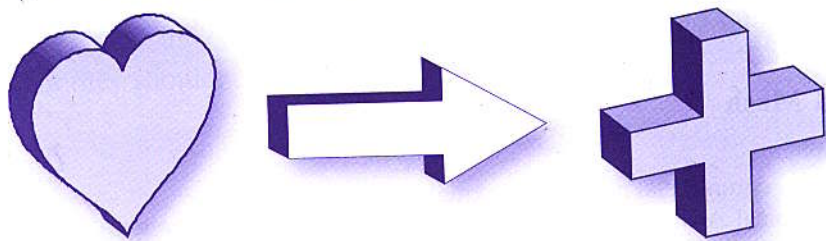


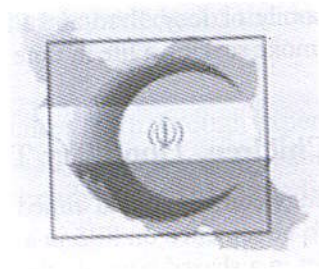
Put simply a code is a system of signs or symbols which are used to communicate meaning. Audiences learn these media codes and the rules for using them through experience. A code can be as simple as a colour, think about what the word blue might represent, or as complex as the rules for a computer simulation game. Sounds are often used as codes. In most schools, for example, a bell will sound to signify the end of class. Even if it doesn't happen in your school, your experience of it through watching television and film texts about schools allows you to read the meaning of this code when you hear it. Some codes are simple constructions and easy to understand like these:



Most codes, particularly the simple ones, have a range of different meanings depending on the audience and purpose of the text in which they are used. Think about all the possible meanings of the codes illustrated above.

Media codes are often complex, they may combine a range of simple codes or they may rely on complex knowledge of a media text, genre, society, or the situation in which they are being used in order to decode their meaning. When Buffy attacks a vampire with a wooden stake the audience does not need to be told why, our knowledge of how to kill vampires is extensive, we learned it from TV and film, we understand the code.

こんにちは



Each of the above is a representation made up of a range of different codes. Try to identify as many of these codes as you can. What is the meaning or meanings of each representation?

Every media text uses codes and conventions to create meaning

You are reading media codes right now. Nelson VCE Media is constructed using many different media codes and conventions. To use this text you first had to learn how to read English, a complex code in itself. Many years of using them has taught you how a textbook is laid out and how to find meaning in them; you understand the codes and conventions particular to each book genre. Finally, this book contains examples of media texts from other media forms. Each one is also a complex code which made perfect sense in its original context but which, when included in this book,

may have a very different meaning. The codes the original producer of the text embedded in that text's construction are now being used for an entirely different purpose.

What is a media convention?

Conventions are patterns of construction that are common to each medium or type of media product. Conventions are found in every aspect of media productions. They provide a framework for the construction of media texts and allow an audience to understand the general structure of text types. In television advertising, for example, we know that a product name, motto and logo will feature prominently, usually at the end of an advertisement. This convention is understood by the producers of advertisements and by audiences. If we are interested in a product we know to pay particular attention to the last few seconds of the

advertisement. Even if you only catch the words 'Oh what a feeling' you know that you have consumed an ad for Toyota.

Like codes, media conventions are a shortcut to meaning. When a character gets into a car and starts the engine at the end of a scene the audience expect to see that character in a different place in a later scene. It is a convention of film and TV that time can be manipulated in this way.

Codes and conventions construct meanings

Media codes and conventions are used to represent people, places, events, ideas, products and values. Like much of the media, codes and conventions seem natural, so logical that you are probably wondering why they are worth studying, after all they are easy for anyone around the world to understand, right? Wrong. Media codes and conventions are like the language we speak, they are a product of the culture in which a media text is created. They are constructions.

It is possible to **deconstruct** the codes and conventions that make up a representation to determine the meaning of that representation and the social values upon which it is based.

