International Journal of Communication 2 (2008), Book Review 34-38 1932-8036/2008BKR034

Benedikt Feldges, **American Icons: The Genesis of a National Visual Language**, Routledge, 2008, 288 pp., $95.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Jason Tocci
Annenberg School for Communication
University of Pennsylvania

In response to one scholar's complaint that cultural studies has favored Saussurean semiology over Peircean semiotics, John Fiske responds, "Saussure is a linguist and Peirce is a logician. It all follows from that" (Fiske, 1991, p. 34). A logician's theory of meaning focuses on how rational minds make sense of a universal reality; cultural objects, however, like language itself, remain ever in flux, existing in their circulation and changing through history.

I was reminded of this argument as I read Benedikt Feldges' *American Icons,* which apparently agrees with the limitation of a logic-based semiotics. However, rather than defaulting to Saussure, Barthes, Levi-Strauss, and the tradition that followed, Feldges reinterprets the basic terms of Peircean semiotics and what we take for granted as "real." The result is a study that suggests a more honest sense of history can be found in the study of images themselves, separate from that which they appear to represent.

As Feldges recounts, concepts of visual language and literacy have been dominated by the Peircean notion that the key mechanism behind interpreting images is in their relationship to the reality of what they depict. An image is "iconic" if it resembles the thing it represents, unlike the arbitrary connection between a word and that which it represents. The image is "indexical" if it implies some proof of the signified's existence, as we might assume of an undoctored photograph. Unlike scholars who have maintained that the ability to recognize what is depicted in an image is entirely learned (e.g., Gombrich, 1960), however, Feldges does not call into question the universal, biological processes of vision that enable us to understand images on the denotative level; in fact, his approach relies on this process, which he terms "the empirical codes behind visual literacy" (p. 232).

This process, however, represents only the early stages of reading images; "Visual literacy," he declares, "is less a passive register of visual terms, than an active process of comparing, categorizing, and typifying visual signs as symbols" (p. 210). Arguably, the distinction is less factual than definitional – should our concept of 'literacy' focus on the denotative or the connotative? – though the point effectively underlies the analysis herein. Thus Feldges introduces "the historical codes behind visual literacy" (p. 234).

The first of the historical codes, the symbolic code, denies that the meaning of a picture is to be found in the moment of its original production. Our interpretation of the shapes in a photograph occurs in the present moment, and is informed more by other images we have seen than by moments remembered from personal experience (i.e., "reality"). Building upon this, the second historical code, the iconic code, differentiates symbols of particular objects or persons from more general categories of visual symbols – *the* house rather than *a* house or *any* house. These images, referred to as 'icons' and 'emblems,' have more specifically defined meanings accrued over time. This level of interpretation is key to the argument of *American Icons*, which states that connotations which have been more inscribed by history have the power to direct all other meaning in the frame of an image.

Iconicity as described by Peirce, the author argues, is something of a sham; we need not have met the President in order to interpret an image of that person. But pictures, moving through space and time, take on their own reality, and so Feldges appropriates 'icon' to refer to the *image* of a person – an image which takes on a specific and increasingly commonly understood set of connotations the more it is circulated in culture at large. Similarly, Feldges uses the term "emblem" to refer to a non-person icon of this sort: the image of the White House, the image of the Golden Gate Bridge, and so on. Collective visual literacy, then, is defined as "a collective knowledge of icons, emblems, and other graphic visual symbols" (pp. 2–3).

While semiologists might describe the circulation of cultural meaning as *like* language or *enabled by* language, Feldges suggests that such a visual system of meaning is its own language – many languages, in fact. A family photo album requires its own visual literacy, he argues, in order to fully appreciate the significance of the images therein. The visual language that most interests this author, however, is the one which has been constructed through the circulation of images in broadcast media. As the dominant medium of the 20th century, Feldges suggests that the icons and emblems circulated on television have the most established and widely understood meanings in the United States, qualifying them as our national visual language.

Divided into three major sections, then, Feldges attempts to describe how this visual language has come to be constructed, and, crucially, why we must understand old images as constructing a visual etymology rather than a pictorial historiography. In a detailed appendix, the author further clarifies the theoretical approach described here.

The first section, "Icons in the Museum," considers the Museum of Television and Radio in New York as a collection of images we tend to think of as historical. This, he argues, is where we define which icons and emblems are powerful enough to engulf or alter the meaning of all other images with which they share a frame. As his concept of icons and emblems is based upon the understanding that some visual

terms are considered more valuable or eye-catching than others, inclusion in the museum collection may both correlate with and also help define what we think of as our national visual language.

