Tropes
A figurative visual language

Movie critic Roger Ebert wrote, “All movie bartenders, when first seen, are wiping the inside of a glass with a rag.” This is a trope, visual shorthand that tells us he or she is tending bar. The scene is from Open Range (2003).
A visual shorthand

If someone says, “I bet my money on the home team and lost the whole enchilada,” we understand that the person didn’t bet an actual enchilada. The person is using a trope:

A trope in language is figurative language. It doesn’t always mean what it says. The four master tropes are analogy, metonymy, synecdoche and irony.

Speaking in literal language, our gambling friend might have said, “I bet my money on the home team and lost $50.”

Tropes offer different ways of saying, “This is that,” or “This is like that.” Tropes help us see the unfamiliar as familiar. Figurative language also can be considered a rhetorical code, and understanding this code is part of being a member of a culture. Like other codes, figurative language is part of how we connect to reality in a culture. Figurative language is a code that tells us how things are represented rather than what is represented.

Tropes depend to some degree on what a person knows. Someone unfamiliar with American figures of speech might think our friend actually lost an enchilada on the home team. But we are familiar with the phrase and understand it as merely colorful language.

Visual tropes are common in movies, television, newspapers and magazines, but especially in advertising. Ad people use signs we know in relationship to other signs and count on us to connect them.

Metonymy means association

We often learn by associating one sign with another. The media place various signs in a media text, such as this ad, hoping that the viewer will associate the values expressed by those signs with a product. Figure 1 is a print ad that shows several large panels with images that are familiar to anyone knowing some U.S. history: The signers of the Declaration of Independence, the 13-star flag of the American Revolution and immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. These carefully composed signs evoke certain values associated with America: independence, liberty and patriotism, and the promise of these things to immigrants. The advertiser’s goal is that we will associate these values with the stock brokerage, Ameritrade.
Metonymy involves using one signified to stand for another signified that is directly related to it or closely associated with it in some way. A metonym evokes the whole of something by a connection. In the Ameritrade ad, the actor Sam Waterston is included as the company’s spokesperson. Waterston is known for his role as the tough district attorney Jack McCoy on the TV show Law and Order. The ad’s creator hopes McCoy’s no-nonsense and somewhat conservative approach in the TV show become associated with Ameritrade’s image.

In Figure 2, we see a statue of a bull, connected to the term “bull market.” It brings to mind the statue’s location, Wall Street in New York. The words “Wall Street” are a metonym in themselves, referring as they do to a whole financial industry.

**Synecdoche**

In language, when we speak of a part of something but mean the whole thing, we are using a synecdoche. For example, if we say we want to “count heads,” we really are counting people. If a sea captain says, “All hands on deck,” he really wants to see whole people appear.

We can reverse the whole and the part, too. If we say “America,” we mean the whole country.

Some theorists do not separate metonymy and synecdoche. Others classify synecdoche as a form of metonymy. Both are special types of association that are used every day by those in the media.

Figure 3, the “Spoonbridge and Cherry” sculpture at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, often is used to stand in for the city itself.

In film and television, a close-up could be considered a type of synecdoche. Photographers also look for synecdoches when they follow the dictum, “Shoot the hands” (Figure 4).
We think about what we don’t know in terms of what we know using analogies. We are familiar with two forms of analogy used in language:

- **A metaphor suggests two things are equal**: *My class is a millstone around my neck.*
- **A simile suggests that two things are similar**: *My class is like an asylum.*

Visual metaphors work much the same way. Comic books are full of visual metaphors, such Figure 5, a panel from *Superman Comics No. 1*. The super child lifts a chair with one hand, a metaphor for strength, and of course, Superman is more powerful than a locomotive.

Figure 6, frames from a scene in the movie *Ghost* (1990) provides an example from film. When a director pairs up consecutive shots and suggests a comparison, the result is a visual metaphor. In the scene from *Ghost*, Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze model clay on a potter’s wheel, a clear metaphor for sexual fondling. Later when they move on to the real thing, many of the hand movements are repeated.
As with spoken or written metaphors, the viewers are allowed to draw their own conclusions about the comparison. Visual metaphors are standard practice in advertising. Figure 7, an ad for Samsung, implies that taking a self-portrait with one of their phones is like having a little photographer on the end of your arm. This would be difficult to express in words, and a lot less attractive to the eye.

**Transference**

Visual metaphors also involve transference, evoking the thought that the product is like something and thus shares that something’s values and qualities. Celebrities or prominent people often appear in advertisements with the hope that the person’s personal qualities will transfer to the product.