Media students identify three types of codes that may be used to construct representations that convey meanings in media products:

Technical codes include camera techniques, framing, depth of field, lighting, exposure, layout and sound design.

Symbolic codes refer to objects, setting, body language, clothing and colour which are used to represent something else.

Written codes include all aspects of text including headlines, captions, speech bubbles and language style.

Each of these types of codes might be expressed using vision, sound or print. The signs and rules that construct media codes are expressed through a range of media conventions.

Examples of **codes** include:

- The use of colours, red for example, as a symbol for emotion;
- Camera angles and framing used to indicate the relative power between characters;

- Props to represent personality types. Glasses, for example, may be used as a code to represent a nerd;
- Sound effects such as screeching tyres to represent that a driver is in a hurry;
- The selection of fonts. Courier New evokes a funky yet traditional typewriter feel, **Broadway** suggests show biz when used in a representation.

Examples of **conventions** include:

- The foreshortening of time in a TV program so that the narrative is introduced, developed and resolved in 50 minutes;
- The use of cliffhanger endings in a soap opera;
- Bold text and a large font in a newspaper headline to indicate the importance of a story;
- Underlining hyperlinks on a web page;
- A radio personality farewelling an audience with 'Goodnight and see you tomorrow' as a tool for constructing a representation of a personal relationship with the audience.

The meaning of media codes and conventions will usually be dependent on the media form, genre, text and style of a product. Consider the use of black and white in the following image.



Greg Fiske

Black and white photographic images can represent a range of different ideas. This technique could be used as a code for classiness, to represent an image as art or it may be used to represent the subject as serious or to evoke times past.

The construction of representations in different media forms

Each media form and the texts within that form represent reality differently because of the ways they are constructed.

Media representations may be analysed in terms of:

Vision what we see;

Sound what we hear;

Print what we read;

Association the meanings we bring to what we see, hear and read.

Visual representations

Visual representations encompass still and moving images. Perhaps the easiest forms of representation to analyse are those contained in a single image, the photograph. Without movement and text photographic representation is pared down to the elements of visual construction. The addition of text adds another layer of

representation and therefore possible meanings through the choice of the words themselves together with the selection, colour and placement of fonts.

Moving images combine all the elements present in a still image with a selection from the many forms of movement to suggest meaning. The way a moving image is constructed is part of the representation of a subject. Is the movement fluid or stilted, fast or slow, conveyed through one continuous shot or the editing together of a number of shots? Is the subject moving or is it the camera that moves? Each element of an image's construction is one of the building blocks that construct representation.

Technical codes

Technical media codes refer to the elements of construction of a media form. By selecting a camera angle for example, a photographer or videographer codifies the way in which the subject is represented. A high angle shot represents a subject as insignificant and weak. Conversely, a low angle shot represents a subject

as powerful. The use of lighting, tone and focus are also aspects a photographer must take into account when constructing a representation.

For more on how technical codes construct meaning in media products see the production sections at the end of this book.

What do the technical codes of construction reveal about this photographer's view of her subject?

Chloe Linton Smith



Symbolic codes of representation

A character will not meet the gaze of another. A femme fatale slowly lights a cigarette. A wave washes onto a beach. A crucifix hangs above a character's bed. An SMS message in capital letters is sent. A tear slowly courses down the face of a character in a manga comic book. A candle is extinguished. Wind whistles in the trees. The sun rises. A croissant and coffee sit on a table. Fireworks erupt in the sky.

Each of the above is a symbolic code used to represent an idea, action, feeling, character, time or place. Every one of these codes has many symbolic meanings. Who decides what a symbol means in a media text? The audience. Try to identify as many different representations as you can for the codes above. Can you come up with more than 40?

Activity 2.10**Symbolic fun**

Choose one or more of the symbolic codes above and write a script that uses the code to represent something – a person, idea, place, event or feeling. Read your script to your classmates. Can they identify the meaning of your symbolism?

