Visual Research
Learning outcomes

› Understand representation and basic semiotic theory i.e. signs, meaning and myth
› Use visual analysis to decode an image
"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak"  
(Berger, 1972)
westerners now interact with the world mainly through how we see it

(Rose, 2007)
The technology of images is this central to our experience of visual culture

(Sturken and Cartwright, 2001)
Images can be powerful

Image source: AFP/Getty Images 1991
Working in the cultural industry you’ll have power and responsibility

End of Term Frolic, c.1894 © Royal College of Art Archive
Systems of representation
The planet Mars
We understand the world by representing it in images and words.
These ways of representing the world are governed by systems or conventions.

For example, the English language is a system with conventions such as grammar.
These ways of representing the world are governed by systems or conventions.

For example film has a system with conventions such as Lighting, Colour, Narrative Techniques, Montage, Symbolism, Juxtaposition.
Signs shape us? Not we shape them?!
We use words and images to represent the world around us.

These representations are governed by systems and conventions.

Semioticians argue these systems are not neutral and shape our understanding of the world.

i.e. culturally specific and depend on each other to create meaning.
Tools for understanding representation
Rene Magritte, The Treachery of Images
(Ceci n'est pas une pipe), 1928-29
Charles S. Peirce
Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure
Course in General Linguistics
(1974)
Relationship between a word and things in the world is arbitrary (random) and relative, not fixed

(Sturken and Cartwright, 2001)
Roland Barthes
French critic he believes signs are not ‘innocent labels’.

In addition to the labelling function of signs, to communicate a fact, there are extra associations which are called ‘connotations’.
Visual analysis tools

1. **Denotation**
   What is pictured?
   First order of signification
   Straightforward / literal / neutral

2. **Connotation**
   How it is pictured? / What is implied?
   The reader/viewer plays an active part in this process

3. **Myth**
   What are the societal ideals or myths?
1. **Denotation**

What is pictured?

First order of signification

Straightforward / literal / neutral
1. **Denotation**

Black and white image  
NY City – Brooklyn Bridge  
Couple in an embrace  
Man clutching woman’s head/neck  
Handwritten text  
Two bottles of fragrance...  
Shallow depth of field
2. Connotation
What is implied?
The reader/viewer plays an active part in this process
2. Connotation

Memory / Dream / Fantasy / Impulsive
Excitement / Spontaneous / Happiness / Passion / Love / Romance
White / Heterosexual / Beautiful / Attractive
Success / Cosmopolitan / Wealth
Control / Submission
3. Myth
What are the societal and cultural myths / ideologies?
3. Myth (or ideals)

Heterosexual union is best
Romantic love will bring fulfilment
Youth is Beauty
“Myth is the result of meaning being generated by the groups in our society who have control of the language and the media. In today’s society the modern myths are built around things like notions of masculinity and femininity, the signs of success and failure, what signifies good health and what does not.”

(Crow, 2003)
Denotation
What is pictured?
Connotation
What is implied?
Myth
What are the cultural societal myths?
Myth
Health = Thin = Beauty?
Summary

- We can use the tools of visual analysis to decode representation and reveal societal ideals.
- For example:
  - Value of romantic love
  - Norm of heterosexuality
  - Concepts of good and evil
- Visual culture is integral to ideologies and power relations

(Sturken and Cartwright, 2001)
Working in the cultural industry you’ll have power and responsibility
Task 4
Task 4

› Choose an advert from the selection on Blackboard and write a 500 word visual analysis

› Think about what this image is portraying, what story it's trying to tell, and how it does this. Focus on issues of size, colour, technique and most importantly content, composition and context to unravel the meaning of the image
Considerations

‣ For whom is the image intended?
‣ How were the images produced or created? By whom? What circumstances?
‣ What are the power relationships involved?
‣ What stories do the images tell?
‣ What social, cultural, political knowledge is required to interpret the image?
‣ What is your emotional reaction to these images...

Source: The Image and Identity Research Collective (IIRC)
Considerations

› How do other people react to them? What might these reactions signify in terms of interpreting the images?
› What is the main message conveyed by the image?
› How are gender differences and similarities portrayed?
› What is the relationship between the image-text and the status quo or current cultural social context?

Source: The Image and Identity Research Collective (IIRC)
Further study

- Ways of Seeing – John Berger
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnfBPUm3el
- Sturkin and Cartwright reading on BB