phrase has come to have a much more ironic meaning in a historical sense. That said, given the context of the image in the thread, odds are that the preferred reading of the text is literal.

4.2.3 Images of reaction – Laughing

Table 3: Image content for images of reaction – Laughing

Image	Content
Image 7	Close-up of a child laughing in an audience, presumably from the set of a TV-show.
Image 8	Actor Brendan Fraser laughing and clapping at an awards ceremony.
Image 9	Actor Tom Cruise laughing and clapping in an interview.
Image 10	Actor George Takei laughing in a radio studio.

Images 7-10 all denote someone laughing. Like in previous examples (images 3-4, 5-6), these images once again provide variation on a theme. Using Umberto Eco’s type/token distinction, the individual images are tokens of the same type (Eco, summarized in Chandler 2002:49). The common denominator, the distinctive element, is *someone laughing*. The settings are different, the persons laughing are different, but the images appear in the same context in the thread. These images are the visual equivalents of the text replies seen in examples 2g-i (see chapter 4.2.1). While some users choose to express their appreciation of the joke in written terms (as in 2i: “LOL”) others represent laughing out loud by posting an animated image of someone laughing.

A very interesting aspect of this particular sign is that while the images of “owning” are expressed as both animated and still picture variations, laughing is expressed exclusively through

¹² It was hung on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003, celebrating the efforts by US troops in after the invasion of Iraq.

animated images. Hypothetically, this could be because the process of laughing is hard to capture in a still image. A picture of someone smiling and of someone laughing might be very hard to tell apart. If the users want their images to be read correctly and easily, an animation is more likely to capture the essence of laughter than a still image. Laughter is not a static expression. Compare this to the thumbs up sign (images 5-6), which was expressed both as an image and an animation. A thumbs up will likely be interpreted the same regardless of whether or not there is motion in the image.

Similar to the earlier examples, these images have an indexical relationship with the actual contents (Tom Cruise laughing) and an iconic relationship to a general concept (laughing in general, laughing at the joke in the thread). What becomes paradoxical is that the contents of each image is a reaction to something in the situation where the image was recorded, not where the image is used as a sign. Brendan Fraser's laughter is a sign responding to a joke made at an awards ceremony. He is not laughing at the joke made in the thread. Nor is any other subject in the images. The image of Tom Cruise is even more interesting since he is not actually laughing at something told by another person (which we can assume the other people are), but rather at something he says himself (Youtube, 2010a 11/17). However, in the context of the thread, being cropped the way it is, the sign in effect becomes synonymous with the others. Through connotation and context we read Cruise's and Takei's laughter as being applied to the situation at hand.

From an intertextual point of view, one can argue as to why these particular images were chosen. In the case of the image of Tom Cruise, it is likely because the original video (leaked from the Church of Scientology) created a great deal of interest when it first surfaced (*Tom Cruise Scientology Video - (Original UN CUT)*, 2010, Youtube [online]). One version of the video has over 6 million views on Youtube, and the segment of him laughing has seen many "remixes" and edits. Thus his particular laugh has become a part of internet sub-culture. The same goes for the image of Brendan Fraser (*brendan fraser clap*, 2010b, Youtube [online]). The other two images do not seem to have the same kind of viral background.¹³ They appear to be just two examples of someone laughing. That said, they are created by using ready-made pieces of media output, rather than representations of the user themselves. The users might very well edit and adapt the material into a finished image, but they do not create the basic elements.¹⁴ One could imagine that with current technology available in the form of web-cams it would be simple for users to record themselves laughing and post those images. No such examples were found. Aside from the

¹³ Viral content is content that spreads rapidly over the internet and is reproduced independent of the original author. Once news of a certain clip or picture starts spreading from blog to blog, message board to message board, the amount of interest in that particular piece of content increases exponentially, like a virus.

¹⁴ This is similar to the semiotic concept of *bricolage* introduced by Lévi-Strauss. (see Chandler 2002:205ff)

anonymity factor, using material that is part of the media output, utilizing shared knowledge, appears to be an important aspect of the practice of image posting. One aspect of this that cannot be answered by this study is to what extent the sources actually constitute a part of the message. Could the fact that it is Tom Cruise laughing, rather than George Takei, alter the interpretation of the sign? Potentially, this could be true for some images in certain contexts, but further research using experimental studies would be required to investigate such an effect.

Chandler (2002:48) mentions laughter in particular as one sign that due to its analogue nature cannot be catalogued in the same sense as linguistic signs. He claims they cannot be related to a dictionary or syntax the same way linguistic signs can. However, I would argue that this selection shows that there is definite potential in cataloguing images of laughter in terms of context and origin, examining the syntax of the who and the where, rather than the how.

