The Meaning(s) of *Lens Meaning*

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*As a photographer and an art educator, I want to come to a better under-
standing of how lens images (photographs, film and television) convey meaning.
This is not a trivial or purely academic concern. Recently media educator David
Trend has observed that "media studies of any kind are virtually nonexistent in ele-
mentary and secondary schools. Yet serious studies of film, photography, and video
are needed most in these latter areas, as students encounter powerful mechanisms
of socialization that will follow them the rest of their lives...Without a pedagogical
imperative, the broader mission of progressive culture stands in jeopardy"
(Trend,1988, p.10). It is hoped that the discussion of the meaning of these media
initiated here can draw further attention among educators to the power and impact
of these lens media.*

Lens Meaning

In his essay "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," Sekula
(1984) suggests that:

> All photographic communication seems to take
> place within the conditions of a kind of binary
> folklore. That is, there is a 'symbolist' folkmyth
> and a 'realist' folk-myth. The misleading but
> popular form of this opposition is 'art photogra-
> phy' vs. 'documentary photography.' Every pho-
> tograph tends, at any given moment of reading in
> any given context, toward one of these two poles
> of meaning. The oppositions between these two
> poles are as follows: photographer as seer vs.
> photographer as witness, photography as expres-
> sion vs. photography as reportage, theories of
> imagination (and inner truth) vs. theories of
> empirical truth, affective value vs. informative
> value, and finally, metaphoric signification vs.
> metonymic signification (pp. 20-21).

Sekula refers directly to two (form as meaning and content as meaning) and
indirectly to a third (context as meaning) layer of signification in his dis-
cussion of photographic meaning. Sekula's argument suggests that there is

a constant tension between the form and content notions of meaning. I take
from his placing of context outside of this struggle that it functions as an
over-arching influence on meaning much like the arena is the larger context
in which two boxers vie for domination.

Allan Sekula's tripartite conception of photographic meaning is a
useful starting point in our discussion, but in order to expand his notions to
include photography, film, and television I must create a term:'*lens meaning*'
by which I mean the understanding that results from our use of lens images.
By lens images I mean any visual representation, whether projected on a
screen (including a television screen) or in the air (as in a holograph) or
printed on a page or other surface that has been created or reproduced with
the aid of a lens and any chemically or electronically light sensitive matrix.
I hope that I am avoiding the pitfalls that Michael Scriven attributes to
redefinition in conceptual analysis (in Jaeger,1988, p.138.) simply because
lens meaning, as far as I can tell, is a new term, not a redefinition of an older
one. In one sense the term narrows considerably a large field in philosophy
by limiting our concern to meaning only as it refers to lens images. At the
same time, by combining the technologies of photography, film, and
television, it runs counter to much of the modernist writing which tries to
explore the 'nature' and uniqueness of each separately.

My purpose here is to analyze terminology that people use to discuss
critically lens media and imagery and to suggest that the new term, *lens
meaning*, can be applied to much of what has been said about photography,
film, and television. Additionally, I want to argue that collapsing these
three technologies into one larger category is both a useful and an appropri-
ate (if not final) step when considering their visual signification. A.D.
Coleman has applied J. David Bolter's concept of "defining technology"
(Coleman,1986, p.10) to the lens. Bolter (1984) suggests that:

> A defining technology develops links, meta-
> phorical or otherwise, with a culture's science,
> philosophy or literature; it is always available to
> serve as a metaphor, example, model, or symbol.
> A defining technology resembles a magnifying
> glass, which collects and focuses seemingly dispa-
> rate ideas in a culture into one bright, sometimes
> piercing ray. Technology does not call forth major
> cultural changes by itself, but it does bring ideas
> into new focus by explaining or exemplifying them
> in new ways to larger audiences (p.11).

It is intriguing that Bolter, in discussing the computer which he wants
to label a defining technology because he feels that it has resulted in
a" general redefinition of...mankind's [relationship] to the world of nature,"
(p.9) uses the metaphor of the lens just in the way that he suggests a defining
technology would be used. Coleman starts from this base and traces the
impact of the lens from its beginnings to the 16th century. It is between 1550-
1553, he argues, that western civilization became a lens culture. In that three
year span: Girolamo Cardano built the first 'modern' camera by affixing a
lens to the light-admitting aperture of a camera obscura; Franciscus

Maurolycus first suggested that the human eye is like a lens; and the two British mathematicians, Leonard and Thomas Digges, designed the first compound lens (Coleman,1986, p.13).

