The Interrogation of Proteus

An Exploration of the Relationship of Signs and Cultural Memory.

Hjálmar Baldursson

A document submitted to:
The Department of Design and Architecture, Iceland Academy of the Arts, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design, 2015.
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Abstract

The Interrogation of Proteus is a design project based on the theory and science of semiotics. It attempts to logically discuss the defining features of signs and symbols and in the process answer how they are able to activate cultural memories. For the last section of the literature review I discuss the relationship of semiotics and myth. I attempt to argue that myths and symbols are a distorted shape of information; a complex mesh of signs which we interpret and invest meaning in. I use the shapeshifting Greek sea god Proteus as an example of a myth as metaphor and I try to exhibit how ancient symbols such as the shapeshifter might function as a metaphor for the shifting interplay of signs and cultural memory. I discuss the findings of two experiments I executed and reflect on their outcome. In conclusion I regard the research and experiments as first steps towards a more extensive context of study.
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I attempt to explore a theory of semiotics, icons and symbols. More specifically I try to highlight a connection between signs and their potential to activate a cultural memory. Semiotics has gradually become an umbrella term for the field of sign study. It is among other things the science of the use of signs to communicate information and model incoming information. Semiotics attempts to understand both the capacity of living things to produce and understand signs (semiosis), and more specifically in the case of humans, the knowledge making act this capacity allows human beings to do (representation). Representation is an intentional use of signs to explore, classify and therefore know the world. Semiosis is the biological ability itself that allows organisms to produce and comprehend signs, from simple physical signals to those that contain very complex symbolism. A generalized characteristic of signals would for example be the intentional signals of humans such as waving, winking, frowning, nudging, smiling, head tilting and so on. I tend to lean rather heavily towards the ideas of the branch of semiotics called social semiotics which emphasizes diversity of interpretation and the importance of cultural and historical context.

In the film Terminator 2: Judgement Day, the Terminator; a humanoid machine sent back in time from the future, learns that the hand gesture thumbs-up signifies something cool or good from the co-leading teenage character John Connor. The Terminator uses the thumbs-up in the final chapter of the film to comfort John as it descends into molten metal and thus destroying itself to safeguard the future of humanity. With the shared experience and knowledge of what the thumbs up represents for both characters the Terminator was able to communicate a complex set of emotions with a simple gesture.

Within this thesis I focus on visual signals and discuss examples of an illustration sent to space and icons and symbols intended for various communication purposes such as warning, advice or information. I also explore how ancient symbols can provide metaphors for a contemporary culture. I do this by using the myth of the Greek sea god and shapeshifter Proteus both as a metaphor for the complex process of interpreting a myth or a symbol and the fluid nature of culture. I explore how myth and fairy tales have the potential to provide metaphors and symbols that allow us to reflect on ourselves and the world around us.

1 Thomas A. Sebeok, Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 8.
2 Ibid, 10.
I experimented with making two online questionnaires; the first one which I named Experiment One included simple geometric shapes to indicate to the interpreter personalities, behavior and circumstances. Experiment Two similarly focused on visual perception and cultural memory by asking the participants to choose one of four simple shapes they felt best represented an accompanying image. These experiments were intended to inform my research and practice, and pave the way for future experiments and research on a grander scale, likewise to inform project development or project creation.

A semiotic theory of sign study is a method to organize our chaotic outer and perhaps inner world. In the same way as we interpret symbols, we seek to interpret and make sense of myths. I attempt to display that we use our experiences and cultural memory to question these phenomenon and decipher the answers. I suggest that a future way forward for the research would be to visualize a metaphor for the emergence of a cultural phenomenon that might explain and exemplify its diversity and complexity.

I believe that the responsibility of anyone working in communication should be to inform themselves of the historical and cultural value of symbols and its relationship with signs and cultural memory. As much as we influence culture, culture influences us.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section I will explore and attempt to partly explain a theory of semiotics and explore the human being as a meaning maker. Furthermore I argue that myths can function as a complex collection of signs and symbols in which the interpreter can reflect on his inner and outer world. One of the examples I use is Joseph Campbell’s interpretation of the Greek sea god Proteus as a universal myth to be investigated from one’s own perspective. Proteus has the ability to shapeshift to avoid being captured and having to share his knowledge, Campbell theorizes that this is like the nature of myths; one has to capture and interrogate the shapeshifter to get answers to ones questions. Similarly one has to capture and interrogate myths to find a resonating reflection of one’s self and environment. I contemplate that icons and symbols share those same properties. Cultural memory is an important feature in this chapter, and indeed throughout this thesis. I attempt to explore how the interpretation of signs, whether they are words, icons, symbols, myths or metaphors are partly dependent on our own experiences, history and cultural memory.
1.1 SEMIOTICS

Hippocrates, who can be regarded as one of the founders of Western medical science, established semiotics as a branch of medicine for the study of symptoms; a symptom would in this case be a symbol or a sign that is a representative for something other than itself. A physician’s primary task, Hippocrates claimed, was to unravel what a symptom stands for. Medical diagnosis is, in a sense, semiotic science, since it is based on the idea that a physical symptom is not a representative for itself but for an inner state or condition.\(^5\)

