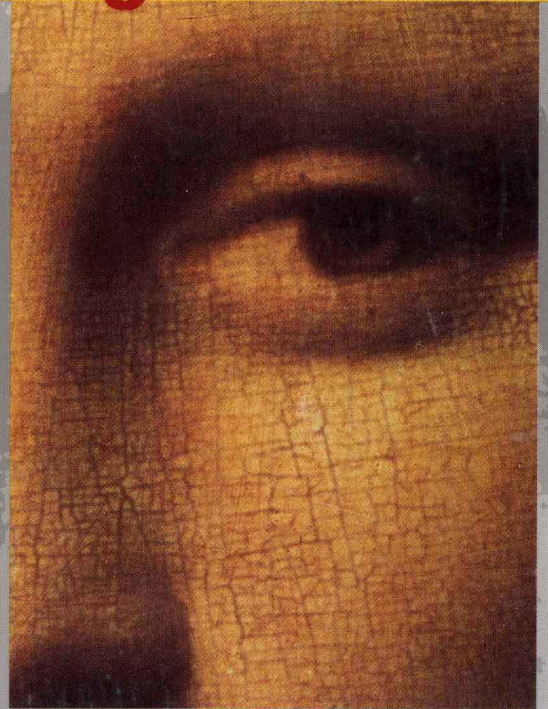# Seeing Is Believing

An Introduction to Visual Communication

Arthur Asa Berger

SEEING IS BELIEVING

An Introduction
to Visual
Communication

Second Edition

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PREFACE

In 1989, when I published the first edition of *Seeing Is Believing*, I felt it was important to help students learn some of the most fundamental things about visual communication. That is, I wanted to help my readers develop their "visual literacy"—their ability to interpret and create visual communication. Now, in an era when visual images are playing an increasingly important role in our politics, our entertainments, and our everyday lives, I think developing visual literacy is even more crucial than ever. We must learn how to examine and to interpret images and other kinds of visual communication to determine better what impact these phenomena may be having upon our lives.

In this second edition, I have added new material on a number of topics such as communication models, ethics, postmodernism, animation, and how the eyes process visual information. I have also expanded my checklists for studying advertisements and television commercials, enhanced my discussion of semiotics, color, and MTV and added many new and interesting images.

I hope that this revised edition of *Seeing Is Believing* will help students learn how to analyze and interpret visual communication better and to understand the role it plays in their lives, the lives of their friends and families, and in society.

THE AUDIENCE

In recent years there has been a rapidly developing movement in our colleges and universities, especially in schools of communication and journalism, to do something about what can be described as the "visual illiteracy" of many of our students. It is possible, and quite likely often the case, that our students graduate without knowing very much (if anything at all) about how images communicate and people find meaning in them, about typefaces and graphic design, or about the difference between the film image and the television image.

Ironically, a significant number of our students hope to work in fields such as advertising, public relations, television, or journalism—fields where they will be involved, either directly or indirectly, with visual communication. Visual communication plays an important role in everyone's lives; we all watch television, we read newspapers and magazines and books, and we go to the movies. And we all live in an "information" society where much of the information we consider has a visual nature. It is important that everyone know something about how images function and how people learn to "read" or interpret images and various forms of visual communication. But it is particularly important that students in communication (and related areas) do so since those who create and use images have a responsibility to those who will be affected by them.

MASS MEDIA FOCUS

One of the distinctive features of this book is that it focuses upon the mass media and deals with material of interest to students, material with which they are familiar. In this respect it differs from a number of books that deal primarily with visual communication as it relates to the fine arts.

USE OF SEMIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Seeing Is Believing uses semiotic and psychological concepts to help readers gain an understanding of how we find meaning in visual phenomena and how our minds process images. These concepts are presented in a readable manner, and numerous illustrations are offered to show how the principles discussed have been applied. These theoretical discussions are supplemented by a number of quotations from authorities that students will find useful and that will help them better understand the principles of semiotics and psychology.

SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE

A great deal of attention was paid to the design of *Seeing Is Believing;* a book on visual communication should be attractive and show what good design is instead of merely talking about it. The book uses the power of graphic design and the visual image to facilitate learning. This book was designed by a sought-after book designer, Anna George. In addition, the images are quite remarkable and were chosen to illustrate, in a very direct and forceful manner, the topics discussed in the book.

TEACHABILITY

Seeing Is Believing was written to be a teachable book:

- It is written in an accessible style.
- It deals with topics that are of interest to students and that are part of their experience.
- It has arresting and remarkable images and visual materials to illustrate these topics.
- It is designed to be functional; that is, the book explains a number of concepts that readers can then use to interpret the images all around them. In addition, they are asked to use these concepts and ideas in interesting and creative ways.

Thus, at the end of each chapter, a section of "Applications" requires readers to think about the textual material and then apply what they have learned in doing various projects—projects that they will frequently find entertaining.

A manual for teachers is available from the publisher; it contains a number of additional activities and exercises—to be used in the classroom or as assignments—as well as discussion questions and test questions.

