Chapter 2

Signs and things

While semiotics is often encountered in the form of textual analysis, there is far more to semiotics than this. Indeed, one cannot engage in the semiotic study of how meanings are made in texts and cultural practices without adopting a philosophical stance in relation to the nature of signs, representation and reality. We have already seen how the Saussurean and Peircean models of the sign have different philosophical implications. For those who adopt the stance that reality always involves representation and that signs are involved in the construction of reality, semiotics is unavoidably a form of philosophy. No semiotic or philosopher would be so naïve as to treat signs such as words as if they were the things for which they stand, but as we shall see, this occurs at least sometimes in the psychological phenomenology of everyday life and in the uncritical framework of casual discourse.

Naming things

To semioticians, a defining feature of signs is that they are treated by their users as ‘standing for’ or representing other things. Jonathan Swift’s satirical account of the fictional academicians of Lagado outlined their proposal to abolish words altogether, and to carry around bundles of objects whenever they wanted to communicate. This highlights problems with the simplistic notion of signs being direct substitutes for physical things in the world around us. The academicians adopted the philosophical stance of naïve realism in assuming that words simply mirror objects in an external world. They believed that ‘words are only names for things’, a stance involving the assumption that ‘things’ necessarily exist independently of language prior to them being ‘labelled’ with words. According to this position there is a one-to-one correspondence between word and referent (sometimes called language–world isomorphism), and language is simply a nomenclature – an item-by-item naming of things in the world. Saussure felt that this was ‘the superficial view taken by the general public’ (Saussure 1983, 16, 65).

Within the lexicon of a language, it is true that most of the words are ‘lexical words’ (or nouns) which refer to ‘things’, but most of these things are abstract concepts rather than physical objects in the world. Only ‘proper nouns’ have specific referents in the everyday world, and only some of these refer to a unique entity (e.g. Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch – the name of a Welsh village). Even proper names are not specific as they are imagined to be: for instance, a reference to ‘Charles Sanders Peirce’ begs questions such as ‘Peirce at what date?’ or ‘Peirce as a philosopher or in some other role?’ or even ‘whose Peirce?’ (e.g. ‘Jakobson’s Peirce’?) Perhaps I should now hesitate to attribute to Peirce the observation that ‘a symbol . . . cannot indicate any particular thing; it denotes a kind of thing’ (Peirce 1931–58, 2.301; my emphasis). The communicative function of a fully functioning language requires the scope of reference to move beyond the particularity of the individual instance. While each leaf, cloud or smile is different from all others, effective communication requires general categories or ‘universals’. Anyone who has attempted to
communicate with people who do not share their language will be familiar with the limitations of simply pointing to things. You can’t point to ‘mind’, ‘culture’ or ‘history’; these are not ‘things’ at all. The vast majority of lexical words in a language exist on a high level of abstraction and refer to classes of things (such as ‘buildings’) or to concepts (such as ‘construction’). Language depends on categorization, but as soon as we group instances into classes (tokens into types), we lose any one-to-one correspondence of word and thing (if by ‘things’ we mean specific objects). Furthermore, other than lexical words, the remaining elements of the lexicon of a language consist of ‘function words’ (or grammatical words, such as ‘only’ and ‘under’) which do not refer to objects in the world at all. The lexicon of a language consists of many kinds of signs other than nouns. Clearly, language cannot be reduced to the naming of objects.

The less naïve realists might note at this point that words do not necessarily name only physical things which exist in an objective material world but may also label imaginary things and also concepts. Peirce’s referent, for instance, is not limited to things which exist in the physical world. However, as Saussure noted, the notion of words as labels for concepts ‘assumes that ideas exist independently of words’ (Saussure 1983, 65), and for him, ‘no ideas are established in advance . . . before the introduction of linguistic structure’ (ibid., 110; cf. 114–15, 118). It remains a rationalist and ‘nomenclaturist’ stance on language when words are seen as ‘labels’ for pre-existing ideas as well as for physical objects. It is reductionist: reducing language to the purely referential function of naming things. When we use language, its various kinds of signs relate to each other in complex ways which make nonsense of the reduction of language to a nomenclature. Referentiality may be a function of language but it is only one of its functions.