The thing that distinguishes living organisms from lifeless objects is semiosis. It can be defined in a simple way as the instinctual ability of living beings to make and understand signs. A sign is any physical form that has been made with some physical medium to stand for example for an object, occurrence or feeling. The English word *cat* is an example of a human verbal sign which could stand for a carnivorous mammal with a tail, whiskers, and claws. For humans signs can serve many functions such as recognizing patterns, predictive guides or plans for taking actions and many more. Each organism creates and recognizes specific kinds of signs depending on how it has evolved and been built by its biology. These vary from simple physical signals to complex symbolic structures, for example words. Semiotics is the science that studies among other things how we use signs to signal our existence, to communicate information between a specific species and frame and interpret incoming information from the outside.\(^6\)

Aristotle described the sign as a phenomenon made up of three dimensions. The first is the physical aspect of the sign, such as the sounds that represent the word *cat*. The second is the *referent* to which it refers or calls attention, that is to say a certain category of a feline mammal. And the third is its meaning, what the referent entails psychologically and socially. Sebeok writes that these three elements happen simultaneously, that it is impossible to think of the word *cat*, which is a vocal sign made up of a particular arrangement of sounds, without thinking at the same time of the type of mammal to which it refers and without experiencing the personal and social meaning that such a referent entails.\(^7\) That is to say that in a sense the word *cat* calls on our personal cultural memory of that particular mammal.

Ferdinand de Saussure developed the theory of *semiology*, the scientific study of signs within social psychology. Saussure divided signs into two parts; signifier (sound or object) and signified (the idea that it represents). Saussure believed signs were inconsistent in nature;

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid.
their use came from convention and the necessarily collective social nature of communication. Saussure’s contemporary, Charles Sanders Peirce, developed the theory of *semiotics*. Peirce identified three categories of signs: *iconic, indexical, and symbolic*. An icon, or iconic sign, he defined as one that looks like what it is. An indexical sign depends on an existential relationship. For example, we can tell in which direction the wind is blowing by looking at a weathercock, but it does not resemble the wind. Symbols, on the other hand have abstract associations rather than experiential connections. They often seem to look totally manufactured, or arbitrary, because their meaning is determined through conventions, such as the Oriental bow on greeting. It’s doubtful though that any symbols can ever be considered fully arbitrary because in its core there is some kind of experiential connection between signifier and signified which, however remote, makes them seem appropriate at one time. Once a gesture becomes standardized and streamlined into a sign, it is then in the situation where it can be used to denote other related ideas, and as the evolution continues, the symbols that develop from experience may seem to be completely detached from their origins. Symbols in the form of written language may be inaccessible to those outside of the culture, yet each symbol within that culture carries a history of representation, association, and relation.  

I like to think that images and symbols carry with them the history of these elements as well, but can be less exclusive since they sometimes rely on iconic images for example the human figure which is collectively recognizable.

The symbolic element in pictures is a suggested value, a bridge between recognizable reality and the mystical, unseen realm of philosophy, memory and perception, extending from the consciously understandable into the field of the unconscious. To this extent one can say that the creator of a symbol is in reality a mediator between two worlds, the visible and invisible.

In signs there may be a great deal of overlapping of categories, and little if any exclusivity. A diamond ring, for example may be seen as an indexical sign of marriage, but also as a symbol of eternity because it is one of nature’s most durable substances, or of vast wealth because of its economic value. But to a culturally uninitiated child a diamond ring can also be simply what it is: a sparkling stone.

The 1944 *Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior* by psychologists Heider and Simmel is a good example of how these ideas overlap; how we attach meaning or motives to

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signs and how they can display our biological memory or learnt understanding of the natural world. The participants in the experiment were shown a 90 second animation of geometric shapes interacting with each other and a box (a large triangle, smaller triangle, a circle and a box with a movable piece which functioned as a door). These shapes seemed to act out a scene which participants were asked to interpret as well as the personalities and motivations of the simple shapes.

In this experiment a few features were common to all responses such as the shapes or the actors as they call them, always move the door through prolonged contact; the door never moves them. \(^{11}\) This could suggest that the movement and proximity of the actor and the door activates a cultural framework that contains knowledge about the function of doors and physics. Our knowledge of the physical nature of doors allows us to recognize how they move and the various motives behind opening or closing a door, or whether the actors are pushing or pulling the door. The majority of the participants interpreted the animation in terms of actions of persons, the origin of movements and motives. \(^{12}\)

These elements could reflect an innate structure in the sensory, emotional and intellectual makeup of the human body and the human psyche. This could explain why the forms of expression that we create and to those we respond to instinctively all over the world are so full of meaning and so understandable, sometimes even between cultures. \(^{13}\)

We humans are adept at attaching meaning to the world around us. We use our

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\(^{12}\) Ibid, 258.

\(^{13}\) Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 5.
personal experiences and cultural memory to place whatever it is we perceive into context. In that way we attempt to familiarize and categorize our physical and social environment; to create a sense of order in a world made up of signs.

1.2 MEANING MAKERS

The human species seems to be driven by a need to make meanings. We humans make meanings through the making and interpretation of signs. Signs can take the form of words, images, sounds, smells, flavors, actions or objects. These signs are not inherently meaningful; they become signs only when we infuse them with meaning. Anything has the potential to be a sign as long as there is someone to interpret it as signifying a specific thing; referring to or representing something other than itself. For the most part humans interpret signs unconsciously by connecting them to pre-established systems of conventions. In 1972, NASA launched a deep space probe named *Pioneer 10* into space. Onboard was a pictorial message attached to the probe in case it would be intercepted by intelligent beings. Art historian Ernst H. Gombrich writes that this effort by NASA was likely not to be taken seriously but he proceeded to analyze the image none the less.

