

# **Visual and Verbal Resources for Evaluative Meaning in Political Cartoons**

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## **Evaluative Meaning: Introduction**

In social semiotics, evaluative meaning arises as an important special case of the Orientational semiotic function. The three general semiotic functions; Presentational, Orientational, and Organizational, correspond to the fact that we always make meanings of these three kinds simultaneously. We construct or construe some presentation (aka representation) of a reality, situation, or state of affairs, real or possible. We also always orient our meaning production (talk, drawing, etc.) to some real or possible addresses and audiences, and in doing so we include some stance or orientation toward the presentational content of our meaning in the context of a system of viewpoints or attitudes and construals of reality available in our community, to us and our addressees and audiences (system of heteroglossia). And finally, we must also always construct our meanings in such a way that each meaningful whole, on each of many levels and scales, is organized by relations among its constituents parts, be they structural units or cohesive threads of semantic continuity. These social semiotic functions generalize Michael Halliday's three general meaning functions (or "meta-functions") for language (Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual respectively).

As we make Orientational meanings, we reveal a stance or orientation toward what we are presenting: we indicate, implicitly or explicitly, to what degree we consider the presented state of affairs certain or uncertain (Warrantability), including true or false as polar extremes; we may also indicate the degree to which we regard the state of affairs as desirable or undesirable (Desirability), important or unimportant (Importance), usual and expected or surprising (Usuality), obligatory or prohibited (Normativity), mysterious or comprehensible (Comprehensibility), and serious or humorous (Humor). These seven semantic categories or Evaluative Dimensions appear to cover all the possible kinds of evaluations which can be made in English and related languages with regard to states or affairs or propositions and proposals. There are other evaluative categories for persons, things, actions, and phenomena, though the latter two overlap substantially with the seven just listed. These seven are mutually independent of one another in principle, though often conflated in practice and in the connotations of particular words in the lexicon.

Evaluative meaning plays a special role in social semiotics. It provides the link between belief and action, i.e. between semiotic representations or meanings and the material processes by which we participate in our local ecosystem. The theory asserts that we must analyze human social systems as ecological-social-semiotic systems, or networks of interdependent processes and practices: ecosocial systems for short. In such systems the flows of matter and energy and information that constitute the system materially depend critically on the meaning-making practices of human participants, individually and collectively,

and particularly on (a) what we imagine to be real and possible, desirable, important, necessary, serious, etc. Our representations mediate our actions, particular in respect of our beliefs about what is and can be (Presentational meaning formations) and our values regarding what must or should be (Orientational evaluative meanings).

For further discussion of these theoretical positions, see the Recommended Readings at the end of this paper.

### **Evaluative Meaning Resources in Language and Visual Representation**

In language there are many lexical and grammatical resources for evaluating propositions (states of affairs) and proposals (possible states of affairs), as well as people, things, actions, and phenomena. These include attitudinal qualifiers (good dog, key proposal), nouns with evaluative connotations (threat vs. promise), verbs of expression (believe vs. know), sentence and process adverbials (hopefully, significantly; possibly, frequently), and modals (could be, should be). Even more interestingly, analysis of connected text or discourse shows that evaluations in one part of the text normally propagate, i.e. bias our interpretation of other parts of the same text. Consistency of evaluative stances also defines and links different discourse formations intertextually, so that we interpret the evaluative force of words in one text in relation to expectations deriving from the evaluative stance of related texts.

In our visual representations, we certainly also have means and conventions by which to indicate how important an element should be seen to be (Salience, or visual Importance), whether an image is to be read realistically or as a fantasy possibility (Warrantability), whether a person is good or bad, acting desirably or undesirably, ways of indicating unusualness, mysteriousness, and humorousness. In specialized genres there are very special conventions for some of these evaluative dimensions (e.g. in scientific graphs "error bars" indicate degree of Warrantability of data points). In simple drawings, we must often rely on intertextual information, i.e. on presumptions of consistency with other visual representations, often accompanied by more explicit verbal evaluations. We will see this in the case of political cartoons.

### **Evaluative Meaning in Multimodal Texts**

I believe that all semiosis is necessarily multimodal semiosis. That is, we always produce material signs that are susceptible of interpretation not just according to linguistic codes or meaning systems, but also according to visual ones or actional ones, etc. And as we make the signs for meanings according to those systems, we almost always also invoke interpretation in terms of verbal semantics as well. We talk about pictures as well as view them; we see and recognize conventions of typeface and font and layout as well as interpret printed words linguistically. Accordingly I believe that all the semiotic resource systems have co-evolved to work in integrated ways with one another, and that

