

## The Study of the Image

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In this article I present an overview of some of the major concerns of Image Study for teachers in schools and colleges of further education who have done some teaching in this area and would like to do more, or who are considering—perhaps hesitantly—introducing this area of work into their curriculum.

### Themes and Problems

Visual perception—or how we actually see—is only partially a concern of image study: as far as it is it involves the study of the physiology of the brain, optic nerves and so on, but becomes relevant when we move from physiology to psychology. The psychologists of the gestalt school provide a basis for understanding perception which underlies much of the writing in this area. The mind is an organising force which, given disorder, chaos or senselessness, will attempt to achieve pattern, order, sense or meaning. In other words, the mind does not receive pictures in the passive sense of a cinema screen receiving images from the projector, it actively participates in perception. Rudolf Arnheim, a writer particularly concerned with the relationship between the visual arts and human psychology, explores this area in *Art and Visual Perception* and asserts that the mind has an innate tendency to establish balance and meaning in what it perceives and that 'seeing' is a process of organising and exploring visual stimuli. The simple shapes, the commonest optical tricks, demonstrate something of this mental activity, but organising ink blots and geometric figures is only the beginning. The mind's activity is not an isolated process, it occurs in a social setting. Our perception of images—in pictures and in life—is coloured and constrained by our expectations, our hopes, our likes and dislikes—indeed by whole personality and cultural situation. As with all communication, we rely on and are constrained by already existing cultural understandings. Kepes, in *The Language of Vision*, develops this point using an example.

'We look at a photograph of two men sitting on a bench and each in a different part of the picture brings up associations. One man is better dressed than the other. They are sitting back to back. Their bodies, their postures are full of associative suggestions. We compare them and contrast them, discovering differences and similarities. The image becomes a dynamic experience. It has a self-movement because of the discovery of opposition. The experience attains a unity as we fill out, with a living story, the latent human background of the visible situation. We do not see things, fixed static units, but perceive instead living relationships. Note especially the last sentence. According to Kepes our minds continue to explore the contradictory units within a picture until a satisfactory meaning is reached.

'Contradiction is then the basis of dynamic organization of the associative qualities of the image. When representational units within the same picture contain statements which seem counter to the accepted logic of events, the spectator's attention is forced to seek out the possible

relationships until a central idea is found which weaves the meaningful signs together into a meaningful whole.'

It is not, perhaps, essential to accept contradiction as having a major role in visual perception to see the relevance of what Keeses is saying. The elements within a picture might instead be mutually corroborative and the mind still have to seek the central idea which weaves the signs into a meaningful whole. Nevertheless, where there are contradictory elements juxtaposed, the power of an image is—in my view—enhanced. This, of course, is the power of metaphor, to which we shall return.

From work which stems from the psychology of perception we can gain insights which inform the rest of our investigation, especially the ideas of active perception and the importance of cultural experience in the interpretation of the images which the mind confronts.

Secondly, there is the question of the relationship between reality and its visual representation. A picture is not the same as the item pictured. In our everyday vision we perceive people and objects and see relationships between them but in a picture these items and these relationships are underlined: the picture has the ability to frame and present its visual contents and to demand a meaningful interpretation. Random objects photographed together would still invite interpretation (even if that interpretation was 'randomness' or 'chaos') whereas the same objects left lying around might connote no more than 'objects left lying around'. They would be merely *there*, not *presented*. There is, then, a certain tendency to deceptiveness in the visual: the image appears to be what it is not, nor cannot be.

Visual representation—particularly in the form of photographs—in contrast to linguistic representation seem to be the items they represent. When we see a word, we do not believe it is what it signifies. (If we see the word *cow* we never think that it is a cow, merely that it means cow; when we see a picture of a cow we tend to say that it is a cow not that it means cow.) A word signifies an item or a concept by virtue of an arbitrary convention. There is no more logical connection between the animal which gives us milk and moos and the word cow than between it and the word *vache*. A picture works differently. It signifies the item by virtue of a physical resemblance or analogy, however few or many conventions intervene.