![Pioneer Plaque](image)

**Fig. 2: The Pioneer Plaque**

He observed that first of all these beings would need to be equipped with receptors among their sense organs that respond to the same type of electromagnetic waves as our eyes do.

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Even if that were the case it would be impossible for them to understand the intended message. The Interpretation of an image, like the interpretation of any other incoming signal, depends partly on established knowledge of possibilities; we can only recognize what we already know. We can’t separate the human figures in the image from our prior knowledge. We have the information that feet are for standing and that eyes are for looking and we cast this knowledge on the image, which would be unrecognizable without the prior information. Even if the intelligent life out in space managed to decipher the image, Gombrich muses, what would those beings think of the woman’s right arm that fades off behind her? The human figures are drawn to scale against the outline of the spaceship, but if the interpreter is supposed to understand foreshortening, they might also expect to see perspective and understand the spaceship as being farther away in the background, which would make the scale of the human figures miniature. And to address that the male figure which has his right hand raised in greeting, it is debatable whether even some cultures on earth would interpret this gesture as a greeting. Gombrich concludes his analysis by observing that the trajectory of the Pioneer is depicted with a directional arrowhead; this conventional symbol would be very obscure to an alien race that had never seen anything like bows and arrows.  

We can on the other hand be rather easily conditioned to respond to signs. The symbols of religion such as the cross or the likeness of Buddha, the signs of good luck or danger such as the four leaf clover or the skull and crossbones, the national flags such as the American stars and stripes, the party badges such as the red flag or the swastika for arousing loyalty or hostility. All these and many more show that the conventional signs can contain within them a potential for arousal of the visual image. This might partly depend on the particular style and execution of the image.

In the past craftsmanship in itself was regarded as something miraculous. The more completely the work represented the content through aesthetic perfection, the greater its symbolic value became and the more worthy of worship it was. A typical example of this effect is the icon such as the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, its beauty, enhanced by a certain stylization, is concerned with the revelation of the object’s symbolic content and the enlightenment of the viewer. We also find the tendency to simplify through the representation of the object in a simple or basic form. An example would be the symbol picture of the crucified Christ, but tying two pieces of wood together to represent the same cross and

thereby signifying the same symbolic content for the believer, even in the absence of any figurative representation or even any aesthetic value; its symbolic content remains absolutely identical. The symbol sign arises from the believers need to possess a version of the original, genuine image so that they can participate in its symbolic value.

In just the same way as superstitious persons wearing amulets want to transfer some kind of higher power to themselves. The degree of symbolic value is therefore not dependent on any perfection of outward form but on the readiness of the viewers to attach their conviction, their faith, to an object of meditation, such as a symbol. But there are other ways a symbol is able to influence our thinking aside from wanting to associate oneself with its symbolic properties.

A lot of our activities are conditioned by signs and symbols. Road-signs for example are widely recognized and drivers know what to do when faced by a certain road-sign. We are conditioned to do what the signs tell us to do, and know that we cannot ignore them without risking an accident or punishment. These signs may tell us how fast we may go and in which direction, which lane we should drive in and when we may or must stop. The driver is part of a larger organism of that particular human society, and just like in our bodies each small organ must live in harmony with the others, so when we move from place to place we must do it in flowing harmony with others. Ignoring the rules distresses the whole organism. Human society has many other signs and symbols for a variety of activities; the plan of an electric circuit is drawn with a series of conventional signs, there are directional signs such as one would find at an airport or a train station or notification signs such as no smoking signs, no

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17 Frutiger, Signs and Symbols, 236-237.
18 Ibid.
19 Munari, Design as Art, 73.
dogs allowed or no parking.

The hobo signs, which are known to have been used by traveling workers in America (sometimes referred to as hobos) at the start of the 20th century, used a visual sign language to tell each other if it’s safe to go to a certain place, if the police are nice or nasty, whether or not they can beg and so on. They would mark certain locations with the signs to inform other hobos about what lay ahead. As an example a sign made of two interlocking circles means caution, a triangle pointing upwards with two arms raised means armed man. A big triangle with three small triangles alongside means that one should make up a sad story to get sympathy; perhaps the big triangle represented a mother and the little ones her three starving children.

![Hobo-glyphs](image)

For anyone not accustomed to the sign system of the hobos reading into the meaning of the signs would take a lot of guesswork. One could maybe have to rely on biological memory such as in the instance of the big triangle next to three little ones, because one knows that children are small in comparison to their larger parents, which is a common phenomenon throughout nature. This would also exist in visual culture as illustrations of families or photographic family portraits.

Another example of how we may have to rely on cultural memory to decipher symbols is a mosaic found at the entrance of a house in Pompeii. It depicts a dog on a chain with the

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21 Munari, Design as art, 74.
writing *Cave Canem* written next to it, which is translated into *Beware of the Dog*. It is supposed to evoke our experiences of growling or barking dogs which makes us automatically afraid or alarmed.