THE STYLE OF THE BOOK

Although the book deals with matters that are often complicated, the style of writing is, as has been suggested, readable. It might also be described as informal and perhaps even "breezy," though the latter term might be a bit extreme.

This style of writing was adopted consciously as a means of attracting the attention and maintaining the interest of the reader. The writing "sugar coats

the didactic pill" as a means of enticing students to deal with material that is occasionally technical and that they might otherwise try to avoid.

In other words, this book might not strike some as reading like a textbook; it also, to my way of thinking, is so attractively designed that it doesn't look like a textbook.

There is also a good deal of humor in *Seeing Is Believing,* another means of making it more attractive and less anxiety-provoking for its intended readers. (This may be a rationalization. The author is a humorist who, like many professors, sees himself as "really" being in training to be a stand-up comedian.)

If readers find this book entertaining, half the battle will have been won. And if there are a number of ideas as well as illustrations and images (by the author and others) that amuse readers and help humanize this text and make it more attractive to its readers, so much the better. The most important thing is to get students to read the book and learn something about visual communication.

THANKS

I want to thank my editor, Holly Allen; my production editor, Carla White; my art editor, Amy Folden; and all the other people at Mayfield and elsewhere who helped me publish this second edition. I also appreciate the efforts of my copy editor, Tom Briggs; my book designer, Anna George; and all the people who were kind enough to give me permission to use their wonderful images. I'd like to thank the following people who reviewed the manuscript: Lisa L. Heinrich, St. Cloud State University; Janette Kenner Muir, George Mason University; and Wayne Wanta, University of Oregon.

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INTRODUCTION

IMAGE AND IMAGINATION

Images are something of a mystery to us, even though they pervade our lives. How do we make sense of them? How is it they have the power to generate emotional responses in us? These are some of the questions we must deal with when we think about images.

IMAGE

We live in a world of things seen, a world that is visual, and we expend much of our physical and emotional energy on the act of seeing. Like fish, we "swim" in a sea of images, and these images help shape our perceptions of the world and of ourselves. It is estimated, for example, that most of us receive more than 80 percent of our information through our eyes.

Images pervade our societies; we find them on billboards; in newspapers and magazines; on film screens and television screens; in our snapshots of children, friends, and relatives; in the paintings on our walls. These paintings, for example, both enrich our lives and convey to others something about our aesthetic sensibilities, socioeconomic class, and taste.

We communicate through images. Visual communication is a central aspect of our lives, and much of this communication is done indirectly, through symbolic means: by words and signs and symbols of all kinds. Our emotional states and our creative impulses need some kind of visual and symbolic expression to develop and maintain themselves, which explains why many organizations pay so much attention to visual phenomena such as costumes

I believe that one can learn to interrogate a picture in such a way as to intensify and prolong the pleasure it gives one; and if . . . art must do something more than give pleasure, then "knowing what one likes" will not get one very far. Art is not a lollipop, or even a glass of kümmel. The meaning of a great work of art, or the little of it that we can understand, must be related to our own life in such a way as to increase our energy of spirit. Looking at pictures requires active participation, and, in the early stages, a certain amount of discipline.
 – KENNETH CLARK,
 LOOKING AT PICTURES

and uniforms, symbolic objects, signs, flags, and portraits and statues of important figures.

These images are needed to make philosophical abstractions or important figures from the past more real or concrete and to channel or focus our emotions more directly. It is very difficult to get emotionally involved with an abstraction, and so religious and political groups focus much attention on heroes and heroines, on great figures—who can be portrayed visually, with whom people can identify, and whose beliefs people can internalize.

In his classic *Guide to the Perplexed,* the great medieval Jewish philosopher and sage Maimonides (A.D. 1135–1204) dealt with images. He compared the concept of image (*tzelem* in Hebrew) with that of likeness (*demut* in Hebrew) and of form (*taoro* in Hebrew) in order to understand the meaning of the phrase in Genesis, "Let us make man in our image." As he wrote:

> Image (tzelem) and likeness (demut). People have thought that in the Hebrew language image denotes the shape and configuration of a thing. This supposition led them to the pure doctrine of the corporeality of God, on account of His saying, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). For they thought that God has a man's form, I mean his shape and configuration. The pure doctrine of the corporeality of God was a necessary consequence to be accepted by them.

But, as Maimonides explained a few paragraphs later (and I am greatly simplifying his argument), the statement "Let us make man in our image" refers to God's form, not his (or her) visual image, and form involves intellectual apprehension, not shape and configuration, as Maimonides defined them.

IMAGINATION

Imagination refers to the remarkable power our minds have to form a mental image of something unreal or not present and to use this power creatively—to invent new images and ideas. We can see a strong link between the terms *image* and *imagination.* Imagination exists in the mind, while the image—for our purposes—is tangible and visual. But the image is often a product of imagination, which means that the visible image is strongly connected to the mental one.

