

An Analysis of the Power and the Discipling of Interpretation in the Use of Symbol in Public Space

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Abstract: This article focuses on warning and instructional signs in urban environments, treating such symbols as a linguistic system. Using semiotics and power-discipline theory as frameworks, it explains how standardized symbols in cities form a "quasi-linguistic" system that compels people's interpretation of symbols. By integrating with spatial governance, these symbols simultaneously lead to a homogenization of interpretive pathways and urban activities, thereby revealing the hidden power dynamics and effects behind the symbols. Additionally, it points out that "technical flaws," "artistic interventions," and "temporary symbols" create openings for semantic drift.

Keywords: Power-Discipline Theory; Public Space; Symbols; Quasi-Linguistic System

1. Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure stated that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary[1]. The relationship between images and their meanings is not inherently fixed. However, what renders this correspondence seemingly "unique" in urban settings is not the image itself, but rather institutional anchoring and spatial arrangement. Under such visual techniques, visual signs increasingly approximate the function of written language, and the non-coded nature of images nearly disappears.

2. The "Quasi-Linguistic" System of Standardized Signs and Power Relations

The globally standardized pictogram systems ISO 7010 (warning signs) and ISO 7010 (safety signs), developed in Switzerland, claim to achieve cross-linguistic and cross-cultural symbolic expression. These standardized symbols strive to transform images into a universal language, serving global communication in the form of a symbolic

system. For example, a circle atop a forked vertical line represents an abstract "person," which is then further subdivided into groups such as pregnant women or people with disabilities through auxiliary graphics. These symbols are designed and tested under strict specifications and are used worldwide. As a result, people from different cultural backgrounds interpret a "red circle with a diagonal bar" (as shown in Figure 1) as "prohibition," and a "green background with a door frame" as "emergency exit." Through coded norms, images acquire the clarity and coercive power of language. These ostensibly neutral symbolic systems appear to embrace diverse cultures in public spaces and facilitate cross-linguistic communication. However, in reality, these symbols—with their language-like precision—constitute a visual knowledge system centered on "safety" and "order." This system is then globally applied across cultures and languages, training subjects worldwide to internalize this knowledge framework, thereby adapting them to modern public environments. Yet, this very knowledge system also sets a "threshold" for access to public spaces in modern society. As Foucault remarked, "Power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations[2]." In standardized symbolic systems, "naive viewing" is excluded and replaced by a specialized way of seeing specific images—that is, viewing informed by particular knowledge. When this globally applicable symbolic system was established by ISO, which represents Western discourse (the signs, such as the one shown in Figure 2 are obtained by paying a fee on the official website based on textual descriptions), the authority to decide how to encode and how to view was already determined. Thereby, ISO constitutes a form of authoritative

discourse regarding visual knowledge of "order" and "safety." Furthermore, as these signs become international standards, are deployed, and produce disciplinary effects, another layer of power relations emerges within urban spaces. Those who have the authority to place these signs ultimately define what constitutes "order" and "safety" in the city. To become an individual adapted to urban life, one must inevitably learn this knowledge.



Figure 1. Warning Signs



Figure 2. The logo Purchase Page

The control over the interpretation of symbols extends beyond the normative aspects of encoding. Typically, such symbols are also accompanied by corresponding text. Barthes noted: "The polysemy of signs can lead to semantic uncertainty, even leaving readers disoriented and evoking a sense of 'terror.' Consequently, various techniques have been developed in society to 'anchor' the drifting chain of signification in images, directing them toward a specific meaning. Linguistic messaging is one such technique[3]." On one hand, these texts provide precise interpretations for each symbol, thereby excluding other potential explanations. On the other hand,

through the repeated combination of images and text, the fixed "vocabulary" and "grammar" of standardized symbols are consistently paired with linguistic annotations, effectively training the viewers. This conditioning influences what viewers ought to see and comprehend. Barthes described this process of "anchorage" as the "domination" of images by language. Once trained, viewers instinctively associate red with "prohibition" even in the absence of text. Thus, when red appears in public signage, it naturally imposes constraints and exerts a deterrent effect on the audience. Under such circumstances, even if viewers still retain the agency and space for personal interpretation of symbols, habitual responses have already been formed. The relationship between the signifier and the signified in visual symbols has become largely fixed, directing viewers toward a singular interpretation that aligns with spatial governance. Behind this lies a form of visual discipline: audiences are educated by this integrated symbolic system and repeatedly exposed to it, reinforcing their memory. Eventually, viewers' interpretations are confined to the "correct" context, while personalized readings gradually vanish. The emergence of this context also reflects an interactive relationship—the proliferation of symbols representing "order" and "safety" in public spaces creates the impression that public spaces inherently embody "order" and "safety." As a result, any symbol appearing in a public setting is automatically assumed to relate to "order" and "safety," naturally drawing viewers into the established symbolic knowledge system of public environments.