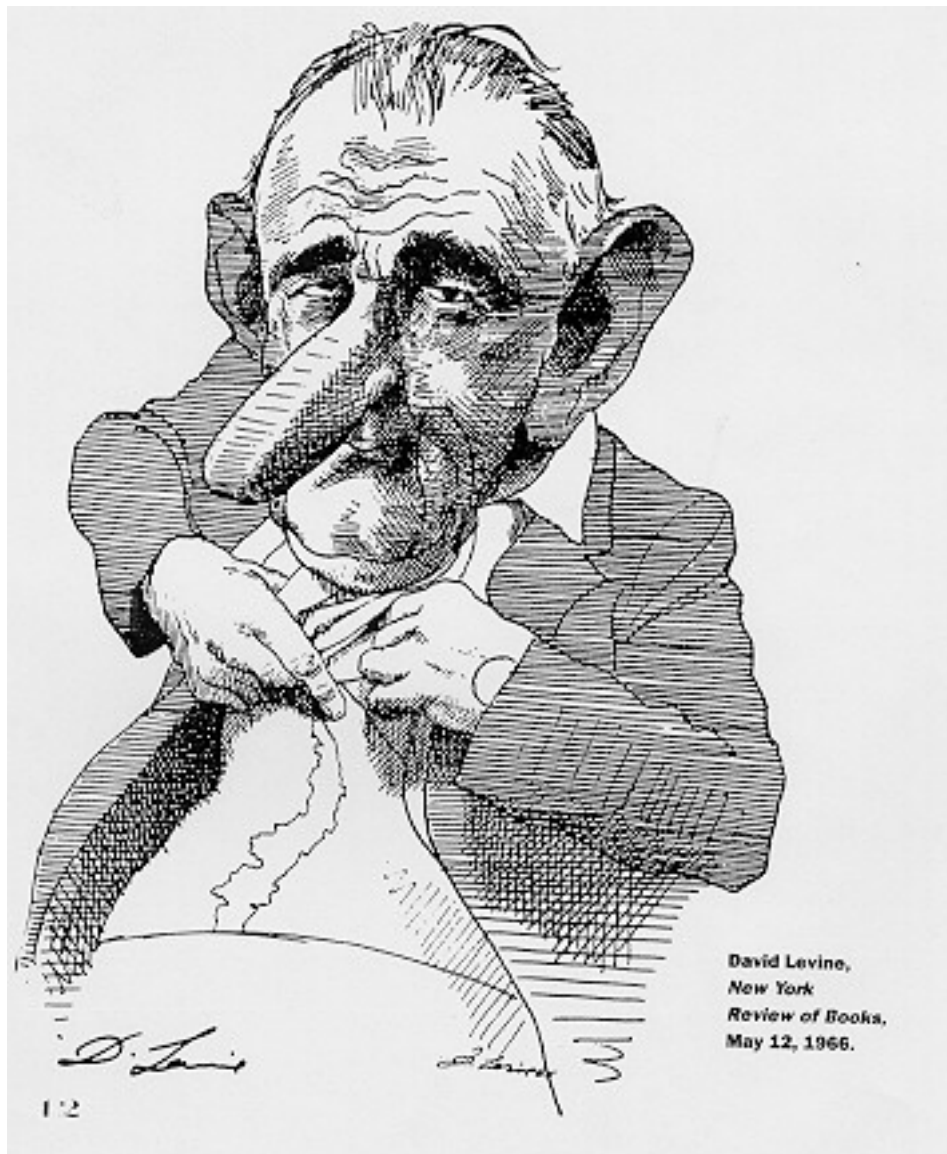
we cannot fully understand any of them until we have looked at how they make meaning together, multimodally, with one another.

I began this multimodal analysis for scientific print publications, where Presentational and Organizational meaning are much more varied and foregrounded than are Orientational meanings. When I focussed on evaluative meanings in newspaper editorials, it occurred to me to extend the analysis to include the related and saliently multimodal genre of editorial or political cartoons. These cartoons generally include verbal meaning units as well as visual ones. I have not examined these cartoons in the context of associated editorials, since for many of them such contexts were not available.

### **The Political Cartoons**

Each of these cartoons is enormously rich in the complexity of its evaluative meanings and the verbal and visual resources mobilized and deployed to construct these meanings. Studying multimodal genres one quickly realizes that the co-production of signs which serve Presentational, Orientational, and Organizational functions all at once means that the expression of each of these meanings strongly influences the expression of the others. Moreover, verbal and visual choices become tightly interdependent, not least because of their unification in the material sign complex itself. There is a strong tendency, both within language, and between language and visual imagery, for there to be 'metaphorical' transfers of meaning from one evaluative dimension (of our principal seven, above) to another. Far from obviating the value of distinct analysis on each dimension and for each general semiotic function, these interactions among dimensions and functions only confirms the usefulness of distinguishing them in principle, if only in order to better understand their combinations in practice.

I reproduce below each of the six political cartoons, together with a brief description. I also assign to each a short reference name, which is used in the next section, where visual and verbal resources for each of the seven evaluative dimensions (Importance, Warrantability, Usuality, Desirability/Inclination, Comprehensibility, Seriousness/Humorousness, and Normativity) are briefly explored with examples from the cartoons.



VIETSCAR. Vietnam Scar.

A view of US President L B Johnson during the Vietnam War showing off to the press a surgical scar (an actual event), but with the shape of the scar changed to resemble an outline map of Vietnam.

Context: Showing off his scar in public was controversial, interpreted either as a sign of his Texas boorishness, compared to his predecessor, the suave John F. Kennedy, or as a sign of his folksy openness. Likewise the Vietnam War was controversial, seen either as a defense of freedom against the falling dominoes of southeast Asian nations threatened by Chinese communism, or as a wasteful and immoral effort to support an unpopular South Vietnamese dictatorship in a civil war with the North (a separation originally created by the U.S. and the former colonial power, France). Vietnam as a scar on Johnson's presidency.



FIRE. Liberty's Fire.

A man climbs a ladder with a bucket of water to put out a fire -- in the torch of the Statue of Liberty.