This leads us to two points of debate. According to C S Peirce (and I am referring to Peter Wollen's presentation in *Signs and Meaning in the Chama* here) there are three types of signs: icons, indexes and symbols. An icon is a sign by virtue of resemblance (eg a portrait), an index is a sign by virtue of an existential connection (eg the temperature of a patient registered on a thermometer) and a symbol is a sign by virtue of an agreement by the one to represent the other (eg mathematical formulae or, indeed, words). One might be forgiven for assuming that all pictures were iconic signs by definition and many people, notably Roland Barthes, maintain that the photograph (the dominant form of visual image in our culture) is indeed iconic. There are others, however, who point out that there is a direct physical connection between the subject and the image—the light from the subject passing through the lens, affecting the light sensitive paper and so on to the completed print or transparency. Are the categories of index and icon mutually exclusive? Could not a photograph, like a bronze made from a wax impression, be both? Are these categories satisfactory?

Another query, following this, is how far the photographic message can be described as *unencoded*. Barthes makes it a central point of *Rhetoric of the Image* that there is a level of meaning in the photograph—the level of

the interpretation of cultural messages—which is essentially unencoded, although there is a 'certain arrangement of the scene (framing, reducing, flattening) . . . this is not a transformation. . . . We are dealing with paradox of a message without a code'—something unparalleled in human communication thus far. Barthes attributes a great deal of importance to discovery but I find myself sceptical. Certainly one can admit the lack of involvement of a human agent in the coding of the message, but does the camera act as a sophisticated coding mechanism which encodes real three-dimensional world in an artificial two dimensional print—an *Artificiality of the Cinematic Code* (as well as a number of observations on analysis of the image which are pertinent). Until contrary arguments advanced more forcefully it seems to be seeking out unnecessary complexity to see the photograph as other than—if we wish to use these terms—coded iconic message.

Perhaps the major controversy in this area, which underlies much of what has already been said, is the notion of a language of vision. To what extent are visual and linguistic systems comparable? Is it possible to envisage a language of vision similar to spoken and written language—hence a way of analysing which uses similar methods?

There are obvious parallels, but there are also crucial differences between visual and linguistic forms as S Langer (in *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Problems of Art*) points out. Each language has a vocabulary and syntax. Its units comprise words which have individual and fixed meanings from which composite symbols and new meanings can be composed. In visual image, while comprising various elements representing constituent parts of the object portrayed, does not comprise elements which have individual meanings: areas of light or shade—for example—do not have significance by themselves. It is, therefore, difficult to envisage the construction of a dictionary: a patch of colour of a particular hue and shape represent a nose in one picture, in another it may be the bonnet of a car. Further, visual items cannot be defined in terms of others in the way words or numbers can. These may be obvious points but they are crucial for if Langer is correct (and no one has shown convincingly otherwise) will not be able to find a method of analysis at the same fundamental level that we have one for our spoken and written language.

In order to find viable units of signification perhaps we have to return to a less basic level, to identifiable objects or representational units, as Keeses would term them. Any notion that objects have a *fixed* significance, however, is rejected by a number of people, including E Gombrich (in *Art and Illusion*), who claims that a given item is not a code-sign because it is likely to have a number of qualities the significance of which the context will determine. A flower blossom, for example, may convey amongst other alternatives the idea of innocence, gentleness, fragrance, softness, beauty even weakness. Until it is placed in relation to some other visual item linguistic item we can only guess at its significance. Guy Gauthier, however, suggests that *some* signs, a privileged number, do have a fixed meaning—not merely the Christian cross but also, for example, those distinctive elements of Hitler's physiognomy (his forelock and moustache) which, when applied to a photograph of anybody else's face, immediately connotes news, brutality and fascism. But opinion overall concurs with Langer and Gombrich. Again and again, we come to the difficulty that 'there is no particular analytic language corresponding to the particularity of the signs

fields of the connotation' (Barthes). In other words, we cannot compose a dictionary of visual language—beyond perhaps drawing up a list of the more 'obvious' signs and their assumed meanings in particular contexts.