![Fig. 5: Beware the Dog](image)

The picture reinforces the writing that warns the supposed intruder of the risk he is taking. Would the image without the text function in the same way? It could, if we were to regard it with prior knowledge of social conventions. But if we think just of the image from the perspective of a member of an alien race, we might think of many other possible interpretations of the image. Maybe the owner of the house was advertising a dog for sale? Maybe it was an animal clinic? Or could the image have been a sign for a pub named *The Barking Dog*? It depends on our prior knowledge of possibilities and experience. The difficulty of interpreting the meaning of the mosaic is instructive because it can be expressed in terms of communication theory. Like verbal messages being unclear because of noise, images can fall prey to the random interference of prior possibilities, leaving the intended message unclear. It is the built-in safeguard of the written message that allows us to read the inscription *Cave Canem* and understand the image instantly.\(^22\) Without the text one would have to rely on one’s own cultural memory for interpretation. Although the text could similarly be open for interpretation in its presentation depending on the phrasing for example. Let’s look at the term *dog*. The referent *dog* in this case is all existing dogs and also all dogs in the past and the future. But *all existing dogs* is not an object that can be perceived with the senses. From the perspective of semiotics a meaning of a term can only be a *cultural unit*. In

any culture a unit is simply anything that can be culturally defined and well known as an entity. It could be a person, location, object, experience, fantasy, dread, hope or an idea. In some western cultures units such as auntie, village, blue (meaning depressed), a hunch, the idea of development and art are cultural units. A unit of this type might also be recognized as an intercultural unit which doesn’t change despite the linguistic symbol with which it is signified; *dog* doesn’t stand for a symbol for a physical object but a cultural unit which remains constant or invariable even if it is translated into another language, *cane, chien, hundur* or *hund*. In the case of a sign or a unit such as *crime* it might be that the corresponding cultural unit in another culture has broader or more restricted range. In the case of *snow* it might be that for the Inuit in Greenland there are in fact four cultural units which correspond to four different states of snow and which are conveyed by four different expression units. Recognizing the presence of these cultural units involves understanding language as a social phenomenon.23

Similarly metaphors are social phenomenon’s which can rely on our understanding of the world and particular social structure in order to relay experiences or understanding. The term *metaphor* is frequently used as an umbrella term which includes other figures of speech for example *similes* that could be seen as a form of metaphor where comparison is made clear by the use of the words *as or like*. In semiotics a metaphor is one signified acting as a signifier, that refers to a different signified. A metaphor is in a way unconventional because it could disregard literal likeness although some sort of similarity must become clear if the metaphor is supposed to make any sense for the interpreter. Many metaphors become so regularly used that people don’t think of them as metaphors any more.24 A visual metaphor for example in cinema, a pair of consecutive shots is a metaphor when there is an implied comparison of the two shots. A frame of an airplane followed by a frame of a bird flying could be metaphorical, it could imply that the airplane is *like* a bird. Visual metaphors can also involve a certain type of transportation of qualities from one sign to another; this is often done in advertising with glamorous actors appearing next to various products.25

In the next section I will talk about more complex metaphors such as myths which often address matters of our complex inner lives. I find the connection between semiotics and myth interesting, particularly how myths can function as a metaphor for the complex signaling culture of a society as well as the personal experience.

25 Ibid.


1.3 THE INTERROGATION OF PROTEUS

Myths are able to place information into a relatable system of conventions. For a lot of us myths are the classic fables about the heroic or tragic deeds of gods and heroes, and how the word *myth* has been used suggests that it refers to beliefs that are in fact not true, the use of the word in semiotics doesn’t have to suggest this. Like some metaphors, cultural myths can aid us in making sense of our emotional trials in a culture. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wrote that fairy tales in a classical sense aid in simplifying our world view; they bring order into chaos. Every figure within a fairy tale becomes essentially one-dimensional such as the evil stepsisters in *Cinderella*, or how the wolf is often portrayed in *Little Red Riding Hood* as conniving, deceitful and hungry. He argues that this enables us to organize and comprehend complex and ambivalent feelings. In that respect myths, symbols and metaphors or a combination of those have the ability not only to activate a cultural memory but perhaps in the process address complex ideas or principles such as justice or growth of the adolescent.

It may depend on the presentation and purpose but it could be argued that some signs or a grouping of certain signs such as a myth, are able to influence cultural values by referencing them in a particular way. An example of a cultural value would be Iceland’s long standing relationship with its Viking heritage or seemingly unspoiled nature. Values can often seem abstract or disconnected from the narratives that influence people’s everyday sense of the world and their place within it. Storytelling in the appropriate form would then be capable of clarifying, activating, strengthening or weakening a cultural value. These values could perhaps be of a very personal nature as well, depending on our own background and interpretation of a myth for example.

Fairy tales are able to address existential matters according to Bettelheim. He argued that much of children’s literature of his time denied children of inner conflicts which children may be exposed to in their lives, such as loneliness, anxiety and desperation. As a result they don’t help them cope with them. A child may not be able to express these feelings in words instead they could appear in other forms like fear of the dark, fear of animals or self image anxiety. Bettelheim argues that fairy tales can address anxieties seriously and even offer

solutions in ways that a child could grasp. This is a function of stories and myths that interests me; the potential for introspection and reflection. If one were to view stories and myths as a grouping of signs which refer to a myriad of cultural memories then one could perhaps compare it to a society. The individual would be a sign containing within it an unseen tapestry of signs, and all the individuals are contained in a larger system of signs named society, and on the planet there is a larger structure containing all societies. If one were to accept that as a possible metaphor one could also accept that a certain synergy between each individual sign and each grouping of signs creates a dynamic and an ideological structure which is fluid in nature and alters and shifts depending on the movement of all the signs. Admittedly these are my personal thoughts in a state of infancy but in order to further develop these ideas and metaphors I will further explore myths and have come to regard them as a complex grouping of interplaying signs.