A radical response to realists is that things do not exist independently of the sign-systems that we use; reality is created by the media which seem simply to represent it. Language does not simply name pre-existing categories; categories do not exist in ‘the world’ (where are the boundaries of a cloud or when does a smile begin?). We may acknowledge the cautionary remarks of John Lyons, that such an emphasis on reality as invariably perceptually seamless may be an exaggeration. Lyons speculates that ‘most of the phenomenal world, as we perceive it, is not an undifferentiated continuum’; and our referential categories do seem to bear some relationship to certain features which seem to be inherently salient (Lyons 1977, 247; my emphasis; cf. ibid., 260). In support of this caveat, we may note that the Gestalt psychologists reported a universal human tendency to separate a salient figure from what the viewer relegates to the (back)ground. However, such observations clearly do not demonstrate that the lexical structure of language reflects the structure of an external reality. As Saussure noted, if words were simply a nomenclature for a pre-existing set of things in the world, translation from one language to another would be easy (Saussure 1983, 114–15) whereas in fact languages differ in how they categorize the world – the signifieds in one language do not neatly correspond to those in another. Within a language, many words may refer to ‘the same thing’ but reflect different evaluations of it (one person’s ‘hovel’ is another person’s ‘home’). Furthermore, what is signified by a word is subject to historical change. In this sense, reality or the world is created by the language we use: this argument insists on the primacy of the signifier. Even if we do not adopt the radical stance that the real world is a product of our sign-systems, we must still acknowledge that there are many things in the
experiential world for which we have no words and that most words do not correspond to objects in the known world at all. Thus, all words are abstractions, and there is no direct correspondence between words and things in the world.

**Referentiality**

Saussure’s model of the sign involves no direct reference to reality outside the sign. This was not a denial of extralinguistic reality as such but a reflection of his understanding of his own role as a linguist. Saussure accepted that in most scientific disciplines the ‘objects of study’ were ‘given in advance’ and existed independently of the observer’s ‘point of view’. However, he stressed that in linguistics, by contrast, ‘it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object’ (ibid., 8). While such a statement might go without comment in a discipline with an acknowledged self-sufficiency (such as mathematics), in the context of human language one can understand how it might be criticized as an idealist model. In the Saussurean model the signified is only a mental concept; concepts are mental constructs, not external objects. A concept may, of course, refer to something in experiential reality but the Saussurean stance is a denial of the essentialist argument that signifieds are distinct, autonomous entities in an objective world which are definable in terms of some kind of unchanging essence. Saussurean semiotics asserts the non-essential nature of objects. Just like signifiers, signifieds are part of the sign-system; signifieds are socially constructed. According to the Whorfian stance, the signified is an arbitrary product of our culture’s ‘way of seeing’. The Saussurean perspective ‘tends to reverse the precedence which a nomenclaturist accords to the world outside language, by proposing that far from the world determining the order of our language, our language determines the order of the world’ (Sturrock 1986, 17).

In contrast to the Saussurean model, Peirce’s model of the sign explicitly features the referent – something beyond the sign to which the sign vehicle refers (though not necessarily a material thing). However, it also features the interpretant which leads to an ‘infinite series’ of signs, so it has been provocatively suggested that Peirce’s model could also be taken to suggest the relative independence of signs from any referents (Silverman 1983, 15). In any event, for Peirce, reality can only be known via signs. If representations are our only access to reality, determining their accuracy is a critical issue. Peirce adopted from logic the notion of ‘modality’ to refer to the truth value of a sign, acknowledging three kinds: actuality, (logical) necessity and (hypothetical) possibility (Peirce 1931–58, 2.454). Furthermore, his classification of signs in terms of the mode of relationship of the sign vehicle to its referent reflects their modality – their apparent transparency in relation to reality (the symbolic mode, for instance, having low modality). Peirce asserted that, logically, signification could only ever be partial; otherwise it would destroy itself by becoming identical with its object (Grayson 1998, 40; Peirce 1982–93, vol. 1, 79–80).