Because of the difficulty of isolating a specific unit, in the way that a phoneme, or word, or sentence are units, a syntax of visual language is no less problematic. However, few researchers have yet attempted to devise and apply a system founded on the supposition that the basic unit is an identifiable object and tried to work out a syntax or system of relationships between such units—though Kepes and others hint that this may be a fruitful mode of exploration. In perceiving relationships and demanding meanings, our minds do make subtle distinctions in terms of spatial positioning. To take Kepes' example of two figures on a bench (see above): if they are back to back their significance is crucially different to that conveyed if they are facing each other, or sitting side by side, and so on. The situations, poses and expressions are infinitely variable and capable of generating an infinite number of meanings. Inanimate objects do not have the same power although their effect can be considerable. To take the Delph advertisement as an example (see below), it will not change the message appreciably if the apples are to the left, right, in front or behind the packets or the milk. . . . Only perhaps with the apple *in* the milk could a new meaning be generated. But when we add inanimate items (as props) to human action we can vastly enrich the stock of potential meanings. Further, the whole composition of inanimate items (or props plus setting) and actors has the capacity to signify meaning beyond that of the individual items. The photographer, no less than the artist in oils, *composes* the picture and that composition is deliberate. It can perhaps be expressed as the sum of the relationships within the image, clearly capable of signification, but resistant to systematic analysis. To sum up, the parallels with linguistic forms is of limited usefulness, but there are avenues which demand further exploration, notably the patterns of relationships which exist within visual images.

Barthes maintains that there is a linguistic message accompanying every visual message—the caption, the speech bubble, the ad headline, for example. The function of this message is 'anchorage': the selection of one message from the collection of messages available in the image. The visual image on its own, Barthes explains, is 'polysemic'—it gives us a cluster of meanings in an unordered presentation. The linguistic message captures one of these meanings and gives it priority. We might complicate this formulation somewhat by pointing out that the function of the linguistic message in some cases, particularly in advertising illustrations, is often to present a second (sometimes complementary, sometimes antithetic) meaning alongside the dominant visual meaning(s), rather than underlining one which is already present.

Nevertheless, one can accept a general notion of anchorage as a useful working hypothesis—we all know how our perception of a picture can alter according to the caption beneath—without necessarily agreeing that all visual images have a linguistic component; we can think of cartoons, snapshots and road-signs which function alone. Logically, then, anchorage becomes a possibility rather than a necessity. For even given a complex polysemic visual image our minds will produce a meaning 'as we fill out with a living story, the latent human background of the visible situation . . . (and) seek out the possible relationships until a central idea is found which weaves the meaningful signs together in a meaningful whole' (Kepes in *The Language of Visual Design*). The use of a linguistic element in the organisation of an image

is necessary if the producer wishes to 'anchor' the meaning of the image more precisely ie to discourage alternative 'readings' of the image. To an artist it may be of little importance which meanings others derive from an image; to a newspaper editor it is very important; to the advertising director it is vital (though the photographer who provided the picture is likely to be quite uninterested). Where economic or political power is involved ambiguity is not allowed.

The procedure for the analysis of visual images most commonly forward is a method which supposes the existence of a number of level layers of meaning which need to be carefully excavated and distinguished one from another. Apart from the linear concept implied (ie that there is a top layer which needs to be uncovered before the next layer) I would accept this as a useful approach. Logically, the levels can be viewed simultaneously or in reverse order, though there may be preferable or conventional sequences which one would arrive at empirically.

Erwin Panofsky presents useful ideas in his work on iconography which suggests three levels of meaning: the level of primary or natural subject matter—ie lines, forms, colours and their relationships; the level of secondary or conventional subject matter which is concerned with the wider culture and the connection of motifs with themes and concepts; and thirdly, intrinsic meaning which is known by 'ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.'

Barthes' work is crucial here. In *Rhetoric of the Image* he uses an example of a display advertisement from a magazine to demonstrate semiological analysis he feels is appropriate. He proceeds to analyse 3 messages, a linguistic message, a literal or denoted message and an interpreted or connoted message. The level of denotation is concerned with what, a simple observable level, is *there*. Objects or beings, free of associations, merely identified. A black fist is a black fist and no more than that; similarly a rose, a cat, a configuration of clouds.