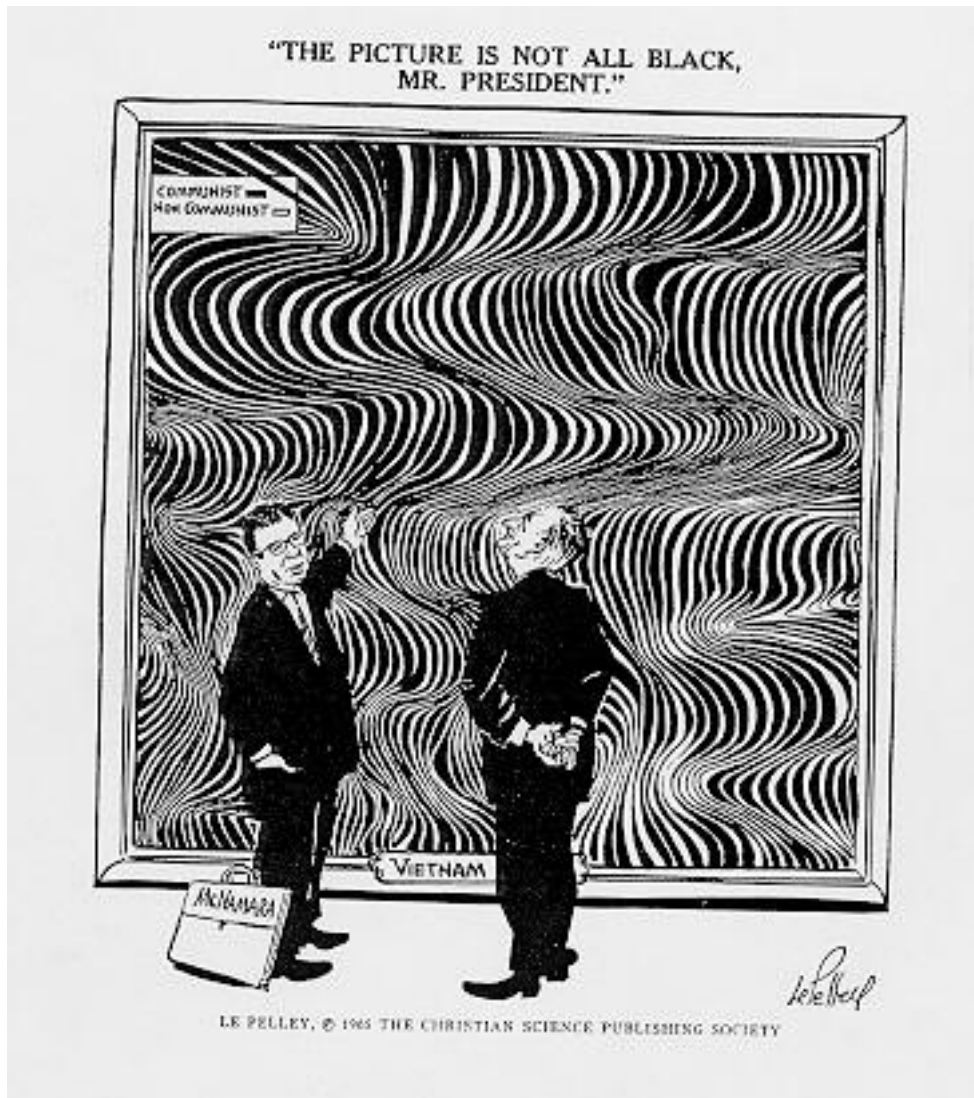
Context: In the days of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the wider hysteria of anti-communism after World War II, many felt that America's liberty was more in danger from the extremist hysteria than from communism itself.



NIXON. Nix-Con. Nixon Standing on the Constitution.

A view of US President R M Nixon during the Watergate Crisis, showing him clutching tape-recordings sought by the courts as evidence against him, while appearing to stand on the U.S. Constitution.

Context: Nixon claimed a right of executive branch privilege in withholding tapes of his conversations with his aides in the White House, but others saw this less as a defense of the constitutional separation of powers and more as a self-serving obstruction of justice. Nixon as walking all over the Constitution.



BLACK. Not All Black.

US President L B Johnson and his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, view a black-and-white, moiré-patterned "map" of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Context: As in the Vietnam-Scar cartoon, the issue was the justification for the Vietnam War, in which there were claims and counter-claims regarding whether most of the country was already held by the pro-communist forces or still held by the anti-communist forces. There is also an allusion to the view that village by village it was impossible to separate communist sympathizers among the people from those opposed to them.