Colour as a symbolic code

Colour is to our eyes what music is to our ears. Colours evoke feelings and represent ideas. They are the building blocks of media representation and one of the easiest symbolic codes to analyse.

There are many rules for what colour represents in media texts and generally these rules are consistent between texts. As with all media codes though, rules may be broken and colours can represent different things in different cultures.

Black can be powerful, elegant, depressing, mournful and heavy but in the right circumstances it may be sophisticated or mysterious. Black may represent death or the dark side or it can stand for wealth and privilege. Black is often used to indicate contrast.

White in western cultures represents simplicity, cleanliness, purity, youth and innocence. Angels wear white as do virgins, brides, babies and the medical profession. A doctor or nurse dressed in white can be trusted. A fade to white may represent an ascent to heaven or the beginning of a dream sequence. In print white text on a coloured background is expensive and difficult to produce and has therefore traditionally been reserved for representations of extremity.

Grey usually represents neutrality or conservatism. It may represent boredom, practicality, security or reliability. A grey suit may represent a dull or unimaginative character. In black and white photography, however, grey as one of a range of tones between black and white may mean something quite different. In this case it is not the colour grey that represents something but the range of tones in an image that gives meaning.

Red is a passionate colour; it is the colour of fire and blood and may represent energy, aggression, temper, war, danger, strength, power or

determination as well as desire, and love. An emotionally intense colour, red also represents courage. It is a colour found in many national flags. The range of reds include soft reds, brownish reds, dark reds and pinkish reds, each evokes its own range of meanings.

Blue is the colour of the sky and sea. It symbolises trust, loyalty, wisdom, confidence, intelligence, faith, truth, and heaven. Blue can represent tranquillity and sincerity. It may be used to represent that which is not passionate. Blue is associated with technological development; hypertext is often blue. Blue is a masculine colour. Superman's costume is blue. Because there is no naturally occurring blue food, blue is rarely used to represent foods.

Yellow is the colour of sunshine. It is associated with joy, happiness, optimism, and energy. Generally yellow is used to represent bright and cheerful feelings or childhood although it can also represent cowardice or sickness.

Green is the colour of nature, it represents growth, harmony, freshness, and fertility. Green indicates safety. Green can be used to represent money. Negative representations with which green is associated include inexperience, greed and jealousy. In recent years the word green, as well as the colour, has come to represent concern for the environment.

Secondary colours often combine the characteristics of the primary colours from which they derive but over time also come to represent ideas of their own. Think of the different meanings of gold, purple, orange and beige.

Activity 2.11

Colour codes in media texts

Make a collection of media texts where colour is used symbolically in a range of different media forms: print, photography, television, film and multimedia.

Think about the use of colour in these texts, how do they signify meaning? Don't forget that the way colours are used to represent meanings may change according to the target audience and purpose of each text.

Prepare an illustrated oral presentation, poster or essay that analyses the symbolic use of colour in the texts you have collected.

Activity 2.12

Love is in the air

It is likely that you are working on this part of the Media course in early February. If so it is a wonderful opportunity to study representations of love. At other times of the year you may have to try a little harder to collect resources.

Collect all the St Valentines Day material and any other representations of love you can find: television advertising, articles and images from newspapers, junk mail, classified advertisements, cards, everything. Photograph shop window displays and posters. Record television specials. Check out the internet.

Use this material to work out the media codes and conventions for expressing love. Look for technical, symbolic and written codes.

Which colours are used?

Are there any colours that are not used? Why do you think this is the case?

What symbols are most used?

Using the material you have collected to create a poster or oral presentation with the title 'Love is'.

Media codes and conventions are culturally specific

In our culture white represents innocence and purity whilst black is used to represent death. In other cultures different colour codes represent these concepts. The conventions involved in the construction of media products are also culturally specific. Log on to the United Nations site in English and Arabic to see these conventions in action. In English the site loads from left to right, in Arabic it loads from right to left. Whilst you are there see if you can find any other culturally specific media codes and conventions.

