

# Metaphor, meaning, and message

The development of advertising communications, through the application of visual language, symbols and signs

Peter Lester, MA, FHEA, September 2020

# Visual Language

If you want to effectively communicate through any non-verbal media, then it is important to understand the construction of visual language

Just as spoken and written language have grammar, figures of speech, similes and metaphors, so does the language of art, illustration and design

# Advertising

Art direction for advertising depends heavily on the use of visual language. This language is developed from an understanding of universally understood symbolism, as well as a deep knowledge of specific target audiences

What follows is a brief introduction to metaphors and symbols, followed by a look at how adverts use them to sell ideas

# What is a metaphor?

A thing which represents or symbolises something else

- Life is a **highway**
- You are my **sunshine**
- He is a walking **encyclopedia**

# What is a metaphor?

Metaphors add colour and interest to **spoken** language. What are your favourites?

Metaphors also work as part of **visual** language

Is a simile the same as a metaphor?

What follows are some simple examples of symbols often used as visual metaphors

- Chains
- Hearts
- Hands

What others are you familiar with?



# Chains



# Brunel: Engineer



What do the chains say about the qualities and values of this great Victorian innovator?

# Chains: symbol of ?



In this example, the chains tell another story. The same material, the same construction, but a different metaphorical symbol.

# A chain is only as strong as its weakest link



How many different narratives could this visual symbol support?

- Poor teamwork
- Defective systems
- Broken hierarchies

# Breaking your chains



Achieving your freedom from all kinds of things can be seen in this symbolic use of chains.

A demonstration of great power is also there.

# The Heart



Many visual symbols cross all cultures and traditions. The heart means love all over the world. Are there any other symbols that do this?

# Companionship



The heart shape just can't be ignored. Once the shape forms in the image, you know it's about feelings and fond emotions. These powerful symbols cross all cultural boundaries

# I love coffee!



It's easy to see how advertisers manipulate our responses to their product. The narrative is simple, you will love our coffee.

# Tide and Heart



By now you should be getting the message about hearts. What is the narrative here? Is the tide also a metaphor?

# Hands (and a bit more love!)



# Unity and support



An interesting use of linked hands, (a chain perhaps) to create a narrative.

A more powerful message might come from making one or more different in some way. IE skin colour, wrinkly, tattoos.

# Unity and support



A similar use of hands and arms but conveying a slightly different message to the previous one.

What do you think this one signifies?

# What is the symbol here?



The hand is located in a particular scene.

What is the other metaphor here.

Together, what do they say?

# What is the message?



Non-verbal communications come in many forms. What is this gesture saying?

Is it hello and welcome?

The head posture, hands and eyes say it all

# Advertising

Using metaphors and symbols to  
create a message

# Deconstruction

- As we have seen the world is full of visual metaphors, which we consciously and sub-consciously understand
- Advertisers are skillful in using these symbols to manipulate consumer responses
- The following slides help deconstruct a few simple examples. Try this yourself

# Case Study: Car Advertising



# The Unique Selling Proposition



# Mitsubishi: USPs are Power, Safety, Ruggedness

Mitsubishi wants to promote its cars as strong and powerful, off road vehicles. (for taking the kids to school)

What are symbols of ruggedness and power?



## Symbol: Power, strength, ruggedness



- Research metaphors for power, strength ruggedness
- A tank? - too military
- A heavyweight boxer? - too violent
- A Rhino - yes!

## Final Ad. Rhino as Metaphor



- Juxtapose one sign or symbol with another to create a narrative
- Meaning and message; our car is as rugged as a rhino