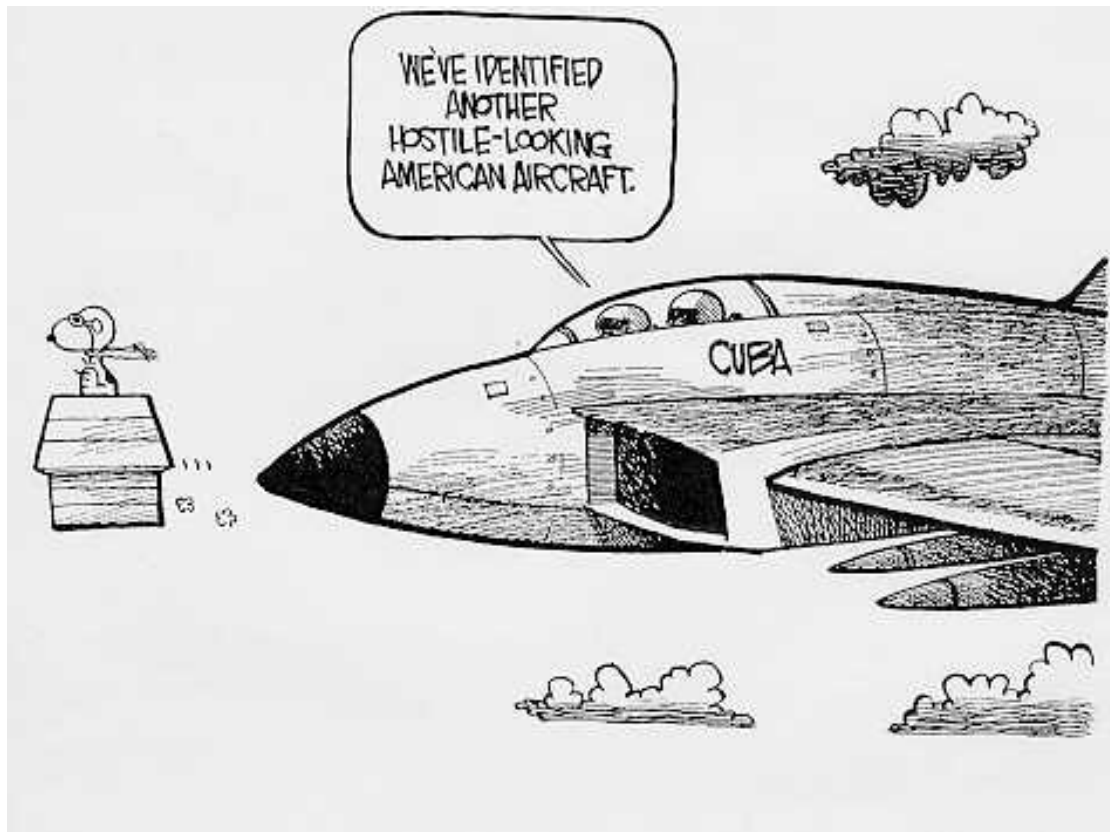


PEACE. Peace Sign.

A view of US President William Clinton presenting Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who are gesturing over one another's heads.

Context: President Clinton was attempting to bring about a peace agreement in the Middle East, but many doubted that the two principals were sincere in seeking peace. The "V" sign with their fingers can indicate a determination for Victory rather than peace, and its position reminds us of children making a sign of "rabbit ears" to jokingly humiliate someone behind their back, a symbolism derived from earlier signs of "horns" for cuckolds (men whose wives were known to be unfaithful).





SNOOPY. Cuba vs. Snoopy.

Popular US children's cartoon character Snoopy, in his persona as a World War I military pilot (of his flying doghouse), pursued by a modern military jet-fighter with two Cuban pilots.

Context: Cuban military aircraft had notoriously pursued civilian private planes based in Florida and suspected of carrying Cubans who might be spies or at least disloyal to the Castro government, or of helping such people escape the Cuban regime.

### **Visual Resources for Evaluative Meaning by Dimension**

The following notes are from the primary analysis of the cartoons and are not meant as final analyses. They are in raw form and offered here for their potential interest to students of these issues. Note that in some cases there is cross-reference to the verbal text in the cartoon, and in other cases there is a more complete multimodal or cross-modal interpretation of their combined meaning effects.

## ***IMPORTANCE***

Importance is indicated generally by visual salience. But this in turn can be realized by many formal features:

Vietnam Scar.

SIZE makes the head, nose, ears prominent. VECTOR to the Vietnam Scar makes it prominent. UNUSUAL feature of shape of scar. Large FRAMING whitespace around the scar.

Liberty's Fire.

SIZE makes the torch prominent, but also DETAIL in relation to the relatively blank but large arm. VECTOR to the torch flame. VERBAL reinforcement of "fire" draws attention to the fire in the torch.

Nix-Con.

SIZE makes the head, nose, eyes, jowls prominent. TOP-LEFT position and TEXTUALITY makes "We the People" prominent. CONTRAST makes the white button stand out against the darker suit. UNUSUALITY makes the tapes noticeable. VECTOR accents the supplicant hand. UNUSUALITY makes the footprints prominent, but as a secondary center of visual interest, only a fair ways into the reading path sequence. The footprints which are thus partly concealed stand out visually through CONTRAST of dark against the lighter background of the Constitution. When the text is read the VERBAL focus on Constitution, and the secondary association of "stand on" to the footprints also reinforces its total prominence and significance.

Note that visual prominence is not completely identifiable with overall semiotic significance or importance, as this example shows. EX.

Note also that diminished prominence can play a role in the semiotic strategy, as here with the footprints. Something of the same sort can be said for the SCAR (vs. greater visual prominence of the Head).

Not all black.

SIZE makes the map prominent, and CONTRAST makes the pattern of the map prominent (black & white). The VERBAL text draws further attention to the pattern. Although the legend is quite small, it plays a key part.

Peace sign.

SIZE (relative to expectation) and TOP-RIGHT position makes the balloon prominent, reinforced by the prominence of TEXTUALITY within the frame. The balance of size and symmetric positioning of the persons gives none of them relative prominence with respect to the other pictorial elements, this also leave the balloon as a main focus of attention. EX. Diminution of the "V sign" visually is balanced by VECTOR to it, UNUSUALITY, and VERBAL indexing.

Cuba-Snoopy.

SIZE makes the plane and the balloon significant, the latter aided by TOP-CENTER position and by TEXTUALITY within the frame. CONTRAST also focuses us on the plane. There is diminution of Snoopy (for PR reasons, but also evaluative in Not-Dangerous, but a prominent VECTOR to him, and his UNUSUALITY. The Verbal link leaves us with an absent referent, which can only index the improbable Snoopy.

### **WARRANTABILITY**

Often in the sense of the skepticism or credence which the producer/image seeks to convey to the viewer regarding some alleged state of affairs.

Viet-Scar.

The pinocchio nose of course, through verbal intertext and perhaps cinema memory of visualized events (themselves mediated in interpretation via language) suggests something may not be believable, something presented by LBJ. What he is presenting here is the scar/Vietnam. There is the usual realistic detail level of the genre, together with its tendency to caricature figures, esp. those presented in symbolic isolation -- but caricature's tendency toward symbolic process ala Theo-Kr is here taken fully in this direction by the replacement of an analytical element, the scar, by its presentational referent, Vietnam. We are not meant to believe that the scar looks like Vietnam, but to believe something about Vietnam being like a scar-attribute for LBJ. And what are we not to believe? perhaps the feigned ingenuousness of LBJ's act of publicly displaying the scar, to seem folksy.

How realistic is the shape of the scar in relation to the map view of Vietnam?

Liberty-Fire.