The level of connotation is the level of interpretation. Analysis at this level is concerned with the meanings which are associated with the constituents of the image, the meanings which are evoked in the individual reader. These meanings will vary in number and in importance according to the individual and also according to the item or sign eg a swastika very particular meanings and associations whereas a cup containing a beverage liquid may have hundreds. Nevertheless, all the possible meanings will be part of the common culture within which the sign was produced and within which it is seen and comprehended.

It will be apparent that analysis at this level is liable to be subjected to a greater degree than at other levels. The elements of a picture in terms of shape, light, colour and so on and the items rendered by those elements can be identified almost completely objectively; at the level of interpretation we are thrown back on the breadth of our cultural knowledge and our sensitivity, our awareness of our subjective biases. The idea of levels of meaning has been accepted and developed by many writers, including Gauthier, Stuart Hall, Andrew Bothell and myself (see the bibliography which follows).

Gauthier makes a useful attempt to apply semiological analysis to a practical teaching situation and he draws attention to the problem of a 'factivity' in the interpretation of visual communication. It is a problem in

interpretation, of course, but he is probably right that it is more acute in the visual domain. Gauthier takes a similar approach to Barthes, acknowledging levels of denotation and connotation, but he also notes the importance of the level of style (including framing, angle, colour etc) as a conveyor of meaning.

Our ability to derive meaning from the style of presentation is again a problem which extends beyond the visual but which is particularly acute there. Style is notoriously difficult to define, but we know that a photograph in crisp black and white with a neat white border signifies something different from a softly focussed and gently lit colour picture of the same scene. The one has connotations of realism, actuality and documentary truth while the other has connotations of an oil painting, a cartoon, a live life. Imagine then the connotations of a computer drawing, a charcoal sketch, a computer drawing. Yet, in practice, we do interpret on the basis of style without much hesitation or rationalisation; the Idi Amin picture (see below) only works because we immediately understand the picture, the conventions of portrait painting.

What procedure, then, should be adopted for the analysis of a visual image? Clearly it would be unwise to claim precedence for any particular method over another: there is still too little empirical evidence. I will merely suggest an approach which synthesises many of the ideas and insights touched on above and which I have, to some extent and with qualified success, applied to the analysis of advertising images in women's magazines in *Images of Woman*.

1 An analysis of form and style, to take account of technique (line drawing/oil painting/colour photography etc), colour, size, angle, lighting and so on. All these are potential signifiers, yet no system has been fully developed of analysing the relationship of signifiers to signifieds.

2 A primary analysis of content (the level of denotation) to consist of an enumeration of the elements in the illustration, ideally under three headings: people, setting and props. This enumeration would take account of both individual items and their relationships. An analysis on this level of a series of images would reveal recurrent patterns, these patterns enabling us to know which visual elements are common in our visual vocabulary and which *combinations* of elements are common and which are not. This, perhaps, might lead to a sort of visual vocabulary and grammar (in so far as usage is grammar).

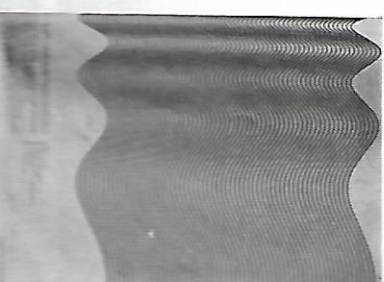
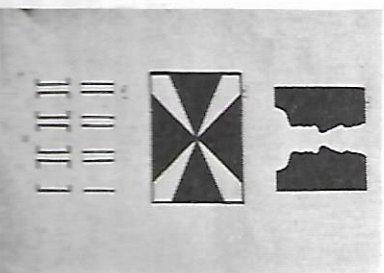
3 and 4 should ideally be pursued simultaneously! These are the analyses of linguistic message (with its crucial function of anchorage) and of the connotations of the content of the image—the problematic level of interpretation (which is already ideological in a basic sense).