Theorists who veer towards the extreme position of philosophical idealism (for whom reality is purely subjective and is constructed in our use of signs) may see no problem with the Saussurean model, which has itself been described as idealist (e.g. Culler 1985, 117). Those drawn towards epistemological realism (for whom a single objective reality exists indisputably and independently outside us) would challenge it. According to this stance, reality may be distorted by the processes of mediation involved in apprehending it but such processes play no part in constructing the world. Even those
who adopt an intermediate constructionist (or constructivist) position – that language and other media play a major part in ‘the social construction of reality’ – may object to an apparent indifference towards social reality in Saussure’s model. Those on the political left in particular would challenge its sidelong of the importance of the material conditions of existence. A system which brackets extralinguistic reality excludes truth values too. But post-Saussurean semiotics is not imprisoned within language in this way: Umberto Eco provocatively asserts that ‘semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie’ (Eco 1976, 7).

**Modality**

From the perspective of social semiotics the original Saussurean model is understandably problematic. Whatever our philosophical positions, in our daily behaviour we routinely act on the basis that some representations of reality are more reliable than others. And we do so in part with reference to cues within texts which semioticians (following linguists) call ‘modality markers’. Such cues refer to what are variously described as the plausibility, reliability, credibility, truth, accuracy or facticity of texts within a given genre as representations of some recognizable reality. Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen acknowledge that

> A social semiotic theory of truth cannot claim to establish the absolute truth or untruth of representations. It can only show whether a given ‘proposition’ (visual, verbal or otherwise) is represented as true or not. From the point of view of social semiotics, truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group, arising from the values and beliefs of that group.

(Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 159)

From such a perspective, reality has authors; thus there are many realities rather than the single reality posited by objectivists. This stance is related to Whorfian framings of relationships between language and reality. Constructionists insist that realities are not limitless and unique to the individual as extreme subjectivists would argue; rather, they are the product of social definitions and as such far from equal in status. Realities are contested, and textual representations are thus ‘sites of struggle’.

Modality refers to the reality status accorded to or claimed by a sign, text or genre. More formally, Robert Hodge and Günther Kress declare that ‘modality refers to the status, authority and reliability of a message, to its ontological status, or to its value as truth or fact’ (Hodge and Kress 1988, 124). In making sense of a text, its interpreters make modality judgements about it, drawing on their knowledge of the world and of the medium. For instance, they assign it to fact or fiction, actuality or acting, live or recorded, and they assess the possibility or plausibility of the events depicted or the claims made in it. Modality judgements involve comparisons of textual representations with models drawn from the everyday world and with models based on the genre; they are therefore obviously dependent on relevant experience of both the world and the medium. Robert Hodge and David Tripp’s semiotic study on children and television focuses on the development of children’s modality judgements (Hodge and Tripp 1986).

Clearly, the extent to which a text may be perceived as real depends in part on the
medium employed. Writing, for instance, generally has a lower modality than film and television. However, no rigid ranking of media modalities is possible. John Kennedy showed children a simple line drawing featuring a group of children sitting in a circle with a gap in their midst (Kennedy 1974). He asked them to add to this gap a drawing of their own, and when they concentrated on the central region of the drawing, many of them tried to pick up the pencil which was depicted in the same style in the top right-hand corner of the drawing! Being absorbed in the task led them to accept unconsciously the terms in which reality was constructed within the medium. This is not likely to be a phenomenon confined to children, since when absorbed in narrative (in many media) we frequently fall into a ‘suspension of disbelief’ without compromising our ability to distinguish representations from reality. Charles Peirce reflected that ‘in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears’ (Peirce 1931–58, 3.362).

While in a conscious comparison of a photographic image with a cartoon image of the same thing the photograph is likely to be judged as more realistic, the mental schemata involved in visual recognition may be closer to the stereotypical simplicity of cartoon images than to photographs. People can identify an image as a hand when it is drawn as a cartoon more quickly than when they are shown a photograph of a hand (Ryan and Schwartz 1956). This underlines the importance of perceptual codes in constructing reality. Umberto Eco argues that through familiarity an iconic signifier can acquire primacy over its signified. Such a sign becomes conventional ‘step by step, the more its addressee becomes acquainted with it. At a certain point the iconic representation, however stylized it may be, appears to be more true than the real experience, and people begin to look at things through the glasses of iconic convention’ (Eco 1976, 204–5).