There is a certain obvious scale-incredibility in the small-gauge ladder reaching to the top of Liberty, so this is to be taken again symbolically. We are both to believe and not believe that there is a Fire: the flame of Liberty's torch is real, and symbolically real as lighting our way to liberty. But we are not to believe that there is a dangerous fire that needs to be put out, and this is signaled by the VERBAL element 'hysteria' labeling the speaker (as Attribute) of the 'Fire!' warning. We are perhaps also not meant to particularly believe that John Doe could put out the fire (though the bucket seems large enough in this perspective - - note again there is a scale-impossibility in the relative sizes as shown of man, ladder, and statue), but to negatively evaluate both the necessity of doing what he thinks should be done (Normativity) and his belief (Warrant for third party assertion).

Nix-Con.

Visually, I think we are meant to believe: that Nixon is holding onto the tapes, that he asks us to trust him (but not that he actually wears such a button, a symbolic attribute), and that he said what is quoted in the caption below. We are also meant to agree with the symbolic presentation that he is trampling on the

Constitution. We are not meant to believe he literally looks as he is shown (caricature genre convention), or that he has actually left footprints on the Constitution as a real document. But the key issue here is whether or not we are to believe that he must indeed stand on his rights and so hold on to the tapes, as shown and stated. Here I believe that the issue of Warranted belief or skepticism attaches not so much to the issue of what he should do (Normativity, as discussed elsewhere), but to the issue of whether we should believe that he is sincere in his stated reasons, i.e. whether we should indeed trust that he is telling us the real reasons why he is holding on to the tapes.

Our skepticism about this is triggered partly by the contradiction of the footprints, so that what he is shown as doing and what he says he is/must do do not agree, and partly by the exaggeration of the Trust Me button and the accompanying open-hand gesture, which form a hyperbole that raises skepticism. The salience of the caricatured face may also work to conjure intertextually the old skepticism: is this a face you would trust? and of course in the era it was often said not to be such, and was perceived by many as the face of a slightly shifty or shady used-car salesman.

Not-all-black.

We are not meant to believe that we see a realistic presentation of the map of Vietnam, not even the military-political situation map. Here again we have a symbolic attribute. So there is a strong overt issue of skepticism raised, since this distortion is not within the usual conventions of the genre. We are mainly not supposed to believe that the metaphorical meaning of 'the picture is not all black' is credible, i.e. that the military situation is somewhat favorable. We do not accept the metaphor because we do accept the literal statement, but not the principle by which it would translate to the metaphoric conclusion: a situation map which is not all black in the sense that there are significant proportions of the territory controlled by 'our' forces (via the legend), which are 'not black', must be one in which there is some strategic advantage conferred by the relations of black and white-controlled zones on the map, or at least some arguability for some favorability in the configuration. But this is clearly a configuration for which no favorability is arguable. There is a very subtle visual effect here topologically (as opposed say to a map where the whole territory was black except for a small enclave around the capital).

Peace-sign.

We are not meant to believe either that N and A actually made the V-sign behind each other's heads on a public occasion, or that they are giving each other the 'peace sign'. But the first disbelief falls under the symbolist convention of the genre: we are to believe that they are belligerent toward one another, perhaps in a childish way. We do not accept the verbal gloss on this action because we see an action which cannot be so interpreted. If there were really giving peace signs to each other, then they would make the signs in a space that was visible to the other, whereas they make the signs in precisely the space which is least visible to one another, while saliently visible to the audience.

Snoopy-Cuba.

In very much parallel spirit to Peace-Sign, we do not take Snoopy's flying doghouse literally because it is within the cartoon world conventions, and here not even directly symbolic-attributive, but a sort of symbolic substitute, transferring its attribute of innocence to the absent (and verbally implied) Florida-Cuban guide-plane. We are more importantly not to believe the gloss on the situation of the Cuban pilot, because of the literal contradictions of 'hostile-looking' (primarily) and 'American aircraft' (it is a doghouse, not an aircraft), which is a bit more ambiguous. The latter contradiction depends on a disjunction between the conventions of the cartoon world of Snoopy and those of the editorial cartoon, and that in turn depends on the difference between the humorous tone of the one and the serious intent of the other.

Note also that the cartoon convention by which Snoopy and his doghouse become recognizable as a fighter plane depends on the verbal-visual pun on 'dogfight' as both an aerial battle (Snoopy vs the Red Baron) and fighting as fiercely as two dogs, or in this case, one dog. Visually, Snoopy wears the aviator scarf and leather cap of the WW1 fighter aces, and his doghouse is given cartoon convention marks for motion (three hashmarks) and propulsion (a micro-contrail as if from a put-put combustion engine, very small and low-tech; two smoke-puffs).

### ***USUALITY***

General Note:

There seem to be at least three ways in which Usual/Unusual is signalled visually. One of these is at the level of the Genre, where violations of genre conventions are marked as Un-Usual. The second is via intertextuality, often verbally mediated, but also purely visual, so that we have expectations about how something is to be depicted that are not necessarily genre-specific. Finally, there is internal marking, which can be achieved by setting up a repeating pattern, so that a particular item is Usual within this pattern, or by setting up such a pattern and then introducing an item that breaks with the pattern and is so marked as Unusual.

Viet-Scar.

The caricature is usual for the G, but the elongation of the nose is perhaps unusual intertextually, even vs. other caricatures. Within the pattern of caricature parts, the scar is Unusual, both in being seen on a revealed abdomen, and in shape or form (intertextually visually not a usual shape of scar). At Genre level as well we have in effect a juxtaposition of two visual genres, the Caricature and the Map. The pointing finger integrates these, being normally position and depicted as finger for the caricature genre, and normal to the Map genre that shows something being pointed to (cf. Not All Black). Since the Caricature genre dominates the display, the Map image is the Unusual feature. What is evaluated here as Unusual are two things: that the scar is revealed, and more so, that it has the shape of a map of Vietnam.

