

Marlboro



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

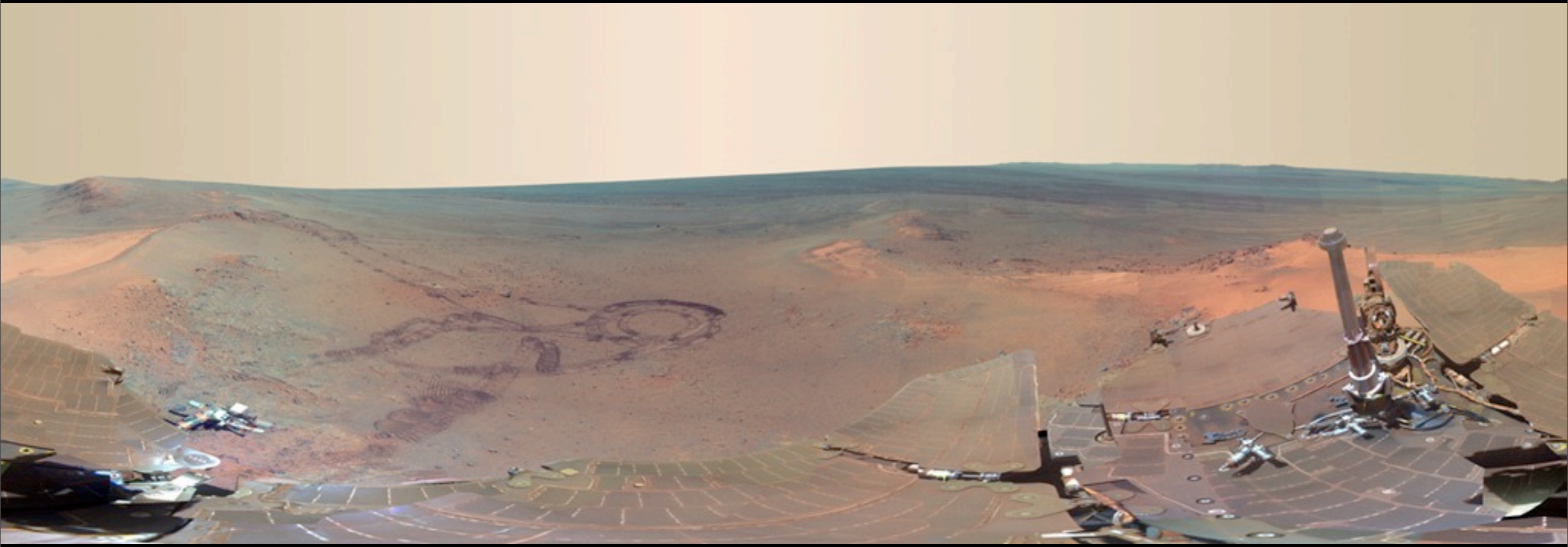
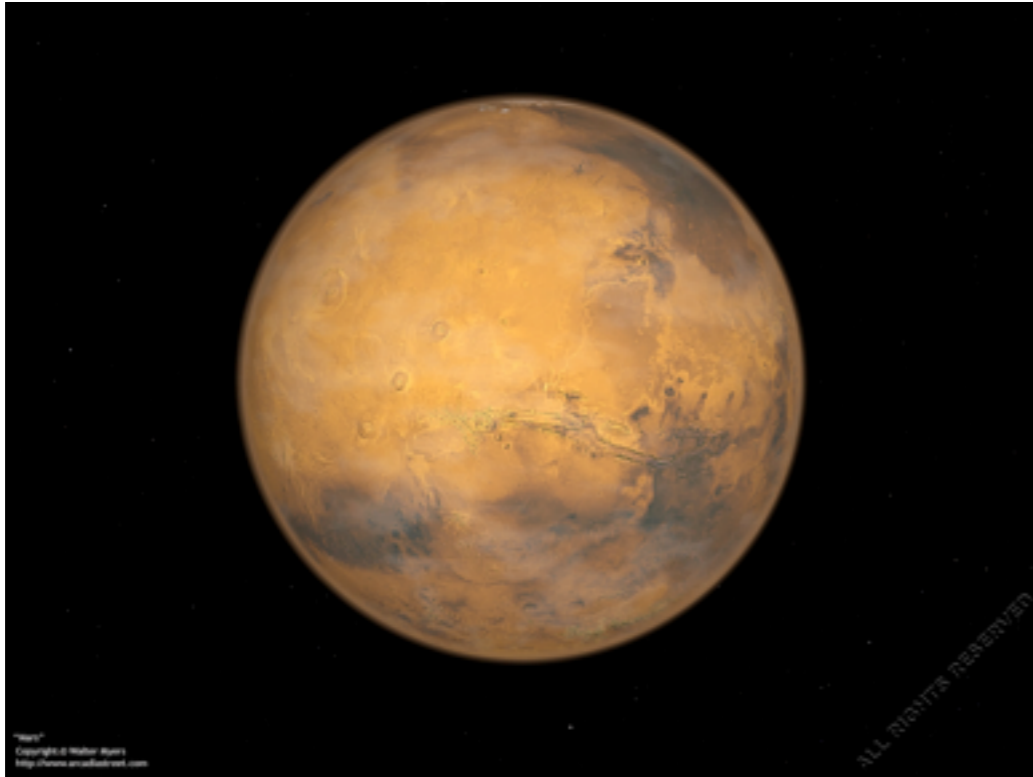