Modality cues within texts include both formal features of the medium (such as flatness or motion) and content features (such as plausibility or familiarity), though it is their interaction and interpretation which is most important. The media which are typically judged to be the most realistic are photographic – especially film and television. James Monaco suggests that ‘in film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical . . . The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not’ (Monaco 1981, 127–8). This is an important part of what Christian Metz was referring to when he described the cinematic signifier as ‘the imaginary signifier’ (Metz 1977). In being less reliant than writing on symbolic signs, film, television and photography suggest less of an obvious gap between the signifier and its signified, which make them seem to offer reflections of reality (even in that which is imaginary). But photography does not reproduce its object: it ‘abstracts from, and mediates, the actual’ (Burgin 1982b, 61). While we do not mistake one for the other, we do need to remind ourselves that a photograph or a film does not simply record an event, but is only one of an infinite number of possible representations. All media texts, however ‘realistic’, are representations rather than simply recordings or reproductions of reality.

The film theorist André Bazin describes what he calls the ‘reproductive fallacy’ according to which the only kind of representation which can show things ‘as they really are’ would be one which is (or appears to be) exactly like that which it represents in every respect. Texts are almost always constructed from different materials from that which they represent, and representations cannot be replicas. For Bazin, aesthetic realism
depended on a broader ‘truth to reality’ (Bazin 1974, 64; Lovell 1983, 81). Ien Ang (1985) argues that watching television soap operas can involve a kind of psychological or emotional realism for viewers which exists at the connotative rather than the denotative level. Viewers find some representations emotionally or psychologically ‘true-to-life’ (even if at the denotative level the treatment may seem ‘unrealistic’). I would argue that especially with long-running soaps (which may become more real to their fans over time) what we could call generic realism is another factor. Viewers familiar with the characters and conventions of a particular soap opera may often judge the programme largely in its own generic terms rather than with reference to some external reality. For instance, is a character’s current behaviour consistent with what we have learned over time about that character? The soap may be accepted to some extent as a world in its own right, in which slightly different rules may sometimes apply. This is of course the basis for what Coleridge called the ‘willing suspension of disbelief ’ on which drama depends.

Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress argue that:

Different genres, whether classified by medium (e.g. comic, cartoon, film, TV, painting) or by content (e.g. Western, Science Fiction, Romance, news) establish sets of modality markers, and an overall value which acts as a baseline for the genre. This baseline can be different for different kinds of viewer/reader, and for different texts or moments within texts.

(Hodge and Kress 1988, 142)

What are recognized as realistic styles of representation reflect an aesthetic code (a concept which we will explore in detail later). Over time, certain methods of production within a medium and a genre become naturalized. The content comes to be accepted as a reflection of reality. In the case of popular television and film, for instance, the use of ‘invisible editing’ represents a widespread set of conventions which has come to seem natural to most viewers (as we shall see later). In realistic texts, what is foregrounded is the content rather than the form or style of production. As in the dominant mode of scientific discourse, the medium and codes are discounted as neutral and transparent and the makers of the text retreat to invisibility. Consequently, reality seems to pre-exist its representation and to ‘speak for itself’; what is said thus has the aura of truth. John Tagg argues that in realist texts,

The signifier is treated as if it were identical with a pre-existent signified and . . . the reader’s role is purely that of a consumer . . . Signifier and signified appear not only to unite, but the signifier seems to become transparent so that the concept seems to present itself, and the arbitrary sign is naturalized by a spurious identity between reference and referents, between the text and the world.

