

Love is Conflict

Love is Conflict - An Analysis of Visual Artifacts as They Relate to Love and Conflict in the Context of Semiotic and Memetic Interpretation.

Keywords to Consider: Love, Conflict, Sign, Longevity, Fecundity and Fidelity.

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Love is a passionate affection for another human being, or a deep and profound attachment to another human being. Conflict is defined as the opposite – an incompatibility. It can be argued that love is conflict. Looking at this concept through visual artifacts, as a part of the larger cultural framework can be best analyzed through the use of semiotics and memetics.

Semiotics is essentially the theory that language is a system of signs, as believed by Ferdinand de Saussure (Stokes 165). It is his belief that abstract signs signify a more comprehensive concept – when presented with an image or symbol it informs the viewer of a concept in relation to image. Therefore, it can be said that signs act as a form of communication. Communication is information transmitted through varying mediums, including writing, speaking and imagery. It can further be suggested that the effect of the sign, within the context of semiotics, can be determined by the successfulness of the same image when analyzed as a meme.

The theory of memetics, suggests that visual artifacts are cultural ideas that are communicated from person to person (LaPointe par. 7). There are three qualities that determine the successfulness of a meme – longevity, fecundity and fidelity. Longevity is the ability of the meme to survive over a long period of time. The ability for a meme to reproduce itself is described as fecundity. Fidelity is the visual simplicity of the meme and the consistency of the meme to remain similar to the original as it reproduced. Based on the theory that language is a system of signs it can be argued that memes are closely related to semiotics. However, the concept of the meme differs from the theory of semiotics as memes analyze the effectiveness of the communication taking place rather than what is being communicated. For the sign to be effective it must also work as a meme – it must possess longevity, fecundity and fidelity. Therefore, the effectiveness of a visual artifact as a sign is dependent on the success of the sign as a meme. This is best represented visually as seen in the chart below (Figure 1).

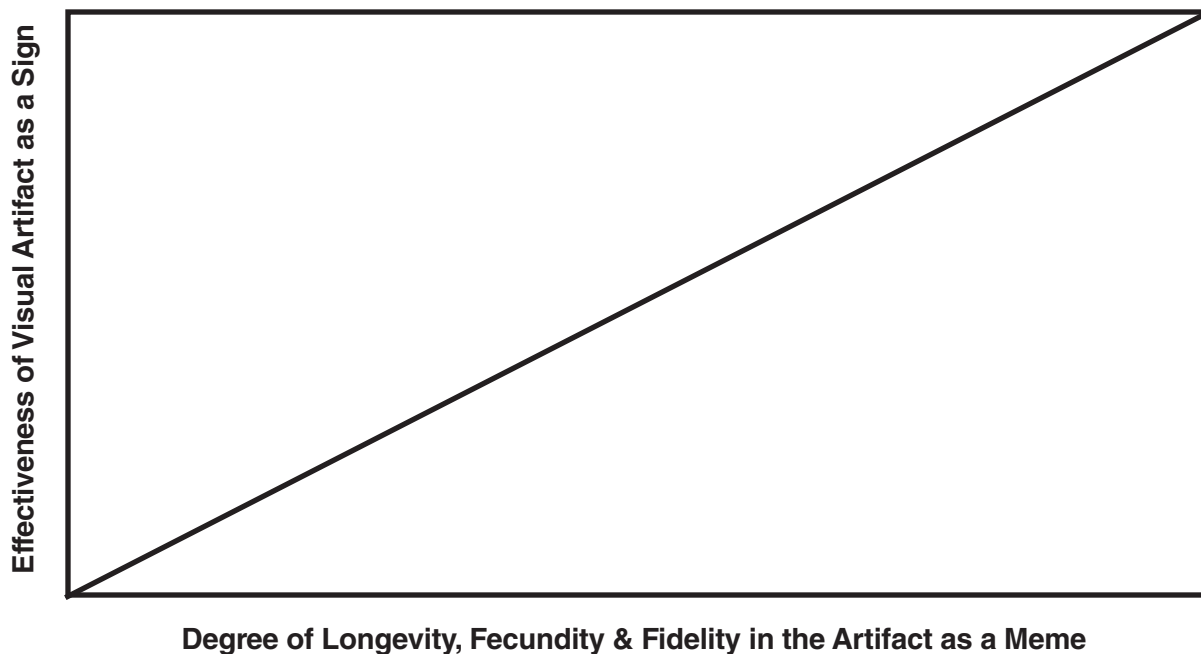


Figure 1. The effect of a Visual Artifact as a Meme on the Effectiveness of it as a Sign