5 Finally, an evaluation of the context of the image (both immediately and generally). This would take account both of the material adjacent to the image on the page (or wherever else it appears) and of the magazine, book, gallery, hoarding where it appears: its social situation. One could then go on to investigate the wider cultural/ideological setting, which would bring us to an ideological level similar to that defined by Bethell; the level at which we claim, for example, that the situation of women in society is affected by (and affects) the images portrayed in display advertising.

### *An Introduction to the Study of the Image for Secondary Pupils*

This selected set of images offer one way into the teaching of some of the concepts dealt with earlier and hopefully it exemplifies the concept being discussed. The notes merely offer suggestions and may be disregarded (They do not attempt to cover the range of Gauthier's notes nor do they attempt the depth of his analysis.) It is hoped that this relatively straightforward exposition will serve to interest both teachers and pupils and clarify some of the basic ideas of the study of the image. These illustrations have been used with pupils taking a CEE course in English and Communications. The pupils were sixteen and over and of moderate ability, having gained—on average—grades 2 to 4 at CSE in English. The course was divided into two parts, taught concurrently by different teachers; one part was based on the 'Image' and the other on the 'Word'. This division was caused by staffing and timetable difficulties but proved to have some advantages. It was so arranged that the two halves ran in a parallel fashion, that, for example, when visual metaphor was being dealt with the other teacher was concerned with verbal metaphor, and similarly with considerations of style, editing and so on. The study of the 'Image' was the starting point for the 'Communications' side of the syllabus which developed into study of the visual media, before linking up with the English-based 'Word' part of the syllabus to consider other media such as newspapers and radio. The final part of the syllabus consisted of practical projects. In spite of the maturity and motivation of the pupils, most of them found concepts such as connotation and anchorage surprisingly difficult to grasp. Many pupils who were adept with written language proved to be quite disoriented when it came to visual material.

The images are arranged in five groups. The first four can be used as a way of introducing the discussion of the mind's ability to select and organise visual stimuli and of our dependence on cultural experience and expectations in the interpretation of images. The second group (5-7) try to present illustrations which will enable the concepts of denotation and connotation to be understood, whilst allowing a consideration of the ramifications of the first slides to be maintained. The third group (8-13) present material which leads into discussions of the meaning of symbol, metaphor and the power of juxtaposition and contradiction. The next two (14-15) can be used for any of the purposes outlined already. They were used in practice with particular emphasis on the function of anchorage. The final two (16-17) presents material which might stimulate ideas on styles of presentation. One should then move on to a more detailed consideration of the



purpose of each image, its social situation and the underlying ideology. The aim of using the first two images is to demonstrate by means of well known 'optical illusions' and an abstract painting that seeing is not a passive process by which the brain merely receives images. Seeing is an active process by which the brain organises stimuli into an image which makes some sense. The first image which includes (a) an ornate vase or two faces, (b) a Maltese Cross or white lines on a black background and (c) an odd number of lines and unfinished boxes, is discussed at some length in *Screen Education* 13 Winter 1974/75 and provides a good starting point. The second (a picture by M Noll taken from *Graphis* 161) is a stimulating follow-up. Do the pupils see black lines on white or white on black? Which curves are troughs and which are ridges? Is there a sensation of movement?



3



4

The above images show a close-up of a pig's face and a photograph of a woman from the *Sunday Times Magazine* feature on Suffragette hunger strikers. Any image of a human face will suffice for the latter. The slides can be projected out of focus and gradually brought into focus until pupils recognise what is portrayed. The human face will be recognised rapidly; some pupils will have difficulty seeing a pig even when they have been told it is there. One can point out the way our minds try to make sense of the patches of light and dark, the shapes and the colours until a satisfactory solution is found. Familiarity with the human face leads us to perceive it readily—often in situations (shadows, clouds, coal fires) where it is in fact absent. Not only are we (most of us) unfamiliar with the faces of pigs, but we also do not expect to see them. Further, our conventional image of the pig is a side view of the complete animal with snout at one end and curly tail at the other. This picture goes against many of our visual expectations. (Lighting, close-up and camera angle are all important here. I have not, in this set of images, attempted to deal with photographic technique but pupils should be made aware of the existence of such techniques and their uses.)