<http://www.un.org/>

Codes and conventions may be media, genre and text specific

In television and film texts the codes and conventions of representation include genre, style, character types, plot patterns and development, production values, lighting and sound. Television soaps and sitcoms share similar production values but differ in the ways in which they construct their narratives. Films may draw on the subject matter of these texts but differ again in their construction and approach. The codes which tell audiences to laugh, cry or be alarmed alter according to genre. Some codes and conventions are common across media forms, others are very media specific.

Activity 2.13

The Internet in the non English speaking world

To test the idea that media codes and conventions are culturally specific, surf the Web looking for sites that are not in English. Try large multinational companies first, you will see how 'western' (that is culturally familiar) these sites appear no matter what the language. When you feel confident that you can navigate sites that are not in English, try looking for sites that are intended for locals only. You will notice quite quickly that even the conventions of site layout and hyperlinking become very culturally specific. Begin with some of the following:

Coca-cola <http://www.cocacola.com/worldwide/flashIndex1.html>
 Adobe <http://www.adobe.com/>
 Vodafone <http://www.vodafone.com/>
 Disney <http://www.asia.disney.com/>
 Nestle <http://www.nestle.com/>
 Microsoft <http://www.microsoft.com/worldwide/>
 Sony <http://www.sony.net/>

When you are confident try these – what do the representations in these sites tell you about these organisations?
<http://www.au.kddi.com/index.html>
<http://jujubetree.com/aboutus/huaihai.htm>
<http://www.naidunia.com/>
<http://www.hauts-de-seine.net/>
<http://www.civila.com/brasilia/>
<http://www.gsi-niger.com/ecotourisme/>

In television news programs it is conventional for a newsreader to introduce each item, the remainder of the report is constructed with a blend of vision, voiceover and newsreader footage. Audiences are familiar with the way this model constructs meaning and read it as natural, they rarely think of news broadcasts as media constructions developed to represent the news. Try it. Videotape a news broadcast and then watch it with the sound turned down. You will be able to recognise the patterns of construction and content of most items immediately.



Horror conventions in *Scream*

Some conventions are common across most texts in a particular media form. In film, for example, an establishing shot is a convention that conveys location, a close up indicates an increased level of emotion, the sound of unseen footsteps represents danger and music contributes to the meaning of a narrative.

Each genre has its own conventions which the audience reads and responds to through their knowledge of that genre. A vulnerable character in a horror film always screams, in early westerns the good guys were clean shaven and the bad guys wore black scarves, audiences expect martial arts heroes to conquer hundreds of villains in every

fight. The conventions that allow audience familiarity with genre leave it free to interact with those representations that are new or different in a text. For more on genre see chapter 8.

In the case of print texts, media conventions define the genre of the product through, for example, content, layout, style, colour, illustrations and photography, font and paper stock. The conventions of print media can be seen by comparing a daily newspaper with a fashion magazine. Each deals with the same elements of construction yet do so in entirely different ways. Just feeling the paper stock can reveal much about the ways in which print texts represent their subjects. It is unlikely that *The Age* will go glossy, *Cosmopolitan* does not have a sports report and, although both have photographs, the style and purpose of these are very different.

Media codes and conventions can change

Media codes and conventions are not static, they change and develop over time. Some become more complex as audience sophistication increases, others change in line with changes in community values and understanding. The extreme slow motion first used for fights between superheroes in the 1970s to represent the power of these characters developed into 'bullet time' in the 1990s. The meaning and impact of this convention has changed over the years, today everyone knows what slow motion represents and it is an almost unremarkable editing tool.

Characters in feature films of the 1930s were often referred to as 'gay'. In the latter part of the 20th century this term came to stand for a pejorative or humorous representation of homosexuality. These days gay is code for a range of entirely different representations, positive or negative, depending on the audience and purpose of a text. Of course the commercial nature of the media means that if something becomes fashionable then representations of that subject are likely to be positive. This has certainly been the case in media representations of gay characters.