### Fire-Liberty.

Again we have, as in Viet-Scar a juxtaposition in which two different genre conventions come together, though neither dominates. The Statue itself is perhaps highly Usual in its depiction, just as we expect to see it. The Man-on-Ladder, however is Unusual in this context (indeed impossible as shown), and the most unusual feature is the Bucket of Water (as most in contradiction with the discourse of Liberty and its images). The word Fire! is also Unusual, and there is use of an action and verbal convention here to make "Fire!" an indication from the John Q Public point of view that the fire in the torch of Liberty is unusual (the exclamation point) and noteworthy to the point of a warning of danger (which is also unusual here). This is pretty much all intertextually interpretable with relatively little specific genre-based unusuality, or visual pattern breaking.

### Nix-Con.

In Genre terms, the use of the Con as background to the figure is somewhat unusual, esp. as there is really no common genre where figures are presented full-size against documents as background. So it is somewhat G-unusual that Nixon is standing on or in front of the Constitution. The caricature itself is not intertextually unusual in visual terms. Perhaps only the tapes are a novel feature. The button is Usual in portrayals of Nixon, or at least the sentiment expressed. The footprints are Unusual in intertextual visual terms; they are in fact impossible in realistic conventions, since the Con document is not big enough to have footprints all over a part of it. This maximally unusual feature links to the minor unusual placement of the figure on the background of the Con, leading with the hi-angle perspective adopted to the key reading of 'standing on', as in the verbal text caption.

If there is a visual pattern and violation here, in one sense it could be taken to be the repeating lines of text of the Con, which are interrupted visually by the footprint images. This is more salient than the 'interruption' by the Nixon figure since the latter spans the document from first line to last, so there is no interrupting of established vertical patterns of lines of text. There is of course some interrupting of horizontal lines of text, but these are much less prominent and are pretty much totally obscured by the figure down to the point where the footprints appear. Moreover, the place where such interruption would be most salient is weakly patterned horizontally because of the large typeface in the first line for We The People. Indeed one could argue that the pattern of Nixon's hair appears to somewhat adapt to the scale of the horizontal lettering of the text, though this is arguable.

### Not All Black.

In terms of genre convention, the posing of figures against a highly contrast-confusing background is Unusual. Intertextually, a situation map is most Unusual for having this moire pattern on it. In image-internal terms, there are vertical and horizontal 'rhythms'. The vertical pattern scale is broken by the figures of LBJ and McN, and they also break the smaller horizontal pattern scale, but only, for the vertical, in the lower half of the image, though for the horizontal, rather sooner. There is nothing G or itx unusual about the figures or their placement.

They do not so much break the moire pattern as stand outside it, connected by the vectors and by their black-and-white extreme greyscale tonality.

Peace-sign.

The cartoon is very visually normal, except, intertextually, for the single element of the "V" signs from N and A. These have visual itx links of course, but not to the genre of the action scene being depicted. In terms of image-internal visual rhythms, there is only the spatial repetition and parallelism for N and A that is then broken, topologically (and enough to count typologically) by the placement of Clinton, and by the podium breaking the lower-half leg-leg pattern of N and A. One can also note that A's uniform and kefiyah, contrasts as unusual with N and Clinton's business suits.

One could say I suppose that there is also a visual rhythm of the V-signs to embrace the balloon, which interprets these signs. But this is a bit of a stretch and more a compositional device than one to do with usuality.

Snoopy-Cuba.

While this cartoon is not genre usual in itself, it depicts a scene which has an action-genre discrepancy that is very noticeable intertextually. Scenes of fighter chase planes include clouds, and other planes, but not flying doghouses! If, following the vector, we read the visual patterns right-to-left, then there is a major shift of just about all elements between the plane and Snoopy, with perhaps the echoing of the helmet and goggles as the only similarity.

Note that Usuality and Salience/Importance seem highly cooperative in these images in the function of identifying the key element of attention about which comment or interpretation is to be made.

### ***DESIRABILITY, INCLINATION***

General Note: Desirability can be shown in an image in the least mediated way by the depiction of esthetically pleasing vs. esthetically repellent images. It can also of course be intertextually and discursively mediated by cultural beliefs associated with reading of various images.

Viet-Scar.

Imagistically the extreme Caricature of LBJ, esp. of the nose (and to some degree ears) topologically create an unappealing character. Intertextually, having a (large) scar is undesirable, showing it (publicly) is embarrassing, and being reminded of the problem of Vietnam is also undesirable.

Liberty-Fire.

There is a certain visual capturing of the strength and nobility of the statue, even in a small part. By contrast there is an image of undignifiedness and pettiness in the John Doe. The most Undesirable element here is of course that the action be completed and the fire of Liberty doused by the bucket of water, but this undesirability is strictly intertextually and verbally mediated. Absent recognition

of the target, the action could be portrayed as desirable -- except for the label Hysteria, which itself stands somewhat outside the pictorial, if not the visual, semiotic. Were it in a language we could not read, and had we no cultural information about the Statue and its symbolism, or its normal visual condition, we might applaud the act, which is heroic in the normal context of its performance. Note specifically that we do have purely visual intertextual basis for considering the fire in Liberty's torch to be USUAL, though it takes discursive support to consider it also Desirable.

#### Nix-Con.

Again the extreme caricature is somewhat grotesque for Nixon, and the unsightly footprints on the Constitution are ugly and inter-pictorially abnormal, discursively Undesirable. Perhaps the most esthetically beautiful element of the image is the lettering of We the People at top left, perhaps again setting up or reinforcing the sense that Nixon and what he's doing are ugly/undesirable, the Constitution and what it stands for beautiful/desirable.

#### Not All Black.

The portrayals of LBJ and McN are fairly neutral esthetically, schematic realistic, neither especially beautiful or grotesque. The moire pattern is disorienting but has a certain visual fascination and perhaps beauty for the viewer, but the extreme tonal contrast tends to accentuate its disquieting character, and so the net esthetic result, I would have to say is negative. The picture may not be all black, but what it shows is bad enough, undesirable.