(Tagg 1988, 99)

Tagg adds that such a stance need not involve positing ‘a closed world of codes’ (ibid., 101) or the denial of the existence of what is represented outside the process which represents it (ibid., 167). However, he stresses ‘the crucial relation of meaning to questions of practice and power’, arguing that reality is ‘a complex of dominant and dominated discourses which given texts exclude, separate or do not signify’ (ibid., 101).
The word is not the thing

The Belgian surrealist René Magritte painted *La Trahison des Images (The Treachery of Images)* in 1936. That it has become one of Magritte’s most famous and widely reproduced works suggests the enduring fascination of its theme. At first glance, its subject is banal. We are offered a realistic depiction of an object which we easily recognize: a smoker’s pipe (in side-on view). However, the painting also includes the text ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (‘This is not a pipe’). The inclusion of text within the painting is remarkable enough, but the wording gives us cause to pause. If this were part of a language lesson or a child’s ‘reading book’ (the style reminds me of old-fashioned *Ladybird* books for children), we might expect to see the words ‘This is a pipe.’ To depict a pipe and then provide a ‘label’ which insists that ‘this is not a pipe’ initially seems perverse. Is it purely irrational or is there something which we can learn from this apparent paradox? What could it mean? As our minds struggle to find a stable, meaningful interpretation we may not be too happy that there is no single, ‘correct’ answer to this question – although those of us who are relatively ‘tolerant of ambiguity’ may accept that it offers a great deal of food for thought about levels (or modes) of reality. The indexical word ‘this’ can be seen as a key to the interpretation of this painting: what exactly does the word ‘this’ refer to? Anthony Wilden suggests several alternative interpretations:

- this [pipe] is not a pipe;
- this [image of a pipe] is not a pipe;
- this [painting] is not a pipe;
- this [sentence] is not a pipe;
- [this] this is not a pipe;
- [this] is not a pipe.

(Wilden 1987, 245)

Although we habitually relate the meaning of texts to the stated or inferred purposes of their makers, Magritte’s own purposes are not essential to our current concerns. It suits our purposes here to suggest that the painting could be taken as meaning that this representation (or any representation) is not that which it represents. That this image of a pipe is ‘only an image’ and that we can’t smoke it seems obvious – nobody ‘in their right mind’ would be so foolish as to try to pick it up and use it as a functional pipe (although many readers will have heard by now of the unfortunate, deluded man who ‘mistook his wife for a hat’). However, we do habitually refer to such realistic depictions in terms which suggest that they are nothing more nor less than what they depict. Any representation is more than merely a reproduction of that which it represents: it also contributes to the *construction* of reality. Even ‘photorealism’ does not depict unmediated reality. The most realistic representation may also symbolically or metaphorically ‘stand for’ something else entirely. Furthermore, the depiction of a pipe is no guarantee of the existence of a specific pipe in the world of which this is an accurate depiction. Indeed, it seems a fairly generalized pipe and could therefore be seen (as is frequently true of language lessons, children’s encyclopedia entries and so on) as an illustration of the
‘concept’ of a pipe rather than of a specific pipe. The label seeks to anchor our interpretation – a concept to which we will return later – and yet at the same time the label is part of the painting itself rather than a title attached to the frame. Magritte’s painting could be seen as a kind of defamiliarization: we are so used to seeing things and attaching labels to them that we seldom look deeper and do not see things in their specificity. One function of art (and of surrealistic art in particular) is ‘to make the familiar strange’ (as the Russian formalists put it).

Alfred Korzybski, the founder of a movement known as ‘general semantics’, declared that ‘the map is not the territory’ and that ‘the word is not the thing’ (Korzybski 1933; cf. Chase 1938 and Hayakawa 1941). The non-identity of sign and thing is, of course, a very basic Saussurean principle. However, while Saussure’s model is anti-realist, the general semanticists adopted the realist stance that language comes ‘between’ us and the objective world and they sought to reform our verbal behaviour to counteract the linguistic distortion of reality. They felt that one reason for the confusion of signifiers and referential signifieds was that we sometimes allow language to take us further up the ‘ladder of abstraction’ than we think we are. Here is a homely example of levels of verbal abstraction in relation to a cow called ‘Bessie’:

1. The cow known to science ultimately consists of atoms, electrons etc. according to present-day scientific inference . . .
2. The cow we perceive is not the word but the object of experience, that which our nervous system abstracts (selects) . . .
3. The word ‘Bessie’ (cow) is the name we give to the object of perception of level 2. The name is not the object; it merely stands for the object and omits reference to many characteristics of the object.
4. The word ‘cow’ stands for the characteristics we have abstracted as common to cow, cow, cow . . . cow. Characteristics peculiar to particular cows are left out.
5. When Bessie is referred to as ‘livestock’ only those characteristics she has in common with pigs, chickens, goats, etc. are referred to.
6. When Bessie is included among ‘farm assets’ reference is made only to what she has in common with all other saleable items on the farm.
7. When Bessie is referred to as an ‘asset’ still more of her characteristics are left out.
8. The word ‘wealth’ is an extremely high level of abstraction, omitting almost all reference to the characteristics of Bessie.