Activity 2.17

Changing times, changing representations

Choose a subject, group or idea for which media representations have changed over the years.

Some suggestions include:

- Men and/or women;
- Children;
- The unemployed;
- Racial inequality;
- The environment;
- Driving under the influence;
- Cigarette smoking.

Find media representations that illustrate changes in the way this group has been represented over time. Conduct some research to find out what society's views were and create a poster or report that illustrates how media representations reflect changing community beliefs.

Media codes and conventions are built on those that have come before, often from earlier technologies. As we read text from left to right it is little surprise that we read screens similarly. Thus it is a convention that important characters are positioned on the left side of the screen looking forward into the future which, for an audience, is represented by the right hand side of the screen. Of course, like all conventions, this one is often broken, particularly for effect, but start looking for the conventions of character placement on screen and you will be surprised by how many there are. Such conventions also explain why very early martial arts films can be difficult to follow. It is not just bad acting and poor subtitling, many were made for audiences who do not have a cultural convention of left to right storytelling and so western audiences found it difficult to follow the flow of the narrative. Modern films are made with a global audience in mind and as most profits are to be found in western markets, it is western conventions that have come to dominate the production conventions of Asian film.

The Sunday Age

THE GAY LIFE 28th March 2004

Television has come out of the closet, with gay characters and contestants appearing in sitcoms, reality shows and soap operas. David Smiedt looks at why it's hip to be fabulous.

A number of factors have coalesced to fuel the mainstream media's appetite for all things fabulous. Not least the fact that gay culture is frequently viewed as more trend-savvy, fashion-forward and rampantly creative than the rather dreary heterosexual one – which, quite frankly, is screaming out for a good zhuzhing.

"In terms of cultural trends, gay has become cool," says Neer Korn, director of social and market research company Heartbeat Trends. "This has coincided with a cultural shift in masculinity where traits once considered effeminate – attention to grooming and dressing well, for example – are now viewed as desirable. And since many gay men have been doing this for years, it makes sense to turn to them for advice and inspiration."

Another significant element has been an attitudinal swing in which homosexuality is not merely tolerated by the younger generations but the idea of anything but equality is laughable. "Increasingly, this is a culture of the individual and people in their teens and 20s want to be [part of] it," says Korn. "But in order for me to have the freedom to express who I am, I need to accept who they are. It's not the shows changing perception but merely reflecting attitude shifts in society. From our research, young people in society cannot understand why there is even a debate about gay rights."

Tim Clucas, head of development, entertainment and acquisitions at Network Ten, concurs. "We are following society's changing attitudes," he says. "We know our audience – that is, people from their teens to their late 30s – and they don't have an issue with homosexuality. For us to make a show that ignored homosexuality would be to go against what our audience view as normal life. It would be unrepresentative of the world they know and counterproductive for us. Our audience work with gay people, go out with gay people and are gay people."

Not only are we seeing more gay men on television, we're seeing beyond the stereotypes. "While you may have the kinds of witty and camp gay men from *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye*," says Marcus O'Donnell, editor of the gay Sydney *Star Observer* newspaper, "you also have *Queer As Folk*, which provides a broader depiction of gay life. In addition to this, there are regular depictions of a wide variety of gay people in the mainstream press and gay issues are now frequently being debated at the highest political levels. We've gone past the situation where the only depiction of gay men you saw on TV was of the limp-wristed Mr Humphries variety from [1970s sitcom] *Are You Being Served?*"



The Gay Divorcee



Are You Being Served?



Buffy

- What emotions are represented in the photographs?
- What emotions or occasions are not represented? Why do you think this is the case?

