

of wood or marble, floors made of marble chips, the bark of trees, and in fact all those things that do not have any definite set shape but can take many forms.

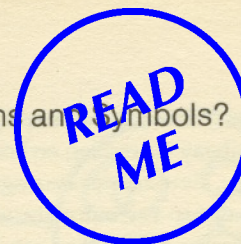
It depends on the person looking, because each of us sees only what he knows. If you do not know what a Bunstable is you will never see one anywhere. If, as often happens, a person is exclusively interested in food, then in the clouds at sunset he will see enormous dishes of spaghetti and tomato sauce (if he can raise his eyes from the table to look at the sunset), the clouds will be heaps of mashed potato and in the grains of certain woods he is bound to find pork chops concealed. But joking apart, this business of two or more images in one must be taken into account by the graphic designer when he is trying to achieve really concentrated visual communication. And one can formulate fairly exact rules for it.

We have a historical example in the paintings of Arcimboldi.

Simultaneous superimposed images may for example be useful in a poster showing a hand composed of cigarettes holding a cigarette, when a trademark may be identified with the product, when a watch may be made to look like the sun or moon, and so on.

These double images may either be obvious or concealed. One can present an image with the merest suggestion of another image in it, barely hinted at, so that it is not revealed at once but leaves a trace of doubt in the mind, or allows the second image so ambiguously presented to grow as from a seed in the mind. In such a case the second image works on the subconscious and may well have a more lasting effect, for it seems to the viewer to be a private acquisition, a personal discovery that he has made inside or beyond what was obvious to everyone else.

A Language of Signs and Symbols?



Many of our activities today are conditioned by signs and symbols, though so far these are only used for visual communication and information. Each sign and each symbol has an exact meaning that is recognized the world over: everyone everywhere knows what to do when faced by a certain roadsign. We are already conditioned to doing what these signs tell us to do, and know that we cannot ignore them without being punished. Our movements on the roads are rigorously controlled: we are told how fast we may go, in which direction, whether we take precedence or must wait for others, what lane to drive in and when we may or must stop.

In this case no one may do as he wants to. Each of us is part of the larger organism of human society, and just as in our bodies each small organ must live in harmony with the others, so when we move from place to place we must do it in harmony with others. To neglect the rules is dangerous, because it fouls up the whole organism.

Roadsigns are the best known, but our society has many other signs and symbols for a variety of human activities: the plan of an electric circuit is drawn with a series of conventional signs, meteorologists communicate among themselves with special signs, there are proof-readers' signs and Boy

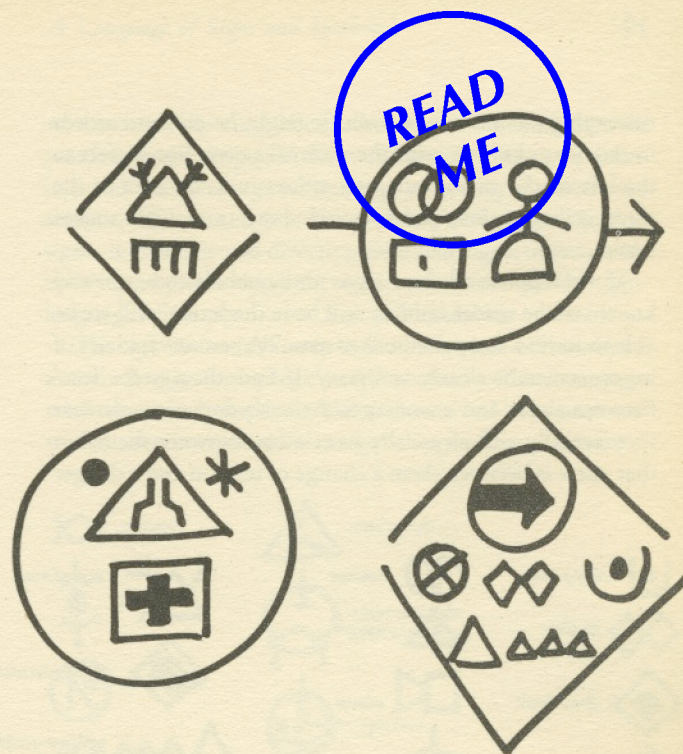
Scout signs, there are railway signals and the special signs used in railway timetables, on board ship and in factories and workshops. Even tramps use a sign language to tell each other if they can go to a certain place, whether the police are nice or nasty, whether or not they can beg, etc.