#### Peace-Sign.

There is a fairly uniform esthetics to the images here, except for the faces. The dress serves to mark A as Unusual and perhaps belligerent as well as alien, but it is not unesthetic, indeed it may be more so than C and N's. In fact if we take black as more undesirable than lighter colors in the western canon, one could see the business suits as more sinister than the uniform. But the faces are what tell. Clinton's is the least negative, I think. It is closest to smiling, his hair has a boyish-youthful-attractiveness to it, and the fullness of the features seems unthreatening (let me have men about me who are fat). N has the most similar face, but bald, stern, with close-set small eyes, and a rather unfriendly look (note that these are highly topologically mediated effects, very hard to describe). Arafat has the headgear in place of hair, which is medial in effect, he gives us the most direct gaze, almost a glare, and the mouth and facial hair, tend to seem also stern, somehow less intelligent than N, almost a vacant look except for the intensity of the eyes, which is somewhat frightening. So in these terms, C is benign if ineffectual, N is unpleasant but intelligent (in a managerially competent way), and A is sinister or at least unpredictably dangerous.

#### Snoopy-Cuba.

There is a pretty obvious use of tonality here to mark the Cuban plane as dark and negative, the Snoopy doghouse as light and innocent. This is reinforced by size, but vectorial aggressiveness, etc. The tonality comes from the black nosecone, the black square vent, the dark shading, and the dark cloud above. Contrasting we have mostly white for the doghouse and Snoopy, with a lighter



shading, and apart from structural outline, only a tiny pelt-marking in black. There are of course also the many intertextual and inter-pictorial associations that work to make the plane bad and the doghouse good.

### ***COMPREHENSIBILITY***

Visually we can represent comprehensibility of mystery in large part through the degree of visible detail and visible essentials for comprehension. A truncated shot where scene-relevant parts are out of frame brings mystery, as does leaving an image in shadow or darkness where key features cannot be clearly discerned. Images can also exploit a certain pattern of logical relationship to be explanatory, and do so more or less effectively, making them more or less comprehensible. Familiarity is also an element, here, linking Comprehensibility and Usuality.

Viet-Scar.

What are not comprehensible here are the Unusual features. Why is LBJ lifting his shirt to show the scar? this is a pointer to the intertextual information of the historical situation. And why does the scar resemble Vietnam, or why does he have an image of Vietnam tattooed on his stomach? There is mystery here only to the uninitiated.

Liberty-Fire.

There is potential mystery about the giant torch, if the out-of-frame elements are not supplied. With those supplied there is some mystery regarding motivation, but the actual action here is quite comprehensible. We know fairly well what he is doing, just not why.

Nix-Con.

Again we can see clearly what is happening (holding tapes, standing on con) but not why. Here the verbal caption supplies motivation, and sets up the core contradiction over interpretation of what we see and what we read. What is most mysterious at first is how the footprints got on the Con, but this is quickly resolved by visual-actional interpretation, leaving us then with the why?

Not All Black.

Everything here is immediately comprehensible except for the pattern of the map. That is almost totally incomprehensible, apart from the inter-visual to Moire, and the topological analysis about what is unusual compared to normal situation maps. What makes it incomprehensible is the unusuality of a genre feature so radically out of place (Moire to Map).

Peace-Sign.

All is fairly apparent here, apart from a sense of C's attitude to the N-A scene (supplied by the balloon text), except of course the "V" signs and their meaning (also so supplied, unconvincingly, by the balloon). Again, what we see is fairly clear, but WHY is not. There is no great purely visual mystery, though some in terms of the actional scene depicted.

Snoopy-Cuba.

The visual mystery here is what is the relationship of the plane to Snoopy? we have the strong transactive vector of the plane, but no obvious interpretation for it in actional terms -- this is supplied by the balloon text. Absent the Cuba label, we might also wonder who was in the plane, esp. since the identity of the doghouse pilot is so much more easily recovered (hence the absence of a need for a label on Snoopy). The unusuality of the juxtaposition, and the flying doghouse itself, call up some mystery, more without the intertextual contexts for the latter.

### ***SERIOUSNESS/HUMOROUSNESS***

What makes for purely visual-pictorial humor? Exaggeration as in caricature can do so, as can unexpected juxtapositions, but neither is sufficient in itself. The mystery of humor in general is a difficult one. It seems to depend on the suggestion of pain, and a deflection of the painful situation toward something highly unlikely or impossible.

Viet-Scar.

The nose exaggeration is somewhat funny. The action is also somewhat funny. But the issue of Vietnam is not. If we take the interpretation of LBJ scarred by his lies about Vietnam, then the pain of Vietnam is somewhat deflected into the embarrassment of the scar-revelation, and that of LBJ's character and deeds deflected into his Pinnochio nose. We see things that might be painful, but are depicted in ways that make them seem wildly improbable.

Liberty-Fire.

The pain here is in the Hysteria, the emergency of a fire as scene, the climbing the high ladder, the potential pain of dousing the flame of liberty, but shown in a scene that is again highly improbably or impossible.

Nix-Con.

The face of Nixon in caricature might arguably be funny by exaggeration, that such a homely and untrustworthy face could appear in such extreme form, almost resemble some jowl-y dog. The footprints on the Constitution are not funny, but represent again a despoiling of the Con that is in form impossible.

Not All Black.

The picture here is not funny in itself, except perhaps for the sheer perplexity of interpretation. There is the pain of not being able to make sense of what we see, displaced into a scene where others very unlikely are making sense of it.

Peace-Sign.