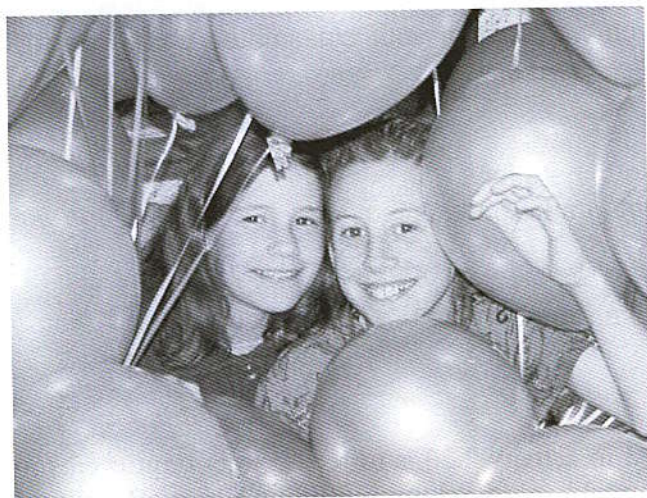
What image does your family project to itself and the world through the representations contained in your family albums?

Select a typical shot from your childhood and the one that is the most unusual. Bring these to school. Pin* all the images on the classroom noticeboard and use them to answer the following:

- What is the most common pose?
- What is the most common location?
- Are there any common colours and props? What are they?
- What do the typical photographs tell us about the way our society likes to represent children?
- What do the unusual photographs reveal about the lives of children in our society?

* Just for fun display the images anonymously. Guess who is represented in each image.

Here are some family snapshots. What can you say about the meaning of these images? What were the photographers trying to represent about these children and their lives?



Photography, representation and meaning

Some basic principles of photographic representation:

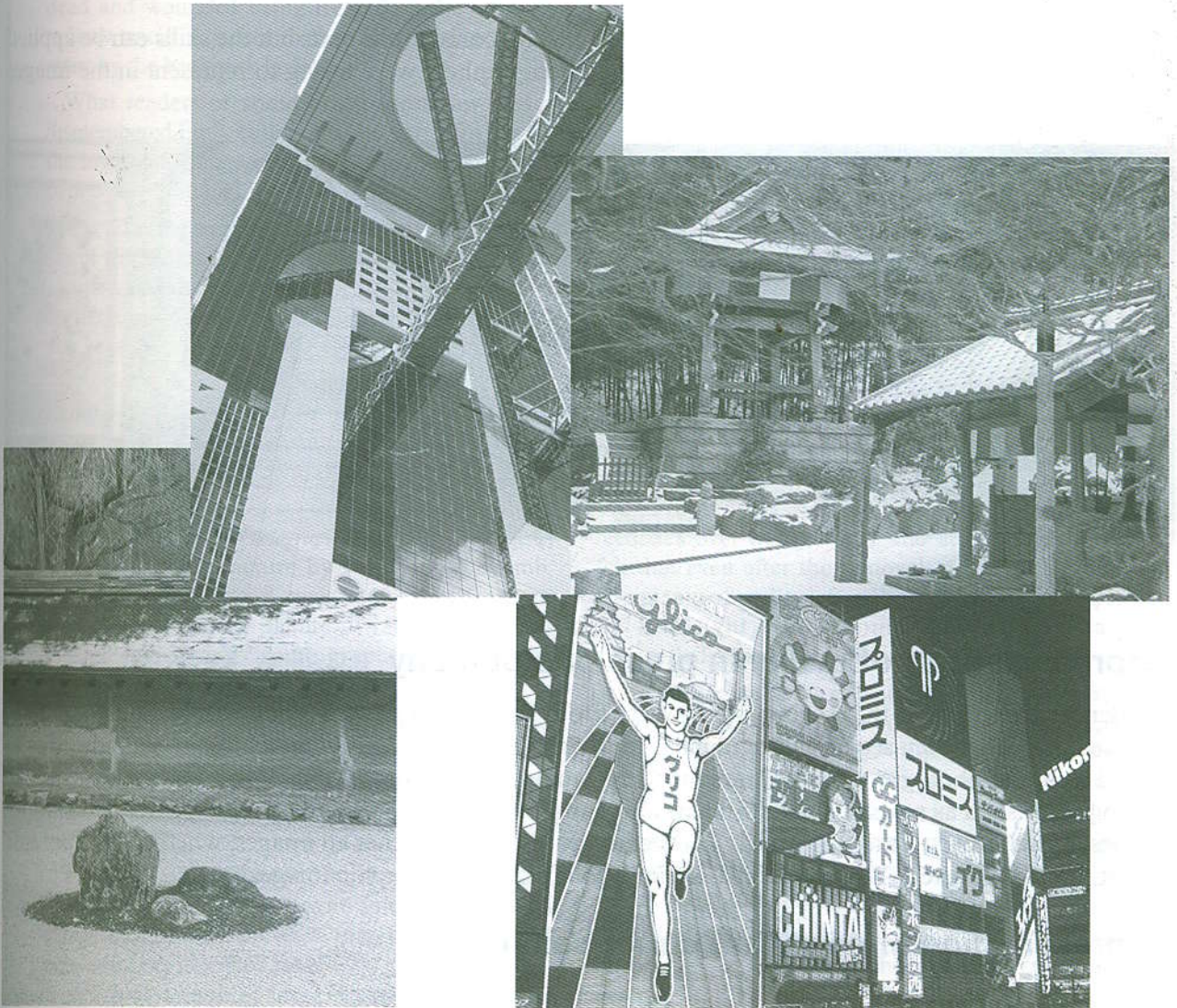
- ✓ No one ever took a photograph of something that they wanted to forget.
- ✓ Human beings prefer order over chaos. Photographs are organised representations of reality.
- ✓ Everything within the frame may be analysed for the role it plays in constructing meaning. This includes the subject, location, other characters, costume, makeup and props.
- ✓ The placement of subjects within a frame reveals much about how the photographer wants to represent them.
- ✓ Camera angles indicate the power of a subject.
- ✓ Light, shade, shadow, contrast, colour, tone, balance and symmetry construct meaning.