There are three visual artifacts that best illustrate the concept of love being conflict. The first is the symbol of the heart (Figure 2), a very common and familiar visual artifact that is widely used. The second visual artifact is the three of swords in a deck of tarot cards (Figure 3). Finally, the third artifact that visually depicts this concept is the image of a heart with an arrow through it (Figure 4) – more specifically Cupid's arrow.

The common symbol to represent the human heart (Figure 2) dates back over 26,000 years to primitive cave paintings throughout France. Interestingly, the tiny red symbol most people in the world are familiar with is painted in the centre of the animals in the cave paintings, indicating the broader understanding of the importance and purpose of the heart. The commonly known symbolic representation of the heart was actually created by the number two facing itself. The number two indicates duality and can further be interpreted to mean two people (Webster 24).

Although the heart has many different contexts throughout many different periods of time, the broader meaning can be simplified down to passion, sexuality, sympathy and love (Webster 25). In regards to semiotic analysis, the heart becomes a signifier. The colour red often represents the colour of blood; which is related to passion and vital energy (Webster 26). Blood uniting between two people often represents a significant bond (Webster 27). The shape of the heart – each half facing each other also indicates a duality of two energies coming together. The visual signifiers in the heart signify the concept of love. Love becomes the signified in the semiotic relationship between the symbol and the concept in which it represents. Therefore, it can be determined that the heart is a sign for love.

The effectiveness of the heart as a sign is directly dependent on the success of the heart as a meme. The three qualities a visual artifact possesses, which make it a successful meme, are longevity, fecundity and fidelity. The heart encompasses all three qualities. As stated earlier, the symbol for the heart dates back over 26,000 years when it was originally used in primitive cave painting (Webster 24). Because of the age of the symbol and the ability to recognize its function and greater meaning throughout time, it possesses longevity. The heart is fecund because it has been reproduced for over 26,000 years and more recently as emoticons on the Internet. It is sometimes difficult to express emotions towards another being so the heart has long been used to replace the words in which it represents. The most interesting thing about the heart is the amount of fidelity it has. Although symbolically it was designed to represent the heart as an organ it took on a variety of powerful functions and interpretations throughout the course of time

Love and conflict are major themes in life and it is important to consider visual artifacts that directly relate to major themes in life. An important visual artifact that expresses these themes, although less common and accepted, are tarot cards. Tarot cards are representative of the journey that is life. Each card holds a meaning about the outcomes, opportunities or difficulties a person will experience in the course of their life. Although less common than the heart, the three of swords (Figure 3) is one of the more recognized and possibly dreaded cards in a tarot deck (Donaldson 3).

The three of swords is a simple depiction of a red heart with three swords pierced through it. When considered in terms of semiotics, the heart and the swords both act as signifiers. As earlier indicated, the heart signifies the concept of love. The heart as a sign remains unchanged even though placed in an alternate context. However, because the swords are introduced they also become a signifier. Swords have traditionally symbolized war, fighting, attack and conflict. Their placement through a sign that represents the concept of love indicates a new concept. The new concept is conflict which acts as the signified. As indicated in Principles of Tarot the three of

swords represents heartbreak (Donaldson 98). It can also mean a love triangle. Both heartbreak and love triangles indicate conflict within the context of love. One is conflict between two people – as one or both are experiencing pain caused by love, and the other is conflict between three people – pain and decision between love for two different people. Interestingly, although the card has two alternate meanings that can have very different contextual circumstances, the signified meaning remains the same – conflict.