4.3 Images of simple indexical denotation - portraits

4.3.1 Context

On *Off Topic*, the following topic was found:

- 3) a. Akus: “In this thread post people you would pay \$ to watch perform (they must be dead). I’ll start”

The post also contained two images, one Barry White, one of Frank Sinatra (see appendix, images 11, 12). A few replies were text based:

- b. Hops: “Chris Farley
John Candy”
- c. NaturalNine: “SRV”
- d. sick nasty: “no one”

The majority of the replies consisted of single images, with a few users writing the name of the person in question above or below the image. While some replies were about musicians like Johnny Cash, Kurt Cobain and or Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham (appendix, image 13), some were of other kinds of celebrities: for instance, martial artist/actor Bruce Lee and stand-up comedian George Carlin (appendix, images 14, 15). These replies led to the following discussion:

- e. Akus: “Jesus fuck you people seriously need to lay off retard juice. You would think that pictures of two singers would pretty much make it clear that we're talking about

musicians, not martial artists or comedians.”

f. Isolated: “Just because you chose musicians, doesn't mean they are the only performers in the world. If you wanted only musicians chosen, you should have made it clear.”

g. slowbird: “it said perform, not play music you fucking unspecific sack of horse manure.”

4.3.2 – Analysis of images of simple indexical denotation - Portraits

Table 4: Image content for images of simple indexical denotation

Image	Content
Image 11	Portrait of Barry White.
Image 12	Portrait of Frank Sinatra.
Image 13	John Bonham playing drums.
Image 14	Portrait of comedian George Carlin.
Image 15	Actor/martial artist Bruce Lee kicking.

Images 11-15 all denote celebrities, usually in portrait form. This category is arguably the least complex in semiotic terms. While virtually all previous examples in this study produce meaning through connotation and utilize intertextuality, these images (on the whole) do not. When the original poster inserts images of Frank Sinatra and Barry White, these images are likely read the same way as they would have been if he had merely written the names in text. . While the photographs themselves belong to different photographic genres (promotional photographs, concert photographs, screen captures etc.), these conventions do not have a very functional role in the conversation. The pictures are indexical signs referring to a famous person. Unlike previous images they do not rely on chains of connotation and context to point to a referent, the content is the referent. Users posting these images expect the celebrities to be recognizable enough for people to interpret them correctly without any text to clarify. The picture of John Bonham is particularly interesting in this respect as it is followed directly by this comment (see appendix 13b):

4) a. w00t_man: “plus the rest of zep”

Essentially, the message *w00t_man* sends is “John Bonham plus the rest of zep”. While some semioticians are wary of talking about images in terms of grammar, I would argue that the combination of image and text here could be seen in terms of a single complex noun phrase. If you presuppose the question of the thread (“Which dead artists would you pay money to see perform?”), the answer “John Bonham plus the rest of zep” fits perfectly. Reading only the text does not provide the full message. The image is necessary for the interpretation of the text (for instance defining “the

rest” as “everyone except Bonham”). In semiotic terms this is a multimodal syntagm,¹⁵ where one single message is conveyed through the combination of two different media.

The last noteworthy thing about this conversation is that it provides a clear example of images used in conversation being misunderstood. The exchange between *Akus*, *Isolated* and *slowbird* in ex 3e-g clearly shows that the different users do not agree as to how the original post should be interpreted. The original poster claims the original question posed in the thread concerned only musicians as both images he posted were of musicians. The other users have another view, and express it quite vividly. This proves that while using images is an accepted and common practice, there is not necessarily a widespread consensus as to how messages containing images should be interpreted. In this case it is not necessarily the interpretation of the images themselves that is the problem, but rather the meaning created by the combination of image and text.

4.5 Viral images – Dat Ass

While some of the images examined so far have been from viral sources (see section 4.2.3 on the images of Tom Cruise and Brendan Fraser), so far, none of the images themselves have been viral images. The next category examined are all variations of an image macro called *Dat Ass* which supposedly originated on the *4chan.org* image boards (*‘Dat Ass, 2010, Know Your Meme [online]*). The image gained notoriety and spread across the internet in a viral fashion. But not only did the image spread, but the conventions around when and how to use it also did. Furthermore, it spawned a number of mutated versions, some of which are varied below. There are a myriad of similar viral images, of varying complexity. The following analysis is intended to be an example of how semiotic concepts can be applied viral images in particular.