The language of visual analysis can be used to identify and analyse the codes and conventions that construct meaning in photographic representations. When analysing photographic images these terms make the process easier. Not all terms are applicable to every photograph but by using them Media students are

able to discuss images knowing that they share a common grasp of the principles of photographic composition. The language of photography deals with compositional elements, technical elements and with the subject matter of the image.

Section 2 contains a detailed explanation of the elements of photographic composition. These elements can be used to deconstruct photographic images.

Photographers join the elements of photographic composition with the symbolic codes and conventions of our culture to construct meaning. This happens at both a conscious and a subconscious level. Analyse the composition of these images. How do the elements of photographic representation construct meaning? What do you think the photographer wanted to say about the subject when composing each shot? These works are part of a photographic essay; how was the photographer trying to represent Japan?



Cropping for meaning

One of the most common techniques photographers use to construct a representation is to crop an image. Cropping involves selecting that part of an image that conveys the message they want an audience to see. This process of selection usually means that the meaning of an image is clearer but occasionally cropping allows photographers to change the meaning of an image altogether.

Representations of reality in press photography

Audiences like to think that seeing is believing. From the earliest days of photography audiences have believed that what they see in photographs is real, that the camera doesn't lie. Before recent advances in digital imaging photographs were thought to be factual records of reality. Even today most forms of photography such as news reportage and family snapshots are still considered to be objective and truthful images, a 'snapshot' of the real world. This belief denies the truth, that all images, whether manipulated or not, are constructed. Why do media organisations alter photographic images?