In the old days there were the symbols of heraldry, the personal marks of builders and stonemasons, hallmarks on silver and alchemical symbols. Today there are trademarks, internationally accepted signs, the badges of airlines, and so on.

Everyone naturally knows road signs because you have to learn them if you want to drive a car. But when the signs used in other fields, such as mathematics and music, are more generally known, then perhaps we may try to express ourselves by means of signs and symbols, and to combine various signs as they do in the ideographic scripts of China and Japan. In these ancient scripts the signs have one value as image or idea when they are alone, and another when they are used in combination. This principle, based on logic, is also used by us in visual communication. For example, in the language of meteorology a six-pointed asterisk means snow, a triangle with its point downwards means a stormy sky. The two together mean 'blizzard'.

In the language of tramps a sign made of two interlocking circles means 'caution', a triangle point upwards with two crude arms raised means 'armed man'. A big triangle with three small ones alongside means that one should spin a really tear-jerking yarn (I imagine that the big triangle is the wife and the little ones her starving children).

In a certain sense the plan of an electric circuit composed of symbols and connections is nothing less than a synthetic discourse of component parts, exact in all particulars and

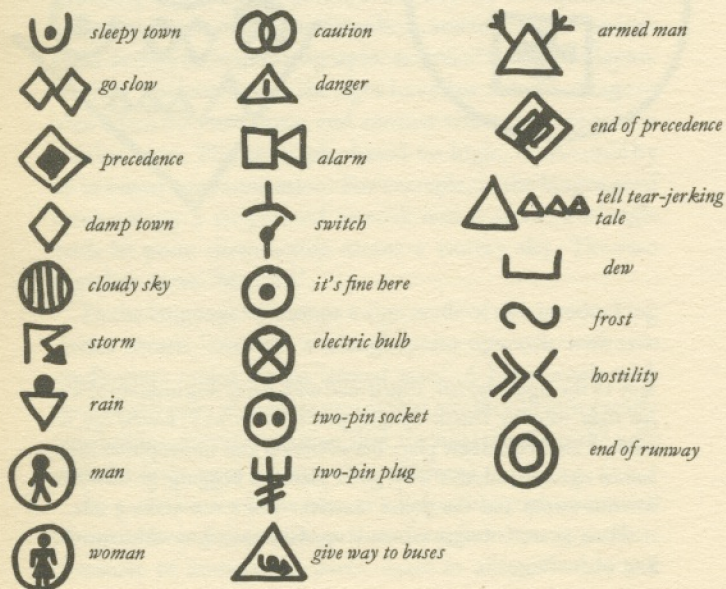


Key to the signs: *top left*, armed man with fierce dog in damp town; *top right*, caution, female danger, proceed this way; *bottom left*, no entry, I am in a narrow place between rain and snow, please help; *bottom right*, friend, this way, good place for begging, go slow, the town is asleep and the police inactive. Tell a tear-jerking tale.

These groups of signs are made up of tramps' signs with a sprinkling of road signs.

conveying precise information. It might be put into words in this way: link up with the external power line six feet to the left of the main door, put a fuse in it, connect to the three ceiling lights, put a switch here, a two-pin socket there. . . .

If we suppose all these signs and symbols to be already known to the reader, as they will be in the future, will we be able to write a story that makes sense? A certain elasticity of interpretation is clearly necessary. If I put the sign for 'fuse' between a man and a woman it obviously does not mean that they actually and physically have a fuse between them, but that there is between them a change of tension and a danger



of the circuit blowing. We shall use the symbols as the words are used in a poem: they will have more than one meaning, and the meanings will change according to where they are put. We can express the weather with meteorological signs, movement and direction with road signs, objects with their appropriate symbols, some sensations in the sign-language of tramps . . . or that of electronics.

The sign for 'switch' may be used to switch off or stop an action, the sign for 'mirage' may have many other meanings, while those for 'precedence', 'stop', 'wait' and 'road narrows' would take on special meanings when used in conjunction



with other signs. The narrative should be clear enough, in some places all too clear, but should also be capable of being as esoteric as a poem.

Will something like this be the international language of the near future? In limited ways perhaps it might. In meteorology and electronics it is already used. But it has not yet been used to tell a story. Or rather, mine is the first attempt.

Attempt at a poem:

Rain
on the firing switch
end of precedence

READ
ME