There is to me some immediate humor in A's face, though this may not be intentional or generally perceived. The pain is that of his vacant look, or the danger his state of mind may represent, displaced into caricature. Clinton's face also is mildly humorous, the exaggeration of the nose, the teeth, the fatness of face, the eyes appearing closed, the pain of really looking like that displaced into

impossible exaggeration. Of course the most humorous element visually is the 'rabbit ears' signs of N and A, which takes the pain of their conflict and displaces it into an action of the sort done by kids and which is highly improbable in the real context, so robbing it of some of its sting.

Snoopy-Cuba.

The only element which is purely visually humorous is the flying dog and doghouse itself, where there is no underlying pain (except maybe that of the danger of flying) but rather a flight of fancy -- perhaps there is in the whole image and its history a displacement of the pain of war (aerial dogfights) onto the impossible and innocent image of the warrior puppy. Here we then have the juxtaposition, with the pain of the destruction of innocence (also from the intertext of the historical situation) displaced onto a fantasy encounter.

In all these cases, the role of the textual elements helps to play up the humor.

In Viet-Scar it is the implicit identification of the scar with "Vietnam", in Liberty-Fire the interpretation of the Fire! exclamation, in Nix-Con the pun of 'stand on' the Con, in Not All Black those words themselves in contrast with the blackness of the situation shown, in Peace-Sign the misconstrual of the gestures as for "peace" when they are signs of belligerence, in Snoopy-Cuba the identification of the innocent as 'hostile-looking'. In each case the source of the pain is referenced and the joint presentation more strongly both announces and displaces that pain.

Laughter is the expectation of pain, relieved.

### ***NORMATIVITY***

It is relatively difficult for pictorial images to express Normativity directly. Instead the option available is to use Usuality and/or Desirability to do so metaphorically, or in effect rhetorically. If we can suggest cause-consequence relations, then to show consequences as un/desirable is to imply actions that should/should not be done. Conservative views may take the Usual as also the Obligatory and Desirable, but radical critics may take it as Undesirable and not-to-be-done. Showing the forbidden is quite difficult, as much so as the declarative NOT (cf. the signs for No Smoking, with the semiotic convention of the bar-through), and to show the Permissible is difficult without some convention that what is not forbidden is allowed, or what is not allowed is forbidden.

Viet-Scar.

The direct action here is the revealing of the scar, which is Unusual, and perhaps Undesirable, perhaps a Should Not. It is not of course an impossible or a forbidden, but neither is it allowed since it is not Usual. The implied action of lying about Vietnam is certainly undesirable, as is the scar it leaves (on belly and nose), and so again something that should not be done.

#### Liberty-Fire.

We have given a complete analysis elsewhere, but in summary, to douse the fire of Liberty is wrong, should not be done. Things done from hysteria should not be done, are undesirable. Hysteria is also unusual, as is the action to be performed here. What is perhaps interesting is that we see an action with probably consequence clearly limned here, and while in itself in its own scene the action may normally be desirable, in the present circumstances we see ahead to a consequence which will be undesirable, so the action is being judged as undesirable, John Q Public should not be hysterically trying to douse a fire which is really the flame of our liberty.

#### Nix-Con.

The message here is that Nixon should not trample on the Constitution, that we should not trust Nixon. Walking all over the Constitution is not permitted (but this is not shown, it is intertextually provided).

#### Not All Black.

We should not accept the positive metaphorical sense of the evaluation, "not all black" because to do so contradicts what we see and the most normal interpretation of it.

#### Peace-Sign.

Again we should not accept the positive interpretation, which contradicts what we see. There is a reading rule here: if we say one thing and show another, the normal reading of the image takes precedence and negates the interpretive text. We also have of course here the Should Not for the behavior of N and A.

#### Snoopy-Cuba.

Still again we have the Reject text interpretation because of contrary visual evidence principle working. We also have within this the Should Not of attacking the innocent.

Note that in every one of these cases, what is depicted is an unusual action. And in each case the judgment is that it Should Not be done. This is clearest and most centrally important for Liberty-Fire (Don't Douse) and for Nix-Con (Don't Trample). Viet-Scar is not mainly an action-narrative image, and neither is Not All Black; in these cases there is simply something Inappropriate in the image. For Peace-Sign and for Snoopy-Cuba, there are minor disparaged actions (behavior, pursuit/threat) but more centrally the Don't applies to accepting the interpretations from the text balloons.

Insofar as Political Cartoons as a genre follow new events and comment on them, they are likely to portray Unusual scenes. They can make the Unusual also Undesirable by implying negative consequences (Liberty-Fire), or an undesirable reinterpretation of the state of affairs (ie. implying mistakenness, which is more a matter of Warrant): as in Liberty-Fire, also, but more centrally for Peace-Sign and for Snoopy-Cuba. And unusual states of affairs, as in Not All Black, can also be subject to positive or negative desirability interpretations, with one dominating over the other.

## **Recommended Reading**

"Multiplying Meaning: Visual and Verbal Semiotics in Scientific Text" in J.R. Martin & R. Veel, Eds., *Reading Science*. London: Routledge. (pp.87-113). 1998.

"Resources for Attitudinal Meaning: Evaluative Orientations in Text Semantics." *Functions of Language* 5(1): 33-56, 1998.

## **Final Note**

This work was carried out in 1996-1997 and presented at the University of Vienna in June 1997 in an invited lecture for the Faculty of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. It was never published because of the difficulty of obtaining copyright permission for reproducing the cartoons. Unlike quotations from textual works, visual works do not fall under legal interpretation of "fair use" for scholarly and academic purposes. This situation was made more difficult by the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which was largely shaped by the interests of corporate copyright holders in lucrative areas such as music and film, and was vehemently protested by scholarly societies and library associations. The passage of that Act is a scandalous example of special interests buying political favor against the best interests of the nation. No doubt there were some good political cartoons produced to reflect that fact.