Advertisers seek to make their products stand out, and one way to do this is to associate the product with a set of social values. A “celebrity spokesperson” becomes a distinct signifier for the product. The ad for Rolex watches uses the image of the Rev. Martin Luther King wearing a Rolex watch, someone instantly recognizable to Americans. His image is right next to the Rolex logo. Dr. King signifies truth, justice and integrity, as well as “greatness.” The Rolex logo and the watch on Dr. King’s wrist signifies the expensive timepiece. The juxtaposition links the two signifiers. The viewer is expected to transfer the qualities signified the civil rights leader, substituting one signified for another. This new metaphorical sign — Rolex watches are like Dr. Martin Luther King — implies the meaning that the watches entail greatness, as well as other qualities.

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**FIGURE 7** An ad for a Samsung camera. The tagline says, “Easy self-portrait with Samsung dual LCD PL 100.”

**FIGURE 8** Metonymy or metaphor? Rolex and Dr. King.
Irony

An ironic sign seems to signify one thing but we know it signifies something very different, often the opposite of what it says. In Figure 9, far left, Volkswagen is saying its cars are so well made, its “lemon” with minor defects isn’t really a lemon.

Understatement and overstatement also are used in irony. In the TAG ad, exaggeration is used ironically.

Irony can be difficult to identify, especially by the “ironically challenged” who “just don’t get it.”

Because tropes involve the non-literal substitution of a new signified for a more literal one, we must be able to understand the difference between what is said and what is meant. But ironic signs might be seen as literal if the ironic cues are not apparent. An ironic statement is not the same as a lie because truth is not the intention. Irony sometimes is known as “double coded.”
### Semiotic basics — 7

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### The master tropes

The American literary theorist Kenneth Burke identified metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony as the four “master tropes,” from which all other tropes can be derived. As with other theories and ideas about visual communication, the dividing lines between master tropes are not as solid as the chart might suggest. Burke warns us that “not only does the dividing line between the figurative and literal usages shift, but also the four tropes shade into one another. Give a man but one of them, tell him to exploit its possibilities, and if he is thorough in doing so, he will come upon the other three.”

The first page of this chapter showed a movie trope, that of a bartender wiping a glass. Such tropes are useful for keeping a movie narrative going; the director doesn’t have to stop and tell you that the person is a bartender.

But such tropes often devolve into stereotypes, images such as these about the rural poor that steer us into narrow-minded thinking about people. Stuart Hall says that stereotypes are “a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, of what they can do, what are the possibilities in life, what are the natures of the constraints on them.”

FIGURE 11 ▲ TOP LEFT Dorthea Lange’s pictures of farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl became classic images of rural poverty. FIGURE 12 ▲ TOP RIGHT Lange’s images influenced set design and costuming for the movie The Grapes of Wrath (1940). FIGURE 13 ▲ LEFT Stereotypes often become most obvious to us in parodies, such as television’s The Beverly Hillbillies (1962-71).
Displacement and condensation

Sigmund Freud defined the term displacement:

Displacement is an unconscious defense mechanism: The mind substitutes ideas or objects for thoughts considered dangerous or unacceptable.

In the world of visual communication, displacement has become a technique where the communicator substitutes something in an image for something else that cannot be displayed, often because it is sexual in nature.

Condensation refers to the way we combine signs to come up with new meanings.

The French theorist Jacques Lacan argued that the subconscious has the structure of a language embedded in it, linking displacement to the function of metonymy and condensation to that of metaphor.

The most common use of displacement in advertising is the phallic symbol. The ad for Viagra (Figure 10) cannot show the man’s erection, so a candle and a building in the background serve as a substitute. The advertiser is relying on us to make the subconscious connection.

In the DKNY ad (Figure 11), displacement and condensation are at work. The rounded forms of the perfume bottles are arranged to suggest a woman’s breasts. The poses of the man and the woman suggest intimacy, and the apple is the classic symbol of female temptation, suggesting the Adam and Eve story of Genesis. We put these signifiers together to create a new signifier.
A pun is a figure of speech that exploits homonyms, words that sound the same and often are spelled the same but have different meanings: What’s black and white and read (red) all over? The pianist and raconteur Oscar Levant once said, “A pun is the lowest form of humor — when you don’t think of it first.”

Visual puns add elements that play off words or have a double meaning in and of themselves. In Figure 12, Orbit makes the point that its gum will brighten your teeth to the point of incandescence. The arrangement of the lightbulbs serves as a visual pun for human teeth.

Figure 13 is an ad by the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression. It uses an arrangement of camera and recording gear to suggest an assault rifle, with the tagline “Information is ammunition.”
Visual clichés

A visual cliché is just an overused trope. Paul Parsons, dean of the school of communication at Elon, wrote after the 2008 stock market crash, “The hand to the head is a visual image of surprise or distress, and we’ve seen a lot of those photos from Wall Street lately.”

The hand-to-the-head stock-trader photo once seemed fresh, but as these images from 2008 suggest, it has become an image gone stale, a visual cliché.