Analyzing the three of swords as a meme will provide an indication of its success as a sign in the larger cultural framework. As a meme the card has longevity, as tarot cards date back as far as fourteenth century Italy (Donaldson 1). The cards were traditionally used as a card game, but eventually their religious themes and mythical symbols evolved their usage as teachings and the process of life. Tarot cards are fecund as they rely on methods of reproduction. They began as hand painted decks for nobleman, but as the printing press developed they were printed and therefore mass-produced. Modern tarot decks have a variety of themes and styles and are produced and sold in hundreds of stores. They are becoming a recognizable activity in new age culture. Fidelity weakens tarot cards as a meme as they are often complex illustrations of similar ideas. Although they are easily reproduced, they are difficult to copy and pass along while staying true to their original form.

The final visual artifact that leads way for analysis on the theme of love and conflict in terms of signs and memes is the heart with an arrow through it (Figure 4). Historically this symbol was developed to represent Cupid's arrow penetrating a heart. In Roman mythology Cupid was the son of Venus and Mars – he was the god of erotic love and passion (Honour and Fleming 630). Popular cultural references show Cupid shooting his arrow to inspire romantic and erotic love; often he is associated with Valentine's Day. This reference is further simplified to the heart with an arrow through it.

In the framework of semiotics the heart with an arrow through it can be determined to be a sign. Maintaining the use of the heart as sign to indicate the concept of love, another element – the arrow – is implemented. Like the swords in the tarot card, the arrow also acts as a signifier. The arrow traditionally represents war, action and conflict. Therefore in the context of the heart and arrow as a visual artifact, the signified becomes an incident or conflict in regards to love. However, because of the influence of popular culture, an arrow with a heart through it actually signifies the concept of falling in love or being in love (Eisenbraun par. 1). Although popular culture has a profound effect on the perceived signified concept of the heart with an arrow, the history behind the reasoning of that perception remains supportive of the sign indicating the concept of conflict within love. In Roman mythology, Cupid's mother, Venus, asks Cupid to shoot the Princess Psyche with an arrow when she becomes jealous of her. He actually ends up scratching himself with the arrow and falls in love with Psyche. The series of events relating to the actions of Cupid's arrows develop the initial incident, or conflict in the story (Honour and Fleming 630). Therefore, within the context of historical mythology involving the heart and arrow the signified can still be determined to be conflict in relation to love.

The effectiveness of the heart with an arrow through it as a sign is determined by using the memetic strategy of analysis. This sign is effective, because it possesses longevity, fecundity and fidelity – similar to the previously discussed visual artifacts. The meme of the heart with an arrow through it has longevity as it was developed based on the story of Cupid and Psyche. These date back to sixteenth century Roman mythology (Honour and Fleming 630). It is fecund in the same essence that the heart as a meme is fecund. It has been made into a commonly used graphic

symbol on clip art and has been a mass-produced symbolic reference to Valentine's Day. Furthermore, the heart with an arrow through it has fidelity because it is simple to stay true to the original due to its simple graphic shapes. Its fidelity is interesting in the fact that it was developed to represent the human heart but bares no realistic resemblance to the heart as an organ (Webster 26). The arrow has also been overly simplified to increase its fidelity. It can be reduced down to the essence of an arrow – a straight line with a triangle on the end.

Love is conflict. This theory is expressed through the analysis of visual artifacts as they fit in the larger cultural framework. Semiotic and memetic analysis provide a supportive argument for the visual artifacts that represent this concept. As previously analyzed, the heart (Figure 2), the three of swords (Figure 3) and a heart with an arrow through it (Figure 4) all support this concept.



Figure 2. Unknown artist. "Heart." Digital. December, 2010.

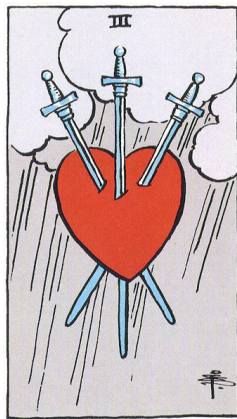


Figure 3. Rider-Waite. "Three of Swords." Illustration. December, 2010.



Figure 4. Unknown artist. "Heart With an Arrow Through it." Digital. December, 2010.

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