# New Golf Sport: USP Fast and Fun



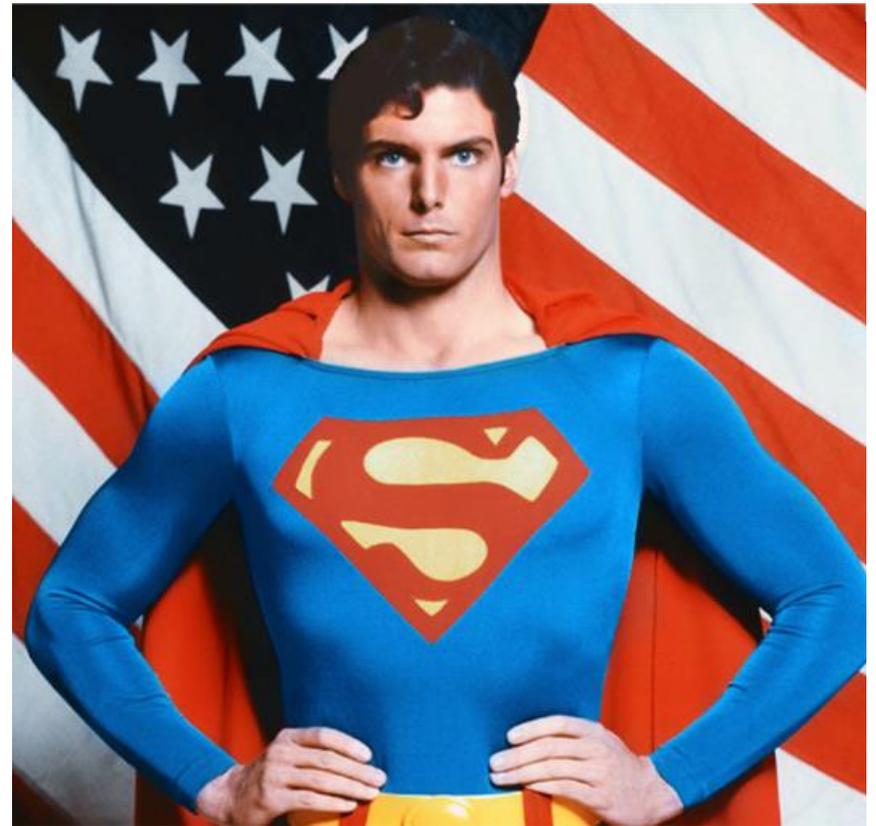
Research symbols of power to add sales value to a VW Golf, which has a new, bigger, sporty engine

Add two symbols together and...

**VW logo is a strong Brand**



**Superman is a symbol of power**



Supergolf; BrmmBrmm!



# Volvo: USP Environmentally Friendly

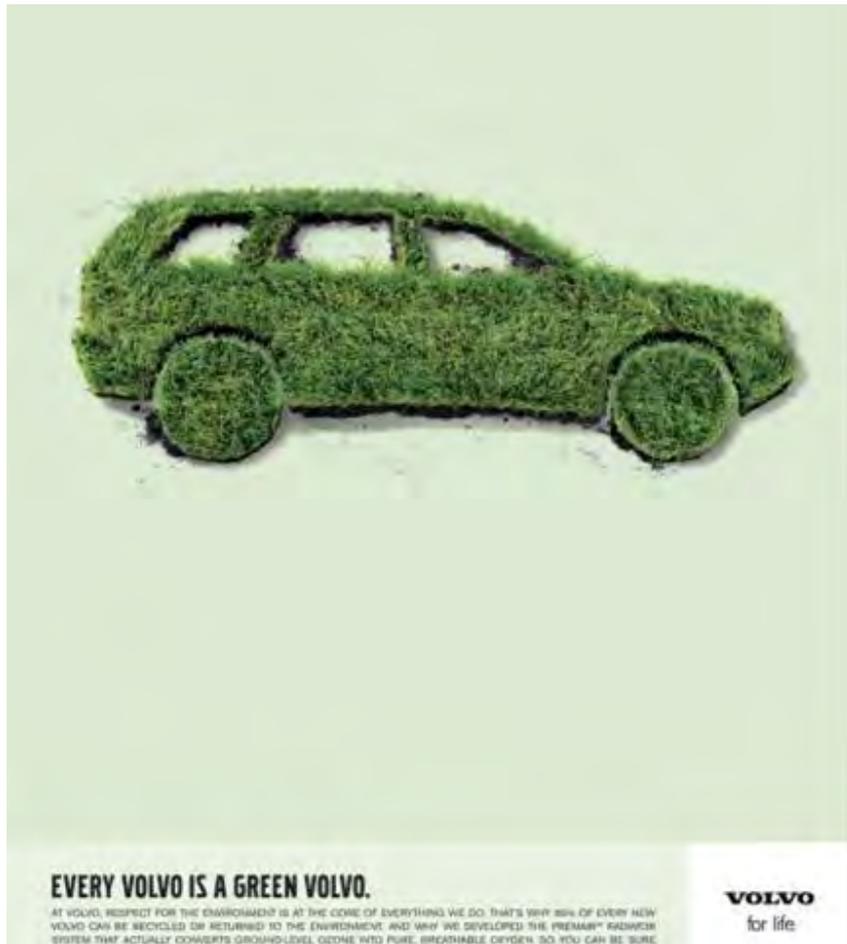
**A lovely clean Volvo**



**Symbol of clean environment**



# A 'green' car



Volvo are seen as a safe, family friendly, and now, environmentally friendly brand

## Case Study: Orient Deluxe Hotel: USP 'Star' treatment



# Star Quality: Metaphors



- Research symbols of stars, VIPs, A-Listers
- Private Jets, limousines, privilege
- Special treatment
- Lay out the red carpet!