Mythology has been interpreted as an ancient, searching effort to explain the world of nature; as a product of fantasy from prehistoric times which has then been misunderstood by succeeding generations. As storage of metaphorical guidelines to shape the individual to his group; as a group dream, a symptom of archetypal urges with the human psyche or man’s traditional method for metaphysical insights. Mythology is all of these. Storytelling is like the ever changing sea god Proteus from Greek mythology. He will take on all sorts of forms and shapes and if you want his wisdom you have to interrogate him for answers. But he never reveals the whole content of his wisdom. He will reply only to the question put to him and what he reveals will be great or not important, according to the question asked. Joseph Campbell said this about myth in an interview with Bill Moyers:

You can’t predict what a myth is going to be any more than you can predict what you’re going to dream tonight. Myths and dreams come from the same place. They come from realizations of some kind that have then to find expression in symbolic form. And the only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet, and everybody on it. That’s my main thought for what the future myth is going to be. (Joseph Campbell)

Roland Barthes believed that myths are not like other kinds of signifiers. He believed they are never random or by chance. They always include some sort of analogy which drives them.

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Myths change the form of or distort certain images or signs to carry and convey a particular meaning. Myths don’t hide things, they distort them.\textsuperscript{32} I think that visual symbols function in a similar way; they distort information so that they can carry within them a particular meaning. The comparison of myth and symbol I make here is an attempt to show that signals function similarly even when the signaling system takes on a complex form like a myth. It could also mean that the distortion of signs makes it doable to carry on ancient symbols and meaning into contemporary culture by changing the form. The distortion of information could function in the attempt of mapping complex ideas such as a myth or the emergence of a culture within a society.

I would like at this point to use the myth of Proteus as a metaphor to explain the fluid nature of the relationship of signs and cultural memory. The story of the capture and interrogation of Proteus in Homer’s Odyssey describes how the son of Atreus ambushes Proteus as he sleeps and locks him in a hold. Proteus attempts to break the hold by turning into a lion, a snake, a panther, a monstrous boar; then running water and a towering and leafy tree. And when that fails agrees to provide him with the knowledge he needed.\textsuperscript{33} Proteus as a metaphor functions not only for myth but for the interpretation of symbols as well. After catching a symbol in your sights there is an interrogation; what is it? And what does it stand for? Depending on a wide variety factors such as experience and cultural memory of the interrogator and style and context of the symbol; there is an interpretation that takes place.

Proteus is a shapeshifter, the word shapeshifting itself can take on different forms such as transforming, fluid, changing, metamorphosis and others. Even the name of Proteus has become a synonym for shapeshifting or something that is able to change frequently. Someone who is protean has a varied nature; a protean phenomenon is something that can appear in many shapes.\textsuperscript{34} The shapeshifter is an entity with the power to change its shape, size, species or even sex. It is present in stories dating to thousands of years ago and continues to populate the popular media of today. Very early examples of shapeshifters in literature originate in mythology. In Islamic culture, spirits classified as djinn or genies are sometimes portrayed with shapeshifting powers, appearing in numerous tales in the collection of folktales. The Genie of Disney’s Aladdin is a modern incarnation of this category. Trickster figures from

folk stories of the Americas frequently appear as shapeshifters. There are tales of naguals which are powerful shamans that can transform themselves into various animals such as a deer, jaguar or a bird to do evil. The word nagual derives from the Nahuatl word nahualli which means disguise. In European folklore vampires and werewolves are notable shapeshifters which have spawned innumerable adaptations. What fascinates me the most about past and present shapeshifter themes is their potential ability to explore a wide variety of experiences which the individual is able to interpret and reflect on; in a way establishing a framework for an experience.

And what it will have to deal with will be exactly what all myths have dealt with—the maturation of the individual, from dependency through adulthood, through maturity, and then to the exit; and then how to relate to this society and how to relate this society to the world of nature and the cosmos. That’s what the myths have all talked about, and what this one’s got to talk about. But the society that it’s got to talk about is the society of the planet. And until that gets going, you don’t have anything. (Joseph Campbell)

I am tempted to view the idea of shapeshifting as a form of empathy where the transformation becomes a relatable symbol for a state of mind, state of existence or experience. How we perceive and experience culture as participants or observers shifts with the currents of history and experience. We have made symbols and meaning deep into the past right up until I write this, to aid us in making sense of the world, our environment, our experiences and inner lives. The distortion of complex ideas or symbols may be necessary in order to make it relatable for the current culture or more comprehensible. In one sense Proteus is then not only a shapeshifter but a time traveler too; assuming new shapes as time passes. In order to receive answers or truth from Proteus we have to capture him and interrogate him, he may go through a myriad of shapes before revealing his true self and then it is up to us to ask the right questions; to unlock and interpret the greater and smaller mysteries of our lives.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of semiotics is preoccupied with the study of signs and symbols. I’m interested in a branch of semiotics called social semiotics which empathizes diversity of interpretation and importance of cultural and historical context. By closely examining the inner workings of interpreting signs one may uncover the underlying cultural influences that are embedded within. A sign may activate a cultural memory, but those memories and our ideas are subject to change even though the sign stays the same. This can for example depend on the history of events or the re-imagined context of a particular sign. I believe that the knowledge and awareness of how signs are able to reactively or proactively influence its interpreter, is important for anyone working in the field of communication. An increased knowledge of the emergence and nature of a cultural phenomenon within a society would benefit a project development, idea development or inspire project creation based on those phenomena.