4.5.1 Context

This category of images was found both on *Off Topic* and *Teh Vestibule*. On *Off Topic* it was posted as a reply to a thread entitled “Apple Store Bum Lookers”, where the first post consisted of an animation of two women standing at a counter in what is supposedly an Apple Store. The women see the camera, laugh at being filmed and turn back. On *Teh Vestibule* the images appeared in a thread called ““Smoking Hot Latinas Thread, IT HAS EVERYTHING!!!” (Warning Lots of Pics)”. The thread was almost entirely devoted to pictures of Latin American women in various states of undress. In both of these threads, the images analyzed were posted in reply to other images rather than a text.

¹⁵ A syntagm is a sequence of signs conveying a particular message. See Chandler (2002:83ff) for an explanation on syntagms and Lamke (2009) for a discussion on multimodal syntagms.

4.5.2 Analysis of viral images – Dat Ass

Table 5: image content for images from the *Dat Ass*-image macro

Image	Content
Image 16	Kim Jong Il, wearing sunglasses, biting his lower lip. A caption reads “DAT ASS”
Image 17	A montage of four people biting their lower lip: rapper rich boy; videogame character The Engineer from Team Fortress 2; actress Summer Glau as well as musician and comedian Andy Samberg. No caption.
Image 18	A portrait of disabled teenager with protruding teeth. A caption reads “DAT ASS”. It appears to be a school photo.
Image 19	The original version of this image, showing rapper Rich Boy in sunglasses biting his lower lip and the caption “Dat Ass”. NB! This image was not found on the surveyed message boards but on a separate site. It is included here for context.

All the images denote a person biting his/her lower lip, with and without sunglasses. This collection of images is important because they highlight the fact that images used online can stem from new conventions, creating new symbolic signs. The signs earlier have made use mainly of iconic and indexical relationships. These signs, however, are more arbitrary, more intertextual and more symbolic. The original version is Image 19 in the appendix, showing Rich Boy with sunglasses as well as the caption, in a slightly different form. While it is hard to fully verify the origin, if we assume it is true, we can make a few assumptions about the development of such a sign.

First of all, the connection between the original context of the image, the set of MTV’s Total Request Live (*Dat Ass*, 2010, *Know Your Meme* [online]), has nothing to do with its subsequent use. The original creator of the image macro might have read the peculiar facial expression as expressing some sort of desire and thus chosen that particular image. However, that connection might also be completely arbitrary.

Second, it shows that once a convention like this has been established, it can mutate. In this mutation, the distinctive element becomes apparent. As different users seek to express the same thing using another image, the community selects which aspects of the original sign are essential and which are optional. In this case, we have three subjects that contain both lip-biting and sunglasses (Kim Jong Il, The Engineer and Summer Glau) and two that only feature the lip biting (Andy Samberg and the teenager). There is also variation of whether or not to include captions, as the montage does not contain a caption. Potentially, the fact that it is montage containing four repeated instances of the image-element of the sign makes the caption superfluous. Either that or the user felt that in this context, everyone ought to be able to make the preferred reading anyway. Note that none of these images are animated. In contrast to the images of laughter, which were all

animated (see section 4.2.3). Presumably, the reason for this is that the lip-biting rarely occurs more than as momentary expression. It is simply better captured as a still image.

Third, this natural variation of the sign points to a high potential for semiotic analysis. The commutation test (see section 3.4) is greatly assisted by the nature of viral images. In the study of viral images and image macros, the test is essentially done already. For instance, based on this sample we can conclude that race, gender and age are not a part of the sign. However, lip-biting, the sunglasses and the caption are. The caption and the sunglasses appear to be optional. The only part of the sign that seeming cannot be omitted is the lip-biting. Depending on which way you interpret the choice of the original representamen, you are left with different conclusions as to why lip-biting is essential. If one makes the interpretation that lip-biting itself has an indexical connection to the concept of *desire*, it is reasonable that the sunglasses are unnecessary. Furthermore, the caption can also be omitted if lip-biting itself can stand as denoting desire. However, even if you do not argue that lip-biting itself is a sign of desire, signs subjected to much use and repetition will naturally be streamlined, omitting everything but the most essential aspects. In this case, one could argue that the lip-biting becomes the essential aspect through conventionality and symbolism rather than indexicality. One further argument to support the claim that the sign is symbolic is that the sign seems to be used only in a specific context: desire for behinds in particular rather than general sexual desire. The specific contextual constraints of the sign mean that it is in part ruled by convention, and thus has a symbolic component. Images online can easily be subjected to structural semiotic study.

Fourth, it shows that it is possible for users to create new, arbitrary, image-based signs. Images in conversation are not reduced to mimicry of conventional body language (images of laughter, emoticons) or the reproduction of established symbols (thumbs up). The message board communities can create new, independent symbols, which do not necessarily have a counterpart offline.