# Red carpet: Symbol of special treatment



- The Oscars
- International summits
- Grand openings
- Posh hotels

# Hotel holiday 'star' welcome

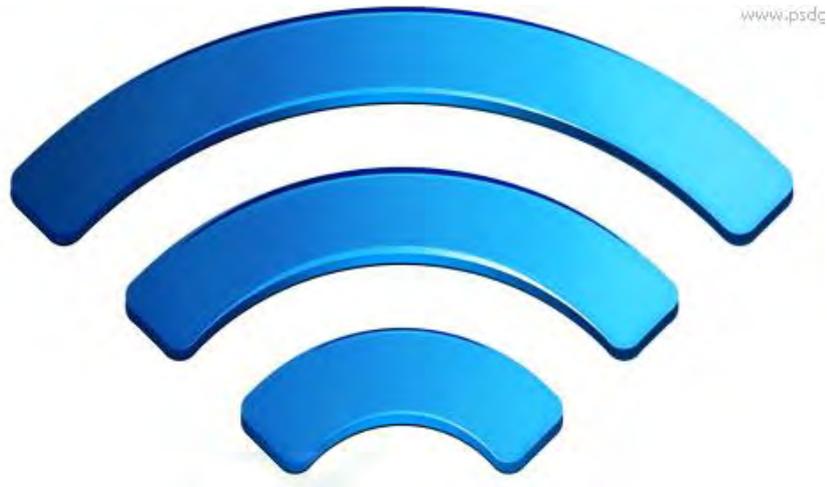


The red carpet metaphor has been used to create a narrative which says you will get star treatment if you take a holiday at the Orient

# Case Study: Internet Cafe

- Message ...
- We sell coffee
- You can drink coffee while you use our internet
- Problem; produce an ad that show an internet/wireless coffee experience

# Recognisable symbols; audience knowledge



# Result ...

A coffee cup combined with a WiFi sign tells a simple but effective story.



## Case Study Bic Pens: USP They Last a Long Time

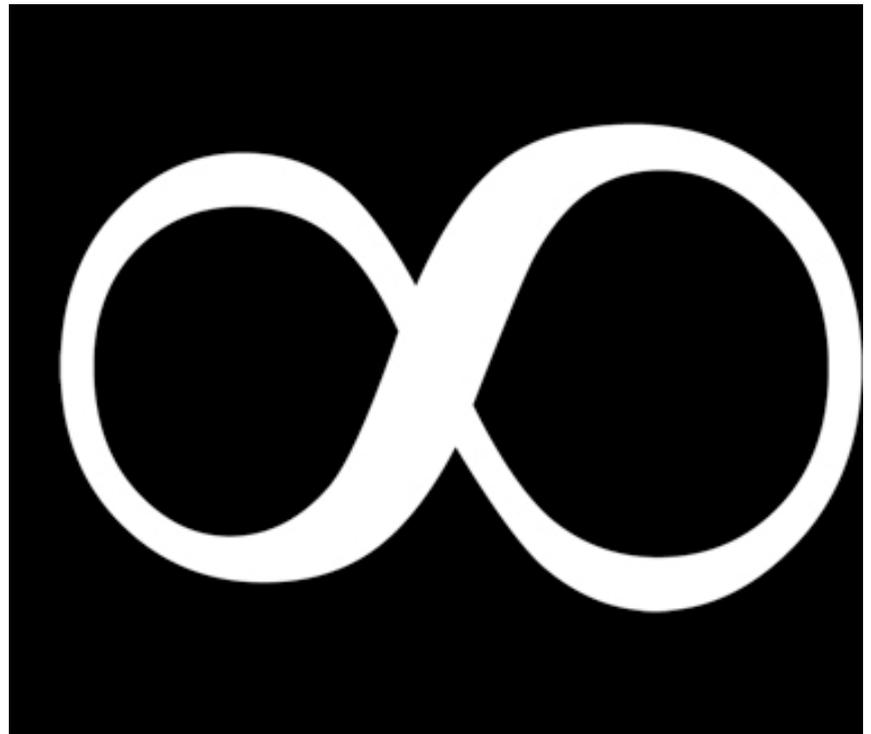
- Oaks?
- Relationships?



# Long Time

Research and visualise symbols of :