Creativity is defined in many different ways, and numerous theories try to explain what it is and why some people are creative and others are not (or don't seem to be). There seems to be a link between creativity and imagination—our ability to generate images in our minds, images *not* always representational or connected to anything in our experience.
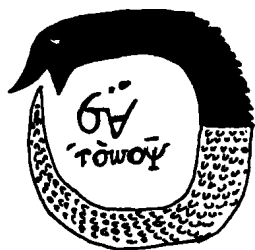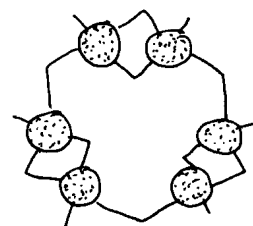
■ FIGURE 0.1
A rendering of a famous image—a snake with its tail in its mouth—found originally in a third-century B.C. Greek manuscript. The nineteenth-century chemist Kekule had a dream about a snake with its tail in its mouth, and this dream image led him to discover the molecular structure of benzene.

Visual images help us discover things. In *Man and His Symbols,* the psychologist Carl G. Jung recounts the role dream images played in the discovery of benzene. Jung writes (1964:26):

> The 19th-century German chemist Kekule, researching into the molecular structure of benzene, dreamed of a snake with its tail in its mouth. [A representation of this from a third-century B.C. Greek manuscript is shown in Figure 0.1.] He interpreted the dream to mean that the structure was a closed carbon ring . . . [Figure 0.2].

This anecdote suggests that there is a strong link between visual images and what we call creativity. The images we see, whether in our dreams or daydreams, in drawings and doodles in our notebooks, or images we find in printed matter or films or the broadcast media—all are connected to our ability to focus our attention on something, to deal with it in other than abstract and intellectual ways, and ultimately to "break set" (escape from conventional ideas and beliefs) and come up with something new. If necessity is the mother of invention, the visual image is its father.


■ FIGURE 0.2
A rendering of the closed carbon ring that Kekule drew in his *Textbook of Organic Chemistry* (1861).

THE VISUAL AND THE PSYCHE

Images have the power to reveal our mental states. The neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, in an early formulation, described the *psyche* as being divided into two parts: one accessible to our consciousness and one buried beneath our consciousness, an "unconscious." (There is actually a third part of the psyche, the preconscious, just below consciousness, which is accessible to our consciousness.) We can represent the psyche by an iceberg. The conscious element is the small part of the iceberg that is above the waves. Just underneath the waves, there is an area we can see into, which is the preconscious. Underneath the preconscious is a huge mass, which we cannot see and which is not accessible to consciousness, that represents the unconscious.
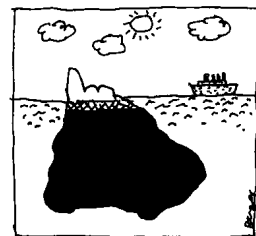
Freud also explained, in a later refinement on his theories, that the psyche comprises three elements: the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*. The id represents drives, impulses, and sexual desire. The superego embodies moral beliefs (conscience) and ideal aspirations. The ego mediates between the two forces and involves the way individuals relate to their environment. The ego employs various defense mechanisms to achieve a balance between the forces of the id and superego. One of the most important of these defense mechanisms is sublimation, which involves the redirection of id energy from sexual matters to other areas, such as artistic expression. (Freud's theory is one explanation of artistic creativity.)

Jung, another great psychologist, had a different set of concepts. He believed there were archetypes, "universal images" that were found in myths, dreams, religions, and works of art. These archetypes were reflections of what Jung called the "collective unconscious," a concept that is extremely controversial. (We can see how a person has an unconscious, but it is difficult to explain the existence of a *collective* unconscious.) The hero, according to Jungians, is the most important archetype.

The psyche, according to Jung, is divided into the shadow (the dark side that is kept hidden from consciousness) and the ego (the light side). But the shadow contains some positive elements, such as creativity, and the ego contains some negative elements, such as destructive attitudes. Jungians also believe that men have a feminine side, the anima, and women have a masculine side, the animus, which play an important role in human development. In sum, Jungians offer a considerably different understanding of the human psyche and of dreams and images than Freudians do, though both believe in the importance of the unconscious.

In 1977, a German therapist, Anneliese Ude-Pestel, wrote *Betty: History and Art of a Child in Therapy,* a book about one of her patients—a little girl who was significantly disturbed (if not almost psychotic). Betty loved to make drawings and had done hundreds of them, which her father had saved. The paintings were all ghastly—full of monsters and horrifying images, reflecting her psychological state. As the treatment progressed, Betty's drawings changed—and by the end of the therapy, when Betty had been restored to mental health, her drawings were those of a typical little girl (Figures 0.3, 0.4, and 0.5).

The visual image, we see, has the capacity to show the anguish of a tormented soul just as it has the power to stimulate sexual desire, to generate intense feelings, to lead people to perform selfless acts of bravery or cruel acts of barbarism. It is not the image or symbol itself that is responsible, but rather the ability of the image to evoke responses in people that are connected to their beliefs and values.