(McKim 1972, 128; the origins of this example are in Korzybski, via Hayakawa 1941, 121ff.)

The ladder metaphor is consistent with how we routinely refer to levels of abstraction – we talk of thinkers with ‘their heads in the clouds’ and of ‘realists’ with their ‘feet on the ground’. As we move up the ladder we move from the particular to the general, from concrete reality to abstract generalization. The general semanticists were of course hard-headed realists and what they wanted was for people to keep their feet firmly planted on the ground. In alerting language-users to levels of abstraction, the general semanticists sought to avoid the confusion of higher logical types with lower logical types. ‘A map’ is of a higher (more general) logical type than ‘the territory’, and linguistic representation in particular lends itself to this process of abstraction. Clearly we can learn more about a
place by visiting it than by simply looking at a map of it, and we can tell more about a person by meeting that person than by merely looking at a photograph of that person. Translation from lower levels to higher levels involves an inevitable loss of specificity – like earth being filtered through a series of increasingly fine sieves or like photocopies being repeatedly made of the ‘copies’ that they produce. Being alert for the consequent losses, absences or exclusions is important to the semiotician as well as the ‘general semanticist’. While the logician may be able to keep such levels separate, in most acts of communication some ‘slippage’ occurs routinely, although we are normally capable of identifying what kind of messages we are dealing with, assigning them to appropriate levels of abstraction. Semioticians observe that some kind of ‘translation’ is unavoidable in human communication. Claude Lévi-Strauss declared that ‘understanding consists in the reduction of one type of reality to another’ (Lévi-Strauss 1961, 61; cf. Leach 1976, 27). Similarly, Algirdas Greimas observed that ‘signification is . . . nothing but . . . transposition from one level of language to another, from one language to a different language, and meaning is nothing but the possibility of such transcoding’ (Greimas 1970, 13; translation by Jameson 1972, 215–16).

While it can be useful to consider abstraction in terms of levels and logical typing, the implicit filter metaphor in the general semanticists’ ‘ladder of abstraction’ is too unidimensional. Any given object of perception could be categorized in a variety of ways rather than in terms of a single objective hierarchy. The categories applied depend on such factors as experience, roles and purposes. This raises issues of interpretation. For instance, looking at an advertisement featuring a woman’s face, some viewers might assume that the image stood for women in general, others that she represented a particular type, role or group, and yet others might recognize her as a particular individual. Knowing the appropriate level of abstraction in relation to interpreting such an image would depend primarily on familiarity with the relevant cultural codes. The general semanticists set themselves the therapeutic goal of ‘purifying’ language in order to make its relationship to reality more transparent, and from such roots sprang projects such as the development of ‘Basic English’ (Ogden 1930). Whatever reservations we may have about such goals, Korzybski’s popularization of the principle of arbitrariness could be seen as a useful corrective to some of our habits of mind. As a caveat, Korzybski’s aphorism seems unnecessary: we all know that the word ‘dog’ cannot bark or bite, but in some circumstances we do behave as if certain signifiers are inseparable from what they stand for. Commonsense still leads us routinely to identify sign and thing, representation with what it represents. Readers who find this strange should consider how they would feel about ‘mutilating’ a photograph of someone for whom they care deeply.