While Coleman's notion of the rapidity of cultural change is problematic, his argument at least makes the important point that in that short three-year period the groundwork had been laid for: the photographic recording of information; the generation of new visual information in the sense that a compound lens makes it possible for us to see what our eyes naturally cannot; and perhaps most importantly, for us to accept the images produced by the lens as being like what our eyes see. Moving to the present we must recognize that these three qualities of the lens have been incorporated (literally) into a mass communications network that Hans Magnus Enzenberger (1974) had labelled "the consciousness industry."

> Thus...it would seem to be vital to our advancement as a culture that we come to understand the extent to which lenses shape, filter and otherwise alter the data which passes through them the extreme degree to which the lens itself *informs* our information. This influence, though radical in many cases, often manifests itself subtly. Yet even the most blatant distortions tend to be taken for granted as a result of the enduring cultural confidence in the essential trustworthiness and impartiality of what is in fact a technology resonant with cultural bias and highly susceptible to manipulation (Coleman,1986, p.18).

It is reasonable to speak of any human product as meaningful. As Oakeshott (1975) argues:

> ...a human being is the inhabitant of a world composed, not of 'things', but of meanings; that is, of occurrences in some manner recognized, identified understood and responded to in terms of this understanding. It is a world of sentiments, beliefs, and it includes also artifacts (such as books, pictures, musical compositions, tools and utensils) for these, also, are 'expressions' which have meanings and which require to be understood in order to be used and enjoyed (p.19).

But in addition to this general sense, lens images are both systematic and institutional, with the lens providing the system, and the mass media providing the institution. This implies that talking about *lens meaning* has much the same logic as talking about meaning and language.

Brian Barry, in his discussion of three theories of meaning in *Political Argument* (1965), suggests that the most naive notion of meaning is what he calls "the causal theory." He describes meaning in this context as being perceived in Pavlovian terms. "An utterance corresponds to the dinner-bell and the effect of the utterance to the dog's salivating (p.17)." In contrast an "intentional" theory of meaning keys on the speaker's intention. Somehow meaning is molded by the speaker and the listener's job is to discover that intention. Barry's own conception of meaning takes into account both the linguistic forms and conventions of a language on the one hand, and the social context of particular speech acts on the other.

> Just as an individual word may have different meanings and one discovers which meaning is relevant by seeing which fits in with the rest of the sentence, so a sentence may have different meanings and one discovers which is relevant by examining the *context* of its utterance, which includes both the linguistic context (what was said before) and the non-linguistic context (when, where and by whom the sentence is spoken, etc.) (Barry, 1965, p. 24).

Barry's tripartite division of meaning, as will be seen, has direct application in the consideration of *lens meaning*. As with Barry, the three categories of *lens meaning* that will follow are not offered as being definitive so much as useful. As he suggests," surely the right procedure is to develop the categories to fit what one finds rather than force everything willy-nilly into predetermined pigeon-holes" (p.25).

A further insight must be mentioned concerning our further inquiry into *lens meaning*. In *Speech Acts*, Searle (1970, pp. 12-13) argues that the linguistic characterization of one who is deemed to have mastery of his or her native tongue are valid representations of that language's structure. An identical contention may be made concerning *lens meaning*.

> Though the theoretical grounding [in *lens meaning*] for most members of this culture is skimpy at best, the direct experience with lens systems and lens imagery is extensive for most of us. Thus, to borrow a concept from Noam Chomsky, the visual equivalent of *linguistic competence* in the language of lens imagery is now commonplace in western society and, increasingly, to be found world-wide (Coleman, p.10).

I would now like to draw together Searle, Chomsky (1972), Coleman, Barry and add John Wilson, who suggests that meaning is the sum of the various ways that a concept is used (Wilson,1966, p.26). So armed, I am going to explore the lenticular *competence* necessary to make valid representations of *lens meaning*. By describing the various ways that lens images are experienced I hope to build a framework for discovering its meaning.