The second section, "Kaleidoscopic Spectacles," analyzes a television documentary of the 20th century which makes heavy use of archival images for presumably historical purposes. Of particular interest here are the techniques that news producers used to attract the eye and present spectacles, which serve as evidence of subjectivity and indicate which images were thought to be nationally relevant. Commenting on one particularly dramatic image of Fidel Castro, for example, Feldges remarks: "Rather than presenting a visual statement of direct historical value, such an instance of rebroadcasting an old clip appears first of all to influence the visual literacy of audiences" (p. 27).

The third section, "Hyperrealism," offers case studies of a number of broadcast icons and image-savvy figures from fiction and nonfiction television, including Edward R. Murrow, Joe Friday of *Dragnet*, and Lucy of *I Love Lucy*, among others. These figures are chosen precisely for the complications and contradictions they present in equating a person with his or her icon. Feldges is resolute in his insistence that an icon is not the same thing as the person it represents: At one point, he declines to say that Walter Cronkite had appeared on the cover of *TIME Magazine*, instead stating that it was Cronkite's icon that *TIME* featured. By disconnecting Cronkite the man from Cronkite the icon, this approach asserts the power of images in directing discourse, and thus the power of image-makers in influencing the terms of "the nation's central framework of symbolic power" (p. 183).

Ultimately, Feldges' approach appears to closely parallel the trajectory of those who have pursued the semiological tradition, even back to Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972). Where Barthes railed against that which seemed misleadingly "natural," Feldges reveals what we presume to be iconic or indexical as "hyperreal." Where Barthes warned of the dangers of hidden bourgeois "ideology," Feldges hunts down traces of "subjectivity" and "bias." Even Feldges' concept of 'icons' and 'emblems' might be seen as a "second order semiological system," or what Barthes called a 'myth' (p. 114).

Feldges is clearly aware of this tradition, but chooses his approach based on another sort of agenda: not to take part in what has been criticized as "a constant unmasking of dominant ideologies at work" (Bennett & Woolacott, 1987, p. 4), but to address a methodological question of pictorial historiography. (As he notes in his Acknowledgements, the book was born from an early dissertation idea to use pictorial advertisements for historical research.)

Overall, the objects under study are approached less as historical objects and more as "a depository of the visual terms of a language in the making" (p. 27). Feldges argues that historians must abandon the idea that pictures can be used to construct a history of what they seem to depict, embracing

instead a study of visual "etymology" – that is, tracing a path of how images came to be encoded with commonly understood meanings. In other words, old images can best (or only) be used to construct a history of how we have produced and interpreted images themselves.

The examples offered here should indeed be taken as a word of caution to pictorial historiography. Some media researchers, however, may be drawn to this book out of interest in his claim to have discovered our "national visual language." These readers may be best served by flipping directly to the rigorous theory in the appendix. The discussion of icons and emblems here might help flesh out and inform some existing notions of visual literacy, thanks to extended consideration of how meaning works within the image's frame and how connotation is built historically. This approach may adapt well, for example, to Pustz's (1999) concept of "comics literacy," in its ability to account for imaginary figures with years of historical background.

By the same token, some may raise an eyebrow at the notion that the icons and emblems of American broadcast media form the backbone of our national visual language. It is easy enough to argue that these images constitute one of many possible visual languages, in much the same way as the aforementioned family photo album. But how many young adults could even recognize Edward Murrow's icon before *Good Night, and Good Luck* was filmed? And do those who still lack knowledge of such an icon count as visual 'illiterates' when they may be quite fluent in other visual and semiotic domains? Writing this review for a Web-based journal, I am hard-pressed to argue that broadcast remains the sort of dominant medium that can continue to define the language Feldges describes.

As our contemporary media environment becomes increasingly fragmented, then, we may not quite be able to maintain the collective visual language Feldges offers to historians for study. Some of us are likely to remain more fluent with *Dragnet*'s Joe Friday, others with YouTube's LonelyGirl15 – itself a problematic icon worthy of the "Hyperreality" section of this book. And so we face new questions: Who now controls the circulation of icons and emblems? Will the concept of "nation" still matter to our concept of a visual language? The main analysis of *American Icons* remains somewhat tangential to such questions, serving more effectively as a methodological critique. Even beyond that, however, the book offers both a theoretical framework for a more complex understanding of visual language, as well as a glimpse of what visual language looked like when broadcast still ruled the day.

References

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies.* (Annette Lavers, ed. and trans.) New York: Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957.)

Bennett, T. & Woolacott, J. (1987). *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero.* New York: Methuen.

Fiske, J. (1991). Semiological Struggles. In James A. Anderson (ed.), *Communication Yearbook 14,* 33–39. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gombrich, E.H. (1960). *Art and illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pustz, M.J. (1999) *Comic book culture: Fanboys and true-believers.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.