2.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

From a young age I experienced myself as an outsider. I felt I did not particularly belong to any one social group and traversed between them almost like a visitor or an observer of behavior and social dynamics. Maybe it was because of that feeling of not belonging that I became interested in the study of sociology and psychology; analyzing situations and behaviors became a way of dealing with that uncomfortable experience. To this day I find that I intensely analyze the reasons and motivation for the actions or ideas of people and hypothesize about what might have caused them.

My relationship with illustration and graphic design, which originated from a want and need to connect with others, coupled with an obsessive analyzing behavior has fired up an interest in the study of the science and theory of semiotics. I think it is important when studying semiotics not only to dissect the theory but to conduct one’s own experiments and interpretation which may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay of signs and cultural memory. I was interested in attempting to create simple abstractions of other images and see if they would be able to activate specific cultural memories for the interpreter. I am particularly interested in the use of the knowledge gained from those experiments in the context of project creation or idea development. My research question thus became an exploration of the relationship between signs and cultural memory.
3 METHODOLOGY

For this research I chose a flexible design research approach also known as qualitative research. I thought it was suitable since the outcome of the research is a matter of interpretation which not all are suitably qualified to do. This way to do research demands a lot from the researcher while carrying out the study. It has often been said that it involves the researcher-as-instrument rather than solely depending on specialist tools. Certainly the quality of a flexible design research depends a great deal on the quality of the investigator. It is not a soft option in the sense that anyone can do it without preparing properly, without the knowledge of procedures or analytical skills. It is soft, perhaps in the sense that there are few routinized procedures where all you have to do is to follow predetermined steps. This makes life harder rather than easier, though it could also be more interesting.\(^{39}\)

A large part of my research was focused on finding my personal relationship with my practice and way of thinking. This means that previously I went through several different design concepts before reaching a research pathway that I fully resonated with. I made a personal breakthrough when I made an experiment attempt based on the 1944 Experiment of Apparent Behavior by Heider and Simmel as described in section 1.1. My initial intentions were to explore how humans interpret signs and their ability to create stories; even from very minimal visual clues. This developed into the current explorative research question of the relationship of signs and cultural memory through the research of semiotics.

There was a developmental process during the maturation of the questionnaires which involved the visual problem solving of what shape they might take and what I hoped to learn from them. This took place in my sketchbooks as thumbnails, drawings and notes. I also experimented with different forms of questionnaires some of which didn’t meet my personal criteria as I tested them on graphic design students at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts.

In the next section I will explain and go through the results of the two primary questionnaires that I conducted online. These experiments have become somewhat of a personal foundation for further development and refinement of experiments on visual perception and the relationship of visual signs and cultural memory.

Fig. 6: Idea development from the pages of my personal sketchbook.
4 EXPERIMENT ONE

For Experiment One I created an online questionnaire with the assistance of Google Forms. The questionnaire was posted in Facebook groups associated with the Icelandic Academy of the Arts and there were 37 anonymous participants over a period of two days. The participants were asked to interpret a series of seven slides showing abstractions from images of fairy tales, pop culture, well known world events and famous paintings. I abstracted the contents of the images; drawing out what I considered to be the most recognizable features, until they consisted only of triangles, circles and rectangles as actors in the otherwise blank images. Accompanying each image were questions such as “If you were to assign a personality to the triangle what would it be?” or “Describe what is happening in this image.” The participants were not aware that the geometric shapes were an abstraction of any particular image.

My perception of the overall responses was that they were primarily based on spatial intelligence, perception of the size and direction of the geometric shapes, personal experience and various overlapping containers of cultural memory. The participants were possibly able to create stories from the images by assembling various factors together such as proximity of shapes, placement, and size, the historical use of the shapes in visual culture and by using cultural memories of storytelling methods, which could have been consciously or unconsciously learnt from the environment. Figure 6 exhibits a sample of one of the slides from Experiment One.

Fig. 7: Summary of a slide from Experiment One. The geometric shapes were based on the composition of Michelangelo’s painting God Appearing to St. Mary Magdalen and St. Catherine of Siena, circa 1508.
My interpretation of the responses for this particular image is that the composition of the geometric shapes may have played a large part in the interpretation of the personality of the circle. Placing the most important figure in the center of a painting is an ancient technique to emphasize importance. Exposure to these paintings is common in contemporary culture. The God figure is also much larger than the other figures which would indicate some sort of authority. The shape of the triangles could also indicate that they are looking up to the larger circle; we look up to figures of authority or figures we respect, we also look up to the sun and the moon which have a history of being worshipped and as having majestic qualities. Even if the interpreter would regard the geometric image as seen from above I believe that the circle still has authority and wisdom because of its size and less aggressive shape compared to the sharp triangles. It would have been interesting to see the difference in responses if the circle would have been replaced with a large triangle. The color of the geometric shapes also implies a differentiation; the two shapes may not be of the same origin.