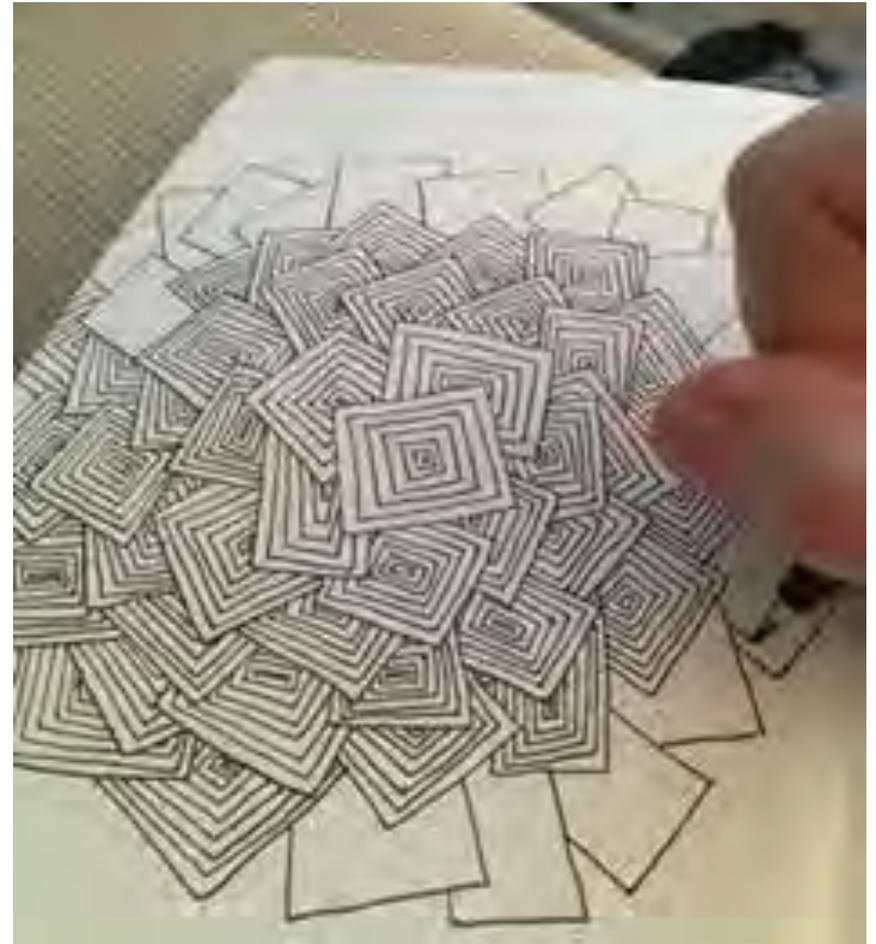
- Time
- Eternity
- Infinity
- Lasting
- Endurance



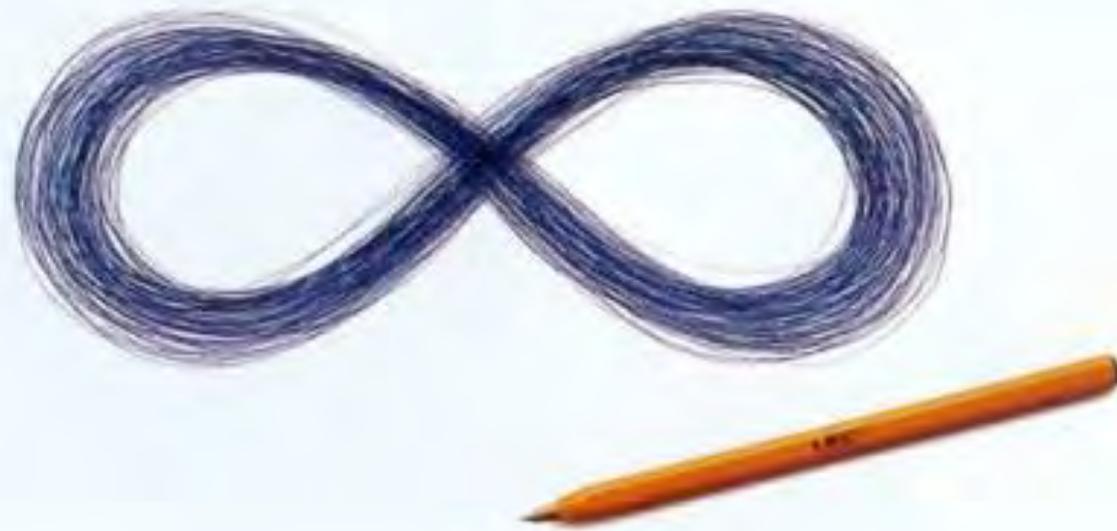
# What does a Bic do?

Do the same with

- Pens
- Writing
- Drawing
- Doodling



# Combination leads to The 'write' solution



# Cultural Icons

How to say 'English' in metaphors





# What's my nationality?



Where could this be?



# Applying Cultural References

Every country has a visual heritage  
which helps identify it

# Chinese dragons



# Russian dolls



# Dragons are not just Chinese



# French Icons



Cultural icons are very recognisable symbols which can easily be used in design or illustration to add meaning and enjoyment to your work

# English, British, or ... ?



This country has many cultural signifiers

- Bagpipes
- Heather
- Thistles
- Kilts



# Conclusion

Hopefully this very simple introduction to visual metaphors, will start you thinking about how you can use this kind of symbolism to add interest and meaning to your work. After all, if you can use an emoji then ...  
And finally one more metaphor which I hope will not offend any one



# Metaphor Message Meaning?