In his massively influential book The Interpretation of Dreams (first published in 1900), Sigmund Freud argued that ‘dream-content is, as it were, presented in hieroglyphics, whose symbols must be translated . . . It would of course be incorrect to read these symbols in accordance with their values as pictures, instead of in accordance with their meaning as symbols’ (Freud 1938, 319). He also observed that ‘words are often treated in dreams as things’ (ibid., 330). Magritte played with our habit of identifying the signifier with the signified in a series of drawings and paintings in which objects are depicted with verbal labels which ‘don’t belong to them’. In an oil-painting entitled La Clef des Songes (The Interpretation of Dreams, 1930) we are confronted with images of
six familiar objects together with verbal labels. Such arrangements are familiar, particularly in the language-learning context suggested by the blackboard-like background. However, we quickly realize that the words do not match the images under which they appear. If we then rearrange them in our minds, we find that the labels do not correspond to any of the images. The relation between the image of an object and the verbal label attached to it is thus presented as arbitrary.

The confusion of the representation with the thing represented is a feature of schizophrenia and psychosis (Wilden 1987, 201). ‘In order to able to operate with symbols it is necessary first of all to be able to distinguish between the sign and the thing it signifies’ (Leach 1970, 43). However, the confusion of ‘levels of reality’ is also a normal feature of an early phase of cognitive development in childhood. Jerome Bruner observed that for pre-school children thought and the object of thought seem to be the same, but that during schooling one comes to separate word and thing (Bruner 1966). The substitution of a sign for its referent (initially in the form of gestures and imitative sounds) constitutes a crucial phase in the infant’s acquisition of language. The child quickly discovers the apparently magical power of words for referring to things in their absence – this property of displacement being a key ‘design feature’ of language (Piaget 1971, 64; Hockett 1958). Helen Keller, who became blind and deaf at the age of 18 months, was gradually taught to speak by her nurse (Keller 1945). At the age of 9 while playing with water she felt with her hand the motions of the nurse’s throat and mouth vibrating the word ‘water’. In a sudden flash of revelation she cried out words to the effect that ‘everything has a name!’. It is hardly surprising that, even in mid-childhood, children sometimes appear to have difficulty in separating words from what they represent. Piaget illustrates the ‘nominal realism’ of young children in an interview with a child aged 9½:

‘Could the sun have been called “moon” and the moon “sun”?’ – ‘No.’ ‘Why not?’ – ‘Because the sun shines brighter than the moon . . .’ ‘But if everyone had called the sun “moon”, and the moon “sun”, would we have known it was wrong?’ – ‘Yes, because the sun is always bigger, it always stays like it is and so does the moon.’ ‘Yes, but the sun isn’t changed, only its name. Could it have been called . . . etc.?’ – ‘No . . . Because the moon rises in the evening, and the sun in the day.’

(Piaget 1929: 81–2)

Thus for the child, words do not seem at all arbitrary. Similarly, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole found that unschooled Vai people in Liberia felt that the names of sun and moon could not be changed, one of them expressing the view that these were God-given names (Scribner and Cole 1981, 141).

The anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl claimed that people in ‘primitive’ cultures had difficulty in distinguishing between names and the things to which they referred, regarding such signifiers as an intrinsic part of their signifieds (Olson 1994, 28). The fear of ‘graven images’ within the Judeo-Christian tradition and also magical practices and beliefs such as Voodoo are clearly related to such a phenomenon. Emphasizing the epistemological significance of writing, the Canadian psychologist David Olson argues that the invention (around 4,000 years ago) of ‘syntactic scripts’ (which superseded the
use of tokens) enabled referential words to be distinguished more easily from their referents, language to be seen as more than purely referential, and words to be seen as (linguistic) entities in their own right. He suggests that such scripts marked the end of ‘word magic’ since referential words came to be seen as representations rather than as intrinsic properties or parts of their referents. However, in the Middle Ages words and images were still seen as having a natural connection to things (which had ‘true names’ given by Adam at the Creation). Words were seen as the names of things rather than as representations. As Michel Foucault has shown, only in the early modern period did scholars come to see words and other signifiers as representations which were subject to conventions rather than as copies (Foucault 1970). By the seventeenth century, clear distinctions were being made between representations (signifiers), ideas (signifieds) and things (referents). Scholars now regarded signifiers as referring to ideas rather than directly to things. Representations were conventionalized constructions which were relatively independent both of what they represented and of their authors; knowledge involved manipulating such signs. Olson notes that once such distinctions are made, the way is open to making modality judgements about the status of representations – such as their perceived truth or accuracy (Olson 1994, 68–78, 165–8, 279–80). While the seventeenth-century shift in attitudes towards signs was part of a search for ‘neutrality’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘truth’, in more recent times, of course, we have come to recognize that ‘there is no representation without intention and interpretation’ (ibid., 197).