Finally, the picture of the teenager shows that once a convention is established. The expression of it can vary and the expression can take any form, from the seemingly neutral to the potentially offensive. It is hard to argue that this boy is expressing desire in the picture itself, it is apparently sufficient with merely the iconic resemblance to an established sign to allow a picture to be included in the vocabulary. It is probably safe to assume that the boy in the picture had little say in whether or not his image should appear in this context. Once a photograph or video clip has been put online, it can potentially form part of a new sign that can be reproduced online and potentially spread everywhere. The viral nature of these images makes it very difficult to contain an image once it has gained popularity. On the other hand, their mutative nature also makes it likely that few instances of the sign will become permanent.

5. Concluding remarks – further research

This study is meant to be exploratory. It is supposed to be a test of the possibilities in examining the role of images in conversation using semiotic analysis. In that sense, it has succeeded. Arguably, this pilot study has shown that applying semiotic concepts to image-based communication can yield worthwhile results. That said, a semiotic study of images becomes that much more useful if paired with other methods. A study of the use of images seen both from a semiotic and a sociological perspective, for instance including Bourdieu's theories of linguistic capital could provide valuable information as to what people are likely to use which kinds of images and why.

While this pilot study might not produce any earth-shattering results, it has nevertheless illuminated a few paths forward. An established taxonomy of image-based signs appears to be needed. I have proposed four categories – some broad, some narrow – but they do not even begin to scratch the surface. Add to that the fact that many potential categories found during data collection were omitted (metonymic images, various memes/image macros) and the need for a solid taxonomy is clear. One potential pitfall of this is the risk of ending up with hundreds of categories, making the taxonomy useless. What is needed is a large-scale sample analyzed from different semiotic perspectives to narrow down a few basic types. Peirce's three modes are a definite starting point¹⁶, but considering the multimodal and contextual aspects, they are insufficient.

Apart from further categorization, detailed study of one sign and all its varied expressions could yield more insightful results as to the role of different image-sources and other intertextual features. In the case of viral images, like those found in the *owned*- and *Dat Ass*-signs, a study of a larger corpus, in more different contexts, could provide better insight. This sample is far too small, but an in-depth study of the *owned*-sign could be very rewarding. The *owned*-sign's more abstract nature of the distinctive element creates a high potential for variation of expression. While this limited study could make useful statements about what the core of the sign was, it has to be examined on a much larger scale in order to make any valuable statements about the variations of the sign. Such a study, however, cannot be initiated without first identifying a sign, as has been done in this study. Once we have a clear definition of a sign, for instance: a sign portraying the act of one individual overpowering another, we can start to look for other instances of it and investigate it in different contexts. In this study the image of Kobe Bryant (appendix, image 4) analyzed in chapter 4.2.2 also appeared in the thread about Latino-women (see chapter 4.5.2), a very different context. In what way does the change of context affect the meaning of the sign?

¹⁶ While Peirce has presented typologies of signs that are vastly more complex than the three categories presented in this study, he has described the division of *symbol*, *icon* and *index* as being the most fundamental one (Chandler 2002:36)

One glaring omission remains untouched so far. What of the actual readers? When conducting this kind of analysis, you cannot escape the fact that your study is potentially subjective. If we are to truly understand how this communication works, we need to engage in dialogue with the users themselves. Both in terms of in-depth interviews about the creation of these images as well as experimental studies investigating interpretation. Only then can you get fully reliable material that can help determine the impact of the sources and variations. Are they arbitrary, or are they part of an intentional creation of nuance in the sign?

As our modes of expression become more and more varied, more and more sophisticated, so does the need for an analysis of our expression. Since image-based communication seems to be so closely integrated with media output, the language it creates automatically becomes tied to a certain time. The speed at which these images spread, mutate and are renewed makes them very sensitive to the surrounding media-landscape. By looking at how we use images, one could potentially uncover a myriad of conventions, norms and attitudes that may not be as visible in textual form. As was mentioned in the introduction, Barthes claimed in the 1960s that it was necessary to enlarge the notion of language to include images. Fifty years later, it is very hard to argue against him, as images have now been taken into use as communicative devices, not only by journalists and advertising agencies, but by practically everyone.

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Primary Material

KFC has a commercial raising an issue about McDonalds putting chicken on burger buns.

http://boards.ign.com/teh_vestibule/b5296/197020572/p1

In this thread post people you would pay \$ to watch perform (they must be dead)

<http://forums.offtopic.com/showthread.php?t=4629964>

"Smoking Hot Latinas Thread, IT HAS EVERYTHING!!!" (Warning Lots of Pics)

http://boards.ign.com/teh_vestibule/b5296/196190077/p1/

Apple Store Bum Lookers.

<http://forums.offtopic.com/showthread.php?t=4631437&page=2>