Three Key Metaphors

Three key metaphors have grown out of both film and photographic theory which emphasize how viewers use images. Images are conceived of as windows, as frames, or as mirrors (Andrews,1984, pp.12-13). Perhaps the most common and most disarming way we use lens images is as a window. Film theorist André Bazin (1967), and photographic theorist John Szarkowski (1966) have both described this metaphor as a construction of unmediated reality by the lens image, a literal window of the world for viewer response. However it becomes questionable whether we can discuss such images in terms of meaning. There are two basic opportunities for the mediation of meaning in lens images; the first is in the production, which I will extend to include distribution of the image and the second is during the reception of the image by the viewer. If we assume that the entire filmic or photographic process is unmediated then both the producer and the consumer of the image can be seen as looking through the same 'window on reality.' At that point lens images correspond to C.S. Peirce's (1955) notion of indexical signs, and viewing lens images becomes like a hunter trying to decipher the meaning of tracks in the snow. If the viewer's response to a lens image is seen only as unmediated then we are describing *lens meaning* in the Pavlovian terms described by Barry's causal theory.

The subtlety of the effect of the window metaphor can be seen any evening on the television news. We tend to respond to the various news stories as little 30 second facts without much thought as to the impact that the various framing and editing devices have had on getting that bit of news down to those thirty entertaining seconds. For example, consider the often broadcasted scenes of twisted automobile wreckage followed by the blanketed and barely visible form of a victim/survivor being whisked away on an ambulance gurney and the closing words of a trenchcoated, microphone-clutching reporter. The viewing audience feels that it has understood the 'reality' of that accident and yet, based on both what they did and did not see, have no conception of the ramifications of that tragedy. How painful is it to see one's family injured or killed on television? For how many months or years will the survivor of an accident be dealing with the physical and emotional damage? Entertainment must be 'tasteful'; it isn't until we experience a tragedy like one in the news that we come to realize how much of that 'reality' has been left out.

A different example can be seen in family photographs. If film and television are 'windows on the present,' then photography is a window on the past. Consider the boxes of family snapshots that are gathering dust in most households. I am referring here to those images that were judged too poor to be placed in a photo album. It is extremely difficult for most people to destroy poorly photographed or duplicated images of family members. Even these visually inferior images refer strongly to personally significant people, places, and events. In this sense photographs take on the same iconic significance as a religious relic. Like the sliver from the 'true cross,' the family photo can be perceived as being one step closer to 'what was' than some other more iconic representations such as a drawing, sketch or painting. Virtually every writer in film, photography, and television has had to deal with the apparent 'reality' of the lens image, the point being that

regardless of our lenticular sophistication, we, particularly in the west and increasingly in the rest of the world, continue to use lens images as evidence for past events, sometimes even as literal emanations of them.

The contrast to this window metaphor is when we respond to a photograph or film as a *construction* like a painting by an artist. This corresponds to Barry's description of the intentional theory of meaning, utilizing what C.S. Peirce had called indexical signs and suggests a framing metaphor. Our assumption is that what we see is not real but intentionally meaningful. Our task as viewers of this art-image is to discover the layers of meaning that the artist has intentionally (and occasionally unintentionally) built into the image. Early theorists who subscribed to this notion of filmic meaning include the Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1949) and gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1957). A film recently released in North America, *Commissar* (Azkoldov, 1967), specifically draws attention to this tradition through the heavy use of montage in combining unlikely imagery and musical fragments for metaphoric effect. As a specific example, consider the following three shot sequences. In shot (1) we see three young children squirming naked in their bath tub with their mother in attendance; off stage a clatter of hoofs on cobblestone is heard. Shot (2) cuts to the front of the children's home where we see the three children still wet and naked, watching the road. The camera pans from eye level down to ground level as a horsedrawn cassoon carrying a cannon pulls noisily along the road. As the shot progresses we see alternately the wheels of the wagon, which are rolling between the camera, and the children and the three children's genitalia effectively stop-framed by those same wheels. Shot (3) dissolves to ground level looking up as the cassoon rolls over the camera's position. As this final shot progresses the huge and unavoidably phallic cannon advances across the screen. Iconically this sequence shows us children watching a noisy procession, but the shifting point of view so common in montage alerts us to an indexical level of meaning. Our task as viewers is to make sense of these images of innocence and war, sexuality and power. There is no reason why any lens image cannot be used in this way. Anytime that we recognize and try to interpret, in a literary sense, the 'signs of suture' - the procedures of cinematographers, actors, editors, directors "by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers" - (Silverman, 1983. p.195), in a lens image we are using that image in a framed and intentional sense.