In urban environments, the power to encode and utilize symbols is tightly controlled, while the polysemy of symbols is significantly constrained. While this contributes to urban order, it simultaneously suppresses local and foreign cultural symbolic practices. These practices are not merely visual but also pertain to the body and space. As de Certeau points out in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, to achieve the goal of rational urban organization, it is necessary to suppress all material, psychological, and political "impurities" that might disrupt order[4]. A synchronized system replaces traditional stubborn resistance by flattening all "data" onto a single plane, where a singular scientific strategy supersedes the tactical ingenuity of users. Here, "data" refers to the rich

content of urban spaces, representing spatial polysemy. Urban planners simplify complex spaces into manageable planar divisions, compressing diverse social life into geometric patterns. In contrast, the "tactics" employed by actual urban users differ from the predefined "strategies" of the city, representing practices endowed with freedom. The following example illustrates this point from the perspectives of visual symbols, space, and human interaction.



Figure 3. The Prayer Room

The prayer room shown in Figure 3 was photographed at Narita Airport in Japan. On one hand, it provides convenience for practitioners. However, from a symbolic perspective, the figure kneeling with raised hands follows ISO's standardized pictographic processing—yet this representation reflects a symbol from an external observer's perspective. Neither ISO, which establishes symbolic standards, nor the Japanese authorities who installed the sign, typically constitute the actual subjects engaging in prayer at the airport.

To align with the context of modern public spaces, the prayer room employs a "universally applicable" synchronized symbol that directly appropriates the act of prayer, replacing the spontaneous and diverse symbolic practices inherent to different cultures. Additionally, the very designation of a dedicated space for prayer implies that urban planners perceive this act as "invisible" within the primary functional framework of the airport. The departure hall is defined solely by its function of accommodating waiting passengers, while praying in this space is regarded as an "impurity" that disrupts order. For urban planners, those who seize opportunities to pray spontaneously in available spaces are perceived as conspicuous bodily symbols that ought to be spatially separated from "ordinary waiting passengers." Public

spaces, inherently filled with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, naturally encompass a variety of social activities. Yet, urban planners "flatten" these diverse behaviors from an external perspective, compressing and strategically categorizing them spatially. By entering the prayer room, worshippers implicitly acknowledge the perceived incompatibility of prayer with public space, thus accepting the behavioral order imposed by modern public environments. For the worshippers, however, this indeed provides a quieter and more suitable space for prayer.

However, from the perspective of urban landscape, this very process leads to homogenization, transforming it into a unified "representation" under power control, replacing the organically emerging "reality." As Lefebvre pointed out, the modern city functions as a representational space dominated by power, reflecting urban planners' abstraction and symbolization of urban space. "Abstract space operates through 'objectification'—as a collection of things/signs and their formalized, quantified spatiality—erasing all differences, whether derived from nature or the human body[5]." This "objectification" strips urban space of concrete experiences, treating it as a manipulable, external "object." The relationship between people and space in the city is viewed by planners as an "object" requiring ordering, where complex human behaviors and spaces are symbolized to achieve an external "formal" alignment between people and their environment.

This also explains why urban planners chose to mark the prayer room with a standardized symbol of a kneeling figure with raised hands. To both planners and ISO, worshippers from diverse cultural backgrounds are reduced to manipulable, abstract symbolic "objects" incorporated into formal spatial categorizations. Such standardized symbols exemplify the governance through abstract symbols from the perspective of urban planners. In reality, the dynamic, bodily actions of people in public spaces are flattened into standardized signs by planners, meant to correspond with similarly "abstracted" spaces. Once this strategy is implemented, the space becomes a "flattened" plane—a reflection of the relationship between people and space that conforms to the order of modern public spaces.

3. The "Call" of Warning Symbols and the Operation of Power

Louis Althusser proposed: "Ideology functions through the category of the subject, interpellating concrete individuals as concrete subjects[6]." He illustrated this with an example: when a police officer calls out on the street, "Hey, you there!" and you turn around, you implicitly acknowledge yourself as the one being addressed. The individual transforms from a random person into the subject interpellated by the police, thus establishing the role relationship dictated by ideology.

However, the "interpellation" of standardized warning signs in urban environments operates differently[7]. They exist within an open, fluid field, stripped not only of "persona" but also of a visible enunciator—the signs become an integrated part of the environment. These signs address everyone yet seem to belong to no one in particular. Every passerby is "casually hailed" by such signs.