It is said that someone once asked an astronomer how he had discovered the name of a previously unknown star! Sophisticated literates are able to joke about the notion that names belong to things. In one of Aldous Huxley’s novels an old farmworker points out his pigs: ‘Look at them, sir,’ he said, with a motion of his hand towards the wallowing swine. ‘Rightly is they called pigs’ (Chrome Yellow, Chapter 5). Literate adults may not often seem to be prey to this sort of nominal realism. However, certain signifiers become regarded by some as far from arbitrary, acquiring almost magical power – as in relation to ‘graphic’ swearing and issues of prejudice – highlighting the point that signifiers are not socially arbitrary. Children are just as aware of this: many are far from convinced by adult advice that ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me’. We may all still need some convincing that ‘the word is not the thing’.

Terence Hawkes notes the ‘anaesthetic function’ of language by which we are numbed to the intervention of the medium (Hawkes 1977, 70). Catherine Belsey, another literary theorist, argues that

Language is experienced as a nomenclature because its existence precedes our ‘understanding’ of the world. Words seem to be symbols for things because things are inconceivable outside the system of differences which constitutes the language. Similarly, these very things seem to be represented in the mind, in an autonomous realm of thought, because thought is in essence symbolic, dependent on the differences brought about by the symbolic order. And so language is ‘overlooked’, suppressed in favour of a quest for meaning in experience and/or in the mind. The world of things and subjectivity then become the twin guarantors of truth.

(Belsey 1980, 46)
Shakespeare’s Hamlet refers to: ‘the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature’ (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, ii), and being ‘true to life’ is probably still a key criterion in judgements of literary worth. However, Belsey comments:

The claim that a literary form reflects the world is simply tautological. If by ‘the world’ we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language. This is a tautology. If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world.

(Belsey 1980, 46)

The medium of language comes to acquire the illusion of transparency: this feature of the medium tends to blind its users to the part it plays in constructing their experiential worlds. Realistic texts reflect a mimetic purpose in representation – seeking to imitate so closely that which they depict that they may be experienced as virtually identical (and thus unmediated). Obviously, purely verbal signifiers cannot be mistaken for their real-world referents. While it is relatively easy for us to regard words as conventional symbols, it is more difficult to recognize the conventionality of images which resemble their signifieds. Yet even an image is not what it represents – the presence of an image marks the absence of its referent. The difference between signifier and signified is fundamental. Nevertheless, when the signifiers are experienced as highly realistic – as in the case of photography and film – it is particularly easy to slip into regarding them as identical with their signifieds. In contrast even to realistic painting and drawing, photographs seem far less obviously authored by a human being. Just as ‘the word is not the thing’ and ‘the map is not the territory’ nor is a photograph or television news footage that which it depicts. Yet in the commonsense attitude of everyday life we routinely treat high modality signifiers in this way. Indeed, many realistic filmic narratives and documentaries seem to invite this confusion of representation with reality (Nichols 1981, 21). Thus television is frequently described as a ‘window on the world’ and we usually assume that ‘the camera never lies’. We know of course that in a film a dog can bark but it cannot bite (though, when ‘absorbed’, we may ‘suspend disbelief’ in the context of what we know to be enacted drama). However, we are frequently inclined to accept ‘the evidence of our own eyes’ even when events are mediated by the cameras of journalists. Highly realistic representations in any medium always involve a point of view. Representations which claim to be real deny the unavoidable difference between map and territory. In the sense that there is always a difference between the represented and its representation, ‘the camera always lies’. We do not need to adopt the ‘scientific’ realism of the so-called general semanticists concerning the ‘distortion of reality’ by our signifying systems, but may acknowledge instead that reality does not exist independently of signs, turning our critical attention to the issue of whose realities are privileged in particular representations – a perspective which, avoiding a retreat to subjectivism, pays due tribute to the unequal distribution of power in the social world.