The most complex of the three metaphors is that of the lens image as mirror. Drawing from psychoanalysis and Freud's appropriation of the myth of Narcissus, lens images can be seen as reflecting back on their spectators. In the *Imaginary Signifier*, (1981) Christian Metz combines semiotic theory with Freudian psychoanalysis in an analysis of film meaning. The issue then becomes one of discovering the nature of our spectatorship in relation to lens images. If one assumes, as Metz does, that there is a deep structure driving, or at least guiding our relationship with lens imagery, then understanding from this perspective can only be derived through the careful discovery and analysis of that structure. Whether working from a Saussurian linguistic model, as Metz does, or a multiple systems model - like that of Peirce, arguing for the lens media's status as a symbolic language has proven to be difficult. The referential nature of lens images gets in the way of the arbitrariness that is basic to symbolic language systems.

Kaja Silverman (1983) uses semiotic analysis and Lacanian psycho-analysis to discuss what she calls suture. In her sense of the term, suture is a metaphor for narrative. Just as castration creates an absence and presumably a dissatisfaction or desire, awareness of the limited vision implied by the film frame creates a dissatisfaction that can only be healed (just as literal sutures help a wound heal) by helping the spectators to feel a part of the filmic narrative so that they will forget about themselves. The shot/reverse shot sequence, as in the camera movement and editing commonly used when filming a conversation between two people is offered as an example of this strategy at work. By allowing the viewer to see the second person involved in the conversation, the person occupying the viewer's position -which is also that of the camera, is nudged toward adopting that new character's persona. We are no longer in control of the images that are being presented to us but have relinquished or have had our individual desires appropriated for control in favour of a voyeuristic projection of ourselves into one of the characters. The peculiarly masculine qualities and metaphors that surround the notions of subjectivity, spectatorship, and desire in the cinema have been effectively explored by feminist semioticians such as Teresa De Lauretis (1984).

The Complexities of *Lens Meaning*

Many writers using semiotic analysis with cinema set photography outside of their discussions. For them the basic unit of signification is the shot, (meaning one continuous sequenced segment of a movie camera) which may be literally the result of thousands of individual photographs. Their concern is less with the visual, per se, and more with the narrative flow and its signification. Max Kozloff (1987) argues convincingly that much advertising photography and some art images as well work in this narrative sense. He describes the ambiguous sexual relations depicted in the bedroom scenes used by Calvin Klein to sell his blue jeans and cotton underwear. By using dramatic stage lighting, young, muscular male and female models in poses that dramatize triangular and complex relationships in various degrees of nudity, the ads create a world that is lurid and desirable and into which we are drawn as spectator-consumers.

Regardless of how orthodox our use of semiotics may be, this kind of approach can imply a kind of rigorous analysis of lens images that would only have a very narrow, academic application. Semiotic analysis of film, television or photography is simply too arduous a task to expect of a general viewing public. If, however, we relax the metaphor somewhat, (and use a larger mirror) this critical analysis only implies, in a general sense, that we become aware of ourselves in front of the lens image placed in a social context. From the theater of Brecht, Walter Benjamin (1935) drew much of his inspiration for his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where he celebrated the lens media's potential to replace art with something more like visual communication in which the audience played a conscious and critical role. He argued:

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide (p. 688).

Whether the potential for a fusion of criticism and reception is often met, it is still argued that the lens media can be used for critical reflection on both self and society.

In Summary

To summarize: the term, *lens meaning* can be seen to involve three parts. Our use of a lens image as a metaphoric window on reality determines its indexical meaning, our recognition of that lens image as an *auteurial* construction determines its iconic meaning and is represented by the 'frame' metaphor. Lastly, its context determines its symbolic meaning and is represented by the metaphor of the 'mirror.' That these visual qualities can all be influenced by physical contexts such as the sequencing of images, the words, music and general noise that may accompany them, gives us some sense of the complexity of our response to the mass media. Add to this the truism that each of us, as viewers brings to this experience our own personal desires, beliefs, and experiences which we contribute to the construction of meaning, it becomes clear why trying to articulate *lens meaning* is a substantial task.

As an art educator, I feel that *lens meaning* and media education in general ought to become more under our domain of influence. Controlling the making of meaning in lens images is central to communication in a postindustrial society. If art education is about children becoming visually critical, creative, functioning members of society, then art educators need to open their collective, institutional eyes to see what is being seen, taught, and learned through the medium of the lens.

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