Unlike being explicitly called out by a police officer—where power relations are concretized through a sequence of "hailing," "responding," and "admonishing," forcing compliance through deterrence—warning signs in public spaces appear neutral and do not target specific individuals. People do not feel personally "targeted" by authority and thus are less likely to resist. Yet, because these signs are widely understood, their message is shared collectively within the field, creating an effect where everyone feels watched by everyone else.

As Foucault observed: "The exercise of disciplinary power is discreet; yet it simultaneously imposes a principle of compulsory visibility on those subjected to it. In discipline, the subjects must be seen. Their visibility ensures the hold of the power exercised over them[8]." In public spaces, warning signs—through their unique combination of imagery and text—make abstract norms concretely visible and collectively shared. Rather than being directly "interpellated" through personal address, individuals in these spaces are constrained by an environmental rule that "applies to everyone," while simultaneously feeling consciously monitored by those around them. The power behind the discourse is subtly concealed, leaving only a "de-personalized" visual symbol that evolves into a universal moral norm within the space[9]. This also forms a surveillance

mechanism that compels people to voluntarily comply.

4. Interstices within Power Relations: The 'Gaps' in Symbols

Although visual symbols in urban public spaces are controlled by power, the inherent characteristics of these symbols still retain the potential for free interpretation[10]. The linguistic domination imposed by power over images is not entirely unshakable.

In Figure 4, the person's back appears fused with the wall. Slight technical imperfections in image rendering can generate unintended significations beyond the intended meaning. One might argue that no imaging technique can permanently fix the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Once an image is freed from the "domination" of text, even standardized images with locked-in significations retain space for free interpretation.



Figure 4. No Leaning

The works of artist Zhao Bang, as shown in Figures 5 and 6, vividly demonstrate this point. By stripping away the text that constantly anchors visual symbols, the potential of images unfolds, breaking the familiar knowledge system surrounding symbols of "order" and "safety." The artist then distributes these subverted signs for people to post in the streets.



Figure 5. The Works of Zhao Bang (1)



Figure 6. The Works of Zhao Bang (2)

The Situationists advocated the use of strategies such as *"dérive"* (drifting) and *"détournement"* (appropriation) to resist the unidirectional symbolic system controlled by power[11]. The significance of this resistance lies not in seeking to abolish such one-way symbols but in cleverly employing "drifting" to break power's absolute control over images. By coexisting with these unidirectional symbols, individuals can, even while being controlled, seek out the subtle tensions created by "gaps," turning observation into a form of *"poaching"* in the urban environment. As the Situationist slogan goes: *"Culture jamming is throwing a wrench into the machine by manipulating images to exaggerate, satirize, or invert their intended meanings"*[12]. The work of artist Ge Yulu, as shown in Figure 7, offers another perspective on such "interference."



Figure 7. The Work of Ge Yulu (1)



Figure 8. The Work of Ge Yulu (2)

The artist created a standard road sign bearing his own name and installed it alongside an unnamed road. Over time, navigation systems

began to recognize and include this road under the name "Ge Yulu." This act not only subverted the symbolic marking of identity traditionally assigned by names but also revealed how people exhibit absolute obedience to the authoritatively defined urban space in an "abstracted" city. Standardized road signs, as symbols of authority, represent absolute power to viewers. Precisely because power operates invisibly—manipulating through symbols—urban dwellers can only submit to the visible signs they encounter. Much like authority hiding behind standardized symbols, the artist concealed his "interference" within these very symbols. It took four years for this "fake road sign" to be discovered and ultimately removed (as shown in Figure 8). The eventual removal of this sign ultimately confirms who holds the defining power over the "abstracted" city.



Figure 9. Uncommon Sign (1)

"Temporary signs" can also give rise to phenomena of semantic drift. For uncommon signs like those in Figures 9 and 10 where symbolic meanings have been recently



Figure 10. Uncommon Sign (2)

assigned but not yet reinforced through repetition, they resemble clumsily articulated statements. When such images with floating signification appear in urban landscapes, the

perceived authority of the image diminishes. For instance, while Figure 9 serves a warning function, it could equally be interpreted as an exaggerated cartoon. Similarly, although Figure 10 conveys meaning effectively when accompanied by text, the visual symbol alone creates confusion.

5. Conclusion

In modern society, the symbolic system formed by power relations in public spaces controls how people view and interpret images, rendering images deactivated both as a strategy and an outcome. What is often appreciated in many so-called symbols is precisely their ambiguity, openness, and that productive inefficiency which prevents them from expressing a "final" meaning—through symbols, people refer to something that can never be fully grasped. While urban symbols reduce their inherent openness, the images themselves remain "agentive," and it is precisely through such "resistance" that richer meanings continuously emerge.

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