Representation in news and current affairs

News and current affairs reporting in all media forms including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, the internet and mobile phones is based on the principle of fair and accurate reporting of facts and opinion. News texts are generally thought to represent reality because they report events that have already occurred. Current affairs texts report and comment on both facts and opinions. Journalists and photojournalists are members of The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance and are subject to the Australian Journalists' Code of Ethics.

News and current affairs texts are complex, there are always multiple ways of reporting any news opportunity. How a story, person, event or idea will be represented will depend on answers to the following questions:

THE AUSTRALIAN

18 MAR 2004

Madrid photo too gruesome, say some

By Mark Day

AUSTRALIA'S daily newspaper editors are divided over the most effective way to treat grisly images of death and injury in the wake of the Spanish train bombings.

A key photograph of the terror attack that appeared in most newspapers last Saturday, showed dead and wounded being treated as they lay on railway tracks adjacent to the train carriages torn apart by the backpack bombs.

What readers of some newspapers saw was a dismembered limb, believed to be part of a leg, in the lower left foreground of the picture. In other papers, the limb had been digitally removed.

The differing treatments raise renewed questions about the ethics of digital manipulation of news pictures, and the extent to which readers should be sheltered from the harrowing and harsh realities of war or terror.

The Australian ran the picture, provided by the Reuters agency, on its front page, in full, but not until some of the confronting red bloodiness of the limb had been toned down. It did not acknowledge this change.

Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* also ran it on page 1, but sanitised the picture by removing the limb, replacing it with small rocks replicated from an adjoining part of the picture. It ran a small over-printed line saying "some graphic content was digitally removed from this image".

Brisbane's *The Courier-Mail* ran it across almost a full broadsheet page as the cover of its Inside Mail Saturday review section, with the limb removed, and without any acknowledgement that the image had been altered.

The Melbourne *Herald Sun* ran the picture on page 5, but overlaid another picture into the lower left foreground of the main shot, thereby covering and obscuring the bloodied limb.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran it on page 1, but cropped the image to remove the offending foreground. Adelaide's *The Advertiser* took the same course in running the picture across two pages.

The Age in Melbourne did not use the picture because its editors regarded it as unnecessarily gruesome.

Editors of London's papers faced the same dilemma, and reached similar conclusions. The Guardian took out the colour from the limb, rendering it grey and almost impossible to distinguish; *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* digitally removed it, while The Independent and the Daily Mirror ran it in black and white to avoid the impact of the bloodied flesh in colour.

What was the proper course?

There is a point of view that argues any change to reality is digital tinkering, and should not be permitted. But this ignores the fact that in the days of film, photographers would lighten and darken parts of pictures, increase contrasts or fade sections of images during processing. Thus, images were "doctored" in unacknowledged ways before they were submitted for publication. Cropping can also change the nature of an image, but has always been regarded as acceptable. In a digital world the processes are different, but the results are the same.

The editor of *The Courier-Mail*, David Fagan, says he regards the removal of the limb as "a small change" that did not change the impact or the tone of the picture. "We wanted to use it big, but it was too gruesome for our tastes – and our readers, too. We have had in the past a fair amount of reader feedback over war pictures, and dead bodies. "We felt that even after the removal of the limb, there was plenty of reality left in the picture but, perhaps, in hindsight, we should have added an acknowledgement that we had made changes."

The Australian's editor, Michael Stutchbury, says the picture was "the most compelling photograph of the day", which was "toned down" in the imaging department "so that the reds didn't jump out at you". Stutchbury says he considers this treatment "part of our normal photo processing" procedures, and there have been no complaints from readers about it.

Michael Gawenda, editor-in-chief of *The Age*, says he balked at running a photograph of the limb because "we don't run pictures as graphic as that". He says attempts were made to crop the picture to remove the limb, "but it looked terrible". "There were plenty of other pictures to choose from. We thought the image of all the body bags was a pretty telling shot, so we used that on page 1 instead."



The colour of the body part has been changed to grey, making it less distinguishable



Some newspapers airbrushed the limb completely from the foreground left section of the photo