Here we move on to the next level of analysis (the first being that of mere perception, of the relationships of shapes and colours), with the concepts of denotation/description and connotation/interpretation. The Belair advertisement presents the cigarette pack alongside lead drinks and fresh grapes. In this example we have one of the millions of advertising

meanings connoted by the items beside the cigarette packet are intended influence judgement about its contents. At this point the terms metap and symbol could be brought in and the differences between the two cussed briefly. (The caption says 'Fresher tasting Belair Menthol King Two points which should be made are (a) that although the image is or ambivalent or polysemic nature and open to a variety of interpretati some interpretations are still nevertheless *excluded*, and (b) that inter tation depends on the experience of the individual receiver and his or cultural biography.



5



6



7

Graveyards: one dark and unkempt, the other with fresh flowers an bright blue sky. These two images should be used in conjunction with e other. The items denoted are similar; the connotations are dissimilar. Th images can be used to lead into a discussion of how similar two pict can be while their connotations remain distinct. Also, if one cannot h two images with identical denotation but different connotations, how one have different denotations of the same connotations? East African ways advertisement presenting five European tourist landmarks and a man beer mug. This advertisement is an example of the straightforward of symbols in visual communication (common enough in other areas, rare in adverts). It is also, if one wishes to pursue such a line, an exam of synecdoche where the part stands for the whole( in this case doubly the Colosseum stands for Rome and Rome for Italy, and so on).



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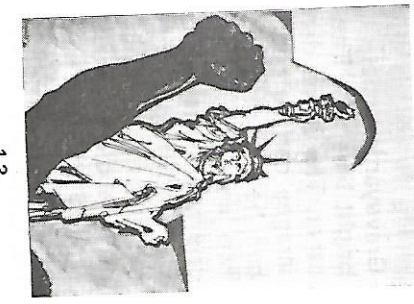
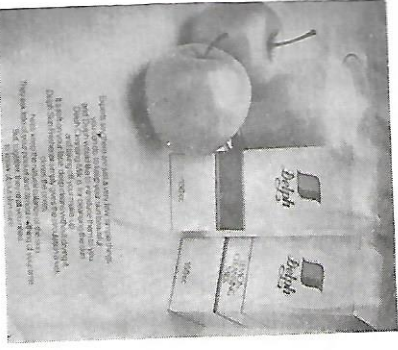


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*Sunday Times Magazine* cover: top half a sepia photograph of a flu

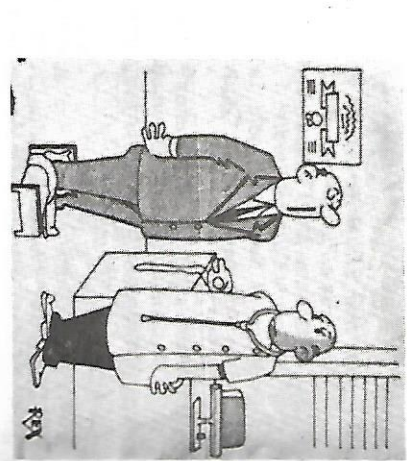
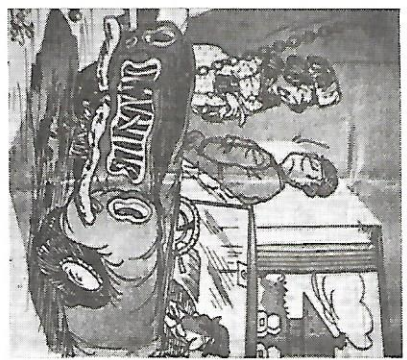
March of the 1930's and the lower half a black and white photograph of an undefined upper-class gathering. It could be an advantage to mask the caption when first showing the slide. The juxtaposition of two different images produces a meaning which is not present in either image individually (exactly the way in which all metaphors—verbal or visual—work). Attention should be drawn to the content and style of each picture and to the fact that a meaning such as class conflict or social injustice is forced upon the viewer: it cannot be escaped.