Image source: [nasa.gov/newsroom](https://www.nasa.gov/newsroom)

Images

The planet Mars

Words



Mars

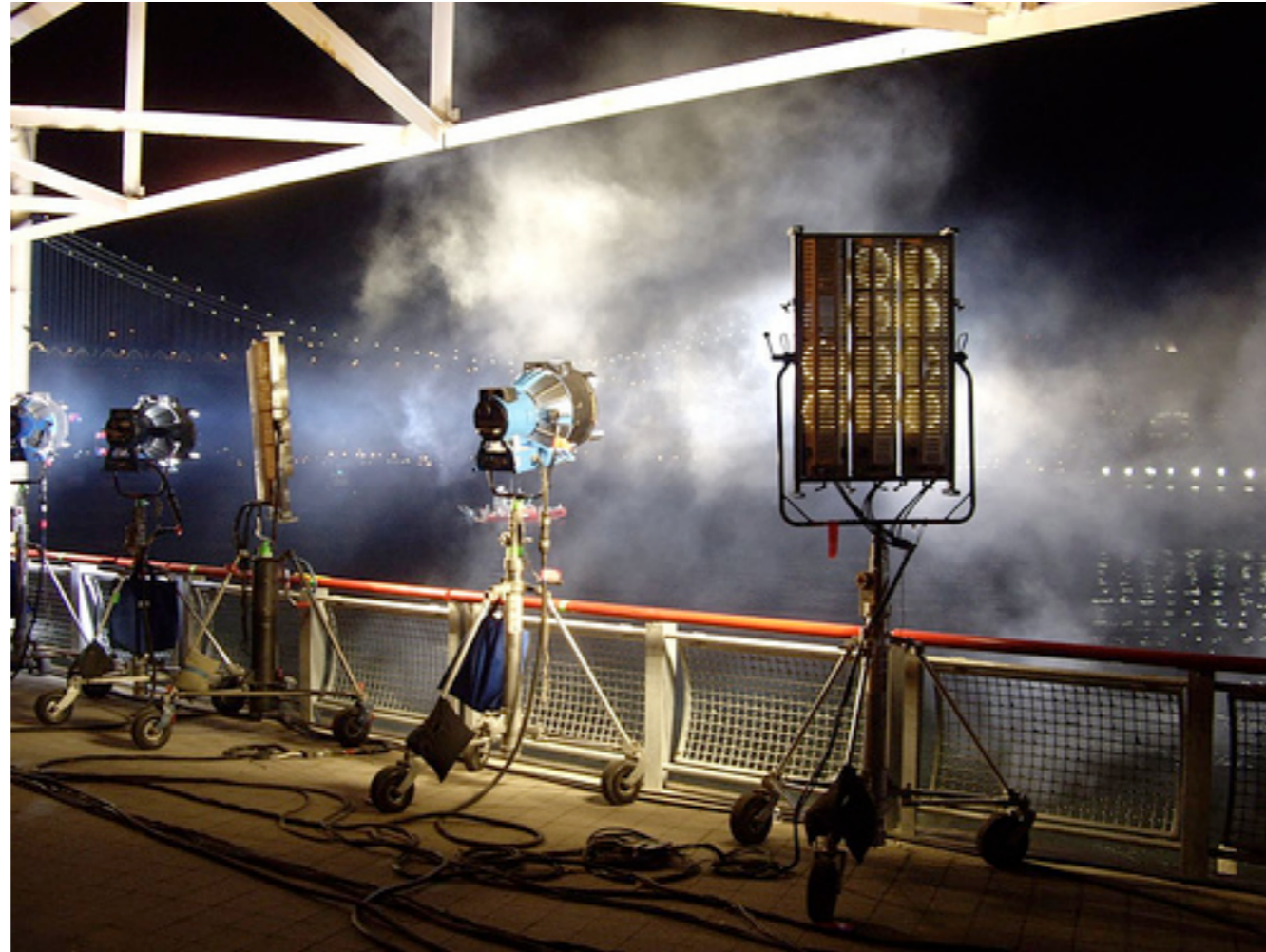
We understand the world by representing
it in images and words

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?!

Summary

- 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 + shape our understanding 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)

Signifier

Image / word / sound

=

Sign

Signified

Meaning / idea

Relationship between a word and things in the world
is arbitrary (random) and relative, not fixed



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

“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)



**ADVERTISING SPACE
AVAILABLE
01 41 05 80 01**

Denotation
What is pictured?



**ADVERTISING SPACE
AVAILABLE
01 41 05 80 01**

Connotation
What is implied?



**ADVERTISING SPACE
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01 41 05 80 01**

Myth
What are the cultural
societal myths?



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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)

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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=LnfB-pUm3el>
- Sturkin and Cartwright reading on BB