I interpreted the responses of all the slides, even the ones that had answers that didn’t correspond with their source of origin. Some of the images I created didn’t prompt responses related to the source image but instead displayed a wide array of interpretations. I found these equally interesting as it was a display of the participants interpreting an arrangement of shapes that didn’t communicate its intended information; provoking a variety of cultural references and experiences. It became clear to me that in this sort of an experiment there are no right answers, only the scrutiny of answers; an interrogation.

### 4.1 EXPERIMENT TWO

Experiment Two built on the experience and form of the previous experiment. I conducted it with a clearer goal in mind of luring fourth clues from the participants which might help me interpret the way in which they invest meaning in the geometric shapes. As an addition I included three questions which tried the visual perception of the participants by asking them to choose one of four simple shapes which best represented an accompanying image. I then asked the participants to explain why they chose that particular shape.

The experiment brought to light a contrasting approach among the participants to relate the shape to the image. In the case of the image of Salvador Dali the participants were almost evenly split between a visual perception of the physical relationship of shape and image, and the prior cultural knowledge of Dali’s history and personality. That is not to say that the participants were blinder to one option over the other, but it raised the question of
why they committed to either option; consciously or unconsciously relating shape and image in the way they did.

I will now summarize the responses to the question why a particular shape was chosen for the picture of Dali to exemplify my process of interpretation. Option a) had a mixed bag of responses but most were trying to find a physical relationship albeit somewhat vague such as “Because it’s closest to the shape of his head.” Or “The shape of his face.” There were also attempts to refer to Dali’s personality; “Wild but still has a certain structure to it.” Regardless of the vague associations they leave clues about how the process of meaning making happens. Option b) had the majority of responses associating the spiky shape to Dali’s spiky mustache, “It is pointy like the beard.” The shape was also described as being crazy and was often associated with the look he has on his face or his wide open eyes, “Crazy shape for crazy eyes.” There were also references made to his personality, “I imagine it represents the spirit of Dali.” Option c) only had three responses which were vague; “Symmetrical Salvador Dali.” This might suggest that this particular process of giving shapes meaning gets more difficult if there is no obvious physical resemblance of a shape to the contents of an image or that which the image might refer to. Option d) had an overwhelming association to Dali’s melting clocks from his painting *The Persistence of Memory*; “My genre literacy tells me the blot is similar to the clocks in his famous painting.” This association might also be related to the shapes.

Fig. 8: Summary of a slide from Experiment Two.
similarity to a blob of paint, but also reveals how that particular painting by Dali has rooted itself in the visual culture of that particular group of participants.

4.2 REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIMENTS
Reflecting on what I learned from these experiments and being encouraged and advised to research semiotics I finally managed to peel off the final layer of my professional self to find a clearer view of my way of thinking. The way the simple geometric shapes were able to activate a myriad of cultural memories within the participants, inspired me to explore more complex signaling systems such as symbols and myths. I was inspired by Joseph Campbell’s interpretation of the sea god Proteus from Greek mythology. Within that story I did not only see Campbell’s metaphor but an interpretation from my own perspective as well; the interrogation of a symbol. It is this ability to interpret symbols and myths from our own perspective, and applying meaning to them that resonate with our own lives that interests me. When complex combinations of signs create a woven fabric of meaning derived from the overlapping of cultural memories and experiences; it allows us to take a closer look at ourselves within a society as meaning makers. It allows us to take a closer look at how we can affect a society and how a society can affects us.

5 CONCLUSION
The Interrogation of Proteus was a project of searching, seeking and learning. Its main purpose was to explore the relationship of signs and cultural memory and in the process pave the way for further research and methods for project development.

I consider the two experiments to have been a valuable aid in my developing understanding of the subject of semiotics and cultural memory, and how one might attempt to develop a study around a relationship between the two. I consider the questionnaires to be the very early steps on a long journey towards developed and defined research attempts. Their results displayed a sample of our ability to call on cultural and biological knowledge and memories for meaning making which were activated by simple signals such as geometric shapes. I believe the project could become a long-term research project, partly because of the continuously shifting nature of culture and symbols and also because of how vast the field of study is. For future experiments I would like to attempt to narrow down my exploratory focus and perhaps address a specific cultural phenomenon within a specific culture. Dissecting a
relationship of a culture to a cultural phenomenon could open up opportunities for project creation or project development relevant to that particular culture.

From my personal point of view as the researcher of this project and visual communicator I see potential in attempting to develop a visual metaphor for the emergence of cultural phenomena’s within a society. For the MA degree show I attempted to create a visual metaphor for the variety of interpretation of a sign based on the physical emergence of snowflakes. For future steps I would want to explore the idea of *cellular automata* as a method of creating a visual metaphor which encompasses the complex relationship of signs and cultural memory.

