

READING THE IMAGE

In art and visual communication, understanding the meaning of images is crucial. This module explores three important concepts: the semiotic plane, the iconic plane, and the contextual plane. These ideas allow us to analyze and interpret artworks, advertisements, and other visual media.

The Three Planes of Visual Communication

Visual communication involves **conveying information and ideas through visual elements** such as **images, symbols, and colors**. It helps people understand and interpret messages quickly using different **layers of meaning**. The three main planes of visual communication are:

- Semiotic Plane
- Iconic Plane
- Contextual Plane

The Semiotic Plane

The **semiotic plane** focuses on **how signs and symbols create meaning**. **Semiotics** is the study of signs and how they communicate ideas. In art, the semiotic plane helps us understand the relationship between what we see and what it represents.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist who introduced a foundational concept in structural linguistics and semiotics. His sign theory is commonly called the **Saussurean Model of the Sign**. A sign is the **basic unit of meaning in language**. A sign consists of two main components: the *signifier* and the *signified*.

Two Parts of Signs:

1. **Signifier** – It is the physical **form of the sign**. It is what we perceive, such as a sound, word, or image.

Example: In road signs, the physical form of the sign includes elements like a **red octagon** (for a Stop sign), a **green circle** (for a Go sign), or a **triangular shape** (for a Yield sign).

2. **Signified** – It is the **concept** or meaning that **the signifier represents**. It is the mental image or idea associated with the signifier.

Examples:

- **Red Octagon** (Stop Sign) – The concept of **stopping** or pausing at an intersection
- **Green Circle** (Go Sign) – The concept of proceeding or **going**
- **Triangular Shape** (Yield Sign) – The concept of **yielding** or giving away to other traffic

The Iconic Plane

The **iconic plane** focuses on **how images resemble what they represent**. The iconic plane is about **visual similarity** between the sign and its meaning.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was an American philosopher who built on Saussure's ideas. He developed a theory about signs, known as **Peircean Semiotics**, and classified signs into three main types.

Peirce's Three Types of Signs

- **Icons** – These are signs that **resemble the objects** they represent (e.g., a portrait)
Examples:
 - A **photo of a cat** represents a real cat through visual resemblance.
 - A **map** represents geographical locations by visually mimicking the layout of an area.
 - A **picture of a camera on your phone** means you can take photos. The image of the camera looks like a real camera, so it's an icon.
- **Indexes** – These are signs that have a **direct connection to their objects** through a causal or physical relationship
Examples:
 - **Smoke** serves as an index of fire, as it indicates the presence of a fire due to a causal relationship.
 - A **thermometer** showing high temperature indicates heat, reflecting a direct physical relationship.
- **Symbols** – These are signs that have an **arbitrary relationship to their object**. It means there's no special reason why a word is used for a particular thing. The connection between the word and what it stands for is just a matter of **agreement**, not something that's naturally obvious.
Examples:
 - The **red light** means **"stop"** because of **social convention** and **agreement**.
 - Words like "cat" or "dog" are symbols that represent the animals through agreed-upon conventions rather than resemblance.

The Contextual Plane

The **contextual plane** is about understanding the bigger picture. The **contextual plane** considers the **historical, cultural, and social context** of the image which helps us **understand the deeper meaning** or message. It reminds us that interpretation can change based on when, where, and how we view an artwork.

Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) was a German art historian who popularized the iconographic method in the 1930s using medieval and renaissance art of Western Europe, such as his famous essay about **Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait**), and he described three steps:

Three Steps of Iconographic Approach

- **Primary Level (Pre-iconography)** – This level refers to the most **basic level of understanding**. It focuses on the basic elements of the artwork, such as its **composition, color, and style**.

Example: In Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," we can identify the 13 people at the table, including Jesus and his twelve Apostles, the table arrangement, and the overall composition of the scene.

- **Second Level (Iconography)** – This level involves **recognizing** and **interpreting symbols** and **specific themes** in artwork to understand their deeper meanings.

Example: In "The Last Supper," people familiar with Western culture or Christianity would recognize the scene as Jesus' final meal with his disciples. We might also identify the chalice as a symbol of the Holy Grail and connect it to the Eucharist, a Christian religious ritual.

- **Third Level (Iconological Analysis)** – This level examines the **deeper symbolic** and **cultural meanings** behind the artwork, taking into account its iconographic context and **broader historical and cultural aspects**.

Example: In "The Last Supper," we examine how the painting's design reflects Renaissance values and how the scene of Jesus' betrayal relates to contemporary moral and human ideas. This helps us understand the painting's deeper meaning within its historical context.

Putting It All Together

In essence, understanding these three planes can help you become a better critical thinker. It can help you analyze advertisements and media more effectively, create more powerful visual content, and enhance art and design on a deeper level.

When you look at a painting, advertisement, or even a meme, try to consider the semiotic, iconic, and contextual planes. You will be amazed at how much more you can comprehend and appreciate visual communication.

References:

- Hay, A. (n.d.). *Semiotics*. Annie's Blog. <https://anniehaydesign.weebly.com/colour-is-sound/semiotics>.
- Kilroy-Ewbank, L. (n.d.). *Smarthistory – An introduction to iconography and iconographic analysis*. <https://smarthistory.org/introduction-iconographic-analysis/>.
- Muralha, F. (2024, March 20). *Panofsky - the 3 phases of the iconological method of art analysis*. Citaliarestauro. <https://en.citaliarestauro.com/art-analysis-panofsky-method/>.
- Nordquist, R. (2020, March 8). *Semiotics Definition and Examples*. ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/semiotics-definition-1692082>.
- Reynolds, A. (2023, October 14). *Semiotics in Art and Design: Understanding the Power of Symbols and Signs*. Ren Creative Works. <https://adrianreynolds.ie/semiotics-in-art-and-design/>.
- Steemit. (n.d.). *Understanding Semiotics and Semiology : Science of Signs*. <https://steemit.com/steemiteducation/@affiedalfayed/understanding-semiotics-and-semiology-science-of-signs-2017911t23147684z>.