*Sunday Times Magazine* cover: a portrait of Idi Amin in the full regalia of the 'Queen' against a traditionally English 'portrait in oils' background. The juxtaposition of two disparate items again produces a powerful message. The regalia of the monarch together with the traditional background often with pictorial incongruity) but the meaning can be interpreted in different ways. Apart from more obvious questions one might ask to what extent the cover reveals a political standpoint (and then compare with 9). Delph skin freshener and cleansing milk advertisement, showing product plus apples and milk. The Delph advert (caption: 'Give your skin the simple life') is a more simple example of visual metaphor. The apples and the milk bring to the product the additional meanings of health, nature, nutrition and freshness. It might be advantageous to use this picture prior to the 'richer' images 9 and 10.

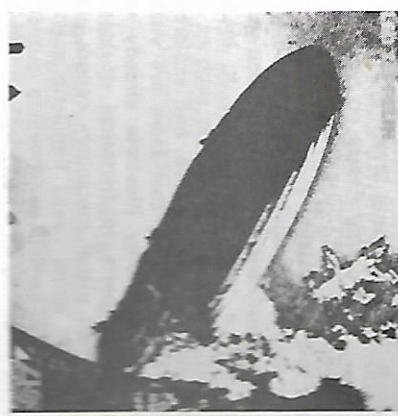


11 Gerald Scarfe cartoon: Healey as King Kong hanging from Big Ben, grasping a pound sign and attacked by planes bearing 'Left', 'Right' and 'IMF' labels. The last example in this section demonstrates the use of metaphor in a cartoon situation. One might discuss how apt is the comparison of a Chancellor of the Exchequer with King Kong and some background information would probably have to be provided for most pupils. It is interesting also for its lack of a caption.

*Africa* cover presenting the Statue of Liberty plus a black raised arm and clenched fist. This, and the next few signs, can be used to illustrate the concept of anchorage. The visual image, being polysemic—ie having many messages, needs a linguistic element to pick out or anchor the particular message which the presenter of the image intends. The image of the Statue of Liberty taken in conjunction with the black salute is rich in possible meanings. The actual cover-story title has been masked. It was, in fact,



14 Cartoons: (14) a woman speaking to a mechanic in front of a crumpled in which a man is slumped in the passenger seat; (15) a patient with foot in a midget bed addressing a doctor (from *Weekend*). Pupils may try to anchor the meanings of these two pictures by devising captions. The original ones were 'Can you repair it before my husband regains consciousness?' and 'It's my foot—it keeps going to sleep.'



16 The final images raise the question of style and technique. One way of approaching this might be to examine these images and to identify their context and purpose according to their style. The first is a news photograph of the Zeppelin explosion (taken from a *Sunday Times Magazine* reproduction) and the second is a record cover (*Led Zeppelin 1*). One could then go on to examine how we know a news photograph is a news photograph and not an advertisement illustration and so on. The comparison of the two could be used to show how a news photograph can be schematised by the machinery of graphic art. The urgency and immediacy of the news photograph is transposed into the picturesque glossiness of the record cover. It is at this point that it would be useful to discuss how we read and understand an image through its style, the extent to which we depend on past cultural experiences in making interpretations and the extent to which the cover had thus far helped to sensitise and develop pupils' awareness of the language of mediation through which any image passes before the reader sees their

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\* Two works not widely known. Marmorì's book is a psychoanalytic approach to visual images and advertising pictures in particular. It is an interesting but ultimately unconvincing analysis. Even accepting the idiosyncratic sexual interpretations of the actors, their props and settings, the approach would be difficult to apply to, say, a picture of an oyster with a frozen pea inside it. In explaining his interpretations, though, Marmorì frequently uses rhetorical terms such as metaphor and metonymy. This is a fruitful area, already touched upon above, and explored in some detail in Bonsiepe's article in *Uppercase* 5. He concludes that there are visual metaphors but 'they don't have autonomous character. They only illustrate already verbally formulated metaphors'. There are also visual counterparts to rhetorical devices such as condensation and exaggeration. The assertion that visual metaphors cannot exist on their own is not substantiated by further evidence. In some cases linguistic anchorage will be necessary to make the metaphor clear but the garden pea peeping out of the oyster shell surely indicates that the pea is as fine in quality as a pearl without linguistic assistance!