I find it inspiring to think that the research and experiments I’ve done so far are merely a small step into the dark, entangled forest of discovery and development. I believe that what all humans have in common is that we try to make sense of this world and our existence in it. The ways in which we do this take on almost indefinite forms and shapes, like the ancient sea god Proteus. I have used this research to make sense of myself in relation to my way of thinking, experience and environment; participating in the ancient practice of meaning making. The result is a qualitative research method which is embedded in culture; for project development and scrutiny.


https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-barthes-2/


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Baldursson, Hjálmar.

FIG. 7: Summary of a Slide from Experiment One

FIG. 8: Summary of a Slide From Experiment Two
Appendix

Summary of a slide from Experiment One: *Tank Man*

If you were to assign a personality to the triangle how would you describe it?
**Responses to Tank Man:** The participants were not aware of the original image. The answers are both in Icelandic and English and appear here in their original form as written by the participants:

“aggressive”
“Stands up for its rights. Decisive. Doesn’t take any crap from anyone.”
“Clever little guy, he if probably playing the big square, thats about to fall on him”
“one who wont take your crap”
“Neikvæður persónuleiki, svartsýnn.”
“odd”
“small minded”
“It loves going to the movies alone.”
“under pressure”
“Hugrakkur”
“Farðu að veggnum”
“inquisitive – direct”
“outsider”
“Ambitious”
“smá peð sem er hræddur, hugrakkur að standa á móti kasssanum”
“ruining the peace”
“smámunasarum og rökrænn jafnleg þróngsýnn.”
“a shy personality”
“too small for the big world”
“pushy”
“overwhelmed”
“Clever”
“certain, rebelious, strong”
“ákveðinn”
“shy”
“complicated...is that a personality as well?”
“young, confused”
“Fierce”
“supportive”
“Weak but brave”
“shy”
“utangarðs”
“mournful”
“watching tv”
“focused”
Summary of a slide from Experiment One: *The Shining*

Describe what is happening in this image.
**Responses to The Shining:** The participants were not aware of the original image. The answers are both in Icelandic and English and appear here in their original form as written by the participants:

“ein persóna inni í herbergi, önnur á leiðinni inn”
“Small circle is leaving big circle. And the bad guy is looking in the window.”
“Stóri hringurinn er að fela sig, litli er að leita að honum og þríhyrningurinn er fastur”
“the two circles saw something strange on their telescope and now the smaller one is going out to check it “
“The little circle is leaving the room in a hurry. The bigger one gone into the corner and cries.”
“The triangle is on his way through the square and cuts it in pieces. The safety/love(the square) is over.”
“sorting.”
“Someone has escaped.”
“A bowl fell on its head and all the candyballs fell out except one that stuck to the bottom.”
“someone is intruding.”
“litli hringurinn er að rúlla frá kassanum.”
“Tveir að reyna að komast inn g einn á leið út.”
“a plan of a room - diagram showing views from room (triangle) circels showing locations of interest.”
“the circle in the corner feels threatened but others approaching.”
“Hide and seek.”
“stóri hringurinn fattar ekki að hann getur labbað í gegnum veggi og kemst ekki út um „hurðina” eins og litli hringurinn, þríhirningurinn veit þetta samt...”
“a fight”
“Maður situr hugsi við barborð, í fínum jakka með klút í brjóstvasanum og drykk í glasi á bordinu fyrir framan sig.”
“scoring a goal”
“the circle thinks there’s no way outside because the hole is too small. but it could be so easy.”
“the triangle jumps just over the wall”
“Something is penetrating a space and one gets out the other is cornered and stuck”
“Danger within the square”
“hringurinn hefur sloppið”
“the triangle is cleaving the space , the circle inside is a teacher and the circle on the outside is a student. elementary school student.”
“Risa könguló er búin að ná mömmy hringnum en litli hringurinn er einn eftir”
“Child leaving a room”
“the triangle is attacking the house, mother circle hiding in the corner, daughter circle is coming back home from school lol”
“A duck looking upwards”
“Being left out”
“The bigger solid circle is hiding from the smaller solid circle in a flat square space that is hanging from a flat solid triangle”
Describe the relationship of these triangles.
**Responses to Sistine Chapel:** The participants were not aware of the original image. The answers are both in Icelandic and English and appear here in their original form as written by the participants:

“kissing”
“Lovers”
“They are lovers”
“they just met at a support meeting for triangles who just want to be whole squares.”
“They just met and are interested in each other. Friendship or love.”
“approach.”
“They mirror each other.”
“They are married and in love.”
“Lovers”
“Rómans”
“Nánd”
“meeting”
“triangles in love”
“Dating”
“þeir eru mótherjar en geta samt verið vinir.”
“gay”
“Kærleikur”
“a mirror”
“opposites attract.”
“even”
“interaction, could be loving, could be aggressive.”
“þeir eru að førast saman”
“They are repelled by each other”
“samrýndir, skyldir, nánir”
“They are fighting”
“gossip sisters”
“They’re talking, maybe arguing about important matters”
“Attracting”
“Corner showdown”
“Against each other”
“They are trying to connect”
“birds kissing”
“fondness”
“friendly”
“tense”
Summary of slides from Experiment Two:

If you were to choose one of these shapes to represent the image to the left which one would it be?

107 Participants

- a) 36.4%
- b) 1.9%
- c) 54.2%
- d) 3.7%

If you were to choose one of these shapes to represent the image to the left which one would it be?

109 Participants

- a) 19.3%
- b) 54.1%
- c) 13.8%
- d) 10.1%