



*X Marks the Spot: The Power of  
Sign-Making and Sign-Use in Today's World*

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Images bearing consumerist messages permeate the cultural landscapes of modern societies. Printed advertisements portraying a worldly lifestyle fill the pages of newspapers and magazines. Poster ads of voluptuous models appear in buses, subways, trains, on city walls. Neon signs along downtown streets flash images extolling material possessions and the fulfillment of bodily desires throughout the night. Brand names and logos have become part and parcel of cultural group-think and, thus, part of the “mental encyclopedia” of virtually everyone who lives in a modern-day society. To a semiotician this comes as no surprise. Images are signs and, thus, products of the human imagination—an imagination that can be used for anything we deem appropriate or just interesting in and of itself. I have often defined semiotics to my students as the science of everything that is interesting. Signs are very similar to viruses. They generate and spread meanings and messages that are generally beyond the limit of conscious reflection, for the simple reason that they are so intrinsic and essential to human psychic survival. They are to the human imagination what food is to the human body. No wonder then that, having proven its efficacy in the marketing of economic goods and services, since the early 1960s image-making, read persuasive sign-making, has been directed with increasing regularity towards matters of social concern. Anti-smoking and anti-drug campaigns are examples of the use of persuasion techniques as means to promote public welfare. And, needless to say, the use of image-making in the political arena seems to know no bounds. Politicians at all levels of government now communicate their platforms and their personal perspectives on social issues regularly through sleek persuasive forms of advertising.

Semiotics is characterizable as a blend of art and science, because it studies both the image-making techniques designed to influence how people perceive themselves, others, and the things of their world, and a rather formal apparatus, known as sign theory, to assess the effects of such techniques on human behavior and on human life in general. Clearly, today, I will forego the latter which, I must admit, is rather dull even for a semiotician, even though, when understood, provides a powerful frame of analysis for unraveling how we make meaning in life.

We are sign users and sign makers. It is thus amazing, although not at all surprising, to find that today's image-conscious world can invest so many meanings and so many social functions in a single alphabet character—a letter that appears constantly in pop culture, media representa-

tions, advertising, naming practices, and general discourse. Indeed, everything from movies to sports names is being named, marketed, and conceptualized with the same twenty-fourth letter of the English alphabet—the letter “X.” There’s Nissan’s X-Terra model; there are X-treme sports; there’s the movie action hero “Triple X;” there are XXX movies; and the list could go on and on. The letter X has become synonymous with youth, danger, and all the X-citing things that our modern culture makes available (pun intended). But is that all there is to this simple, yet apparently powerful, sign?

At an obvious analytical level, X is a perfect example of the use (some may say abuse) of signs in today’s image-conscious world. As a semiotician at the University of Toronto for decades this certainly comes as no surprise. As mentioned, semiotics studies what is perhaps the most fundamental condition of human sapience—the capacity for creating and using signs for thinking, expressing, representing, and communicating. The world of human beings is a *de facto* world of signs, the thoughts they elicit, and their overall organization into a system of communal meaning that we call a culture. If there is one trait that distinguishes the human species from all others, it is precisely the interplay of signs, thought, and culture in generating consciousness—the state of mind that provides humans with a means for making sense of who they are, of where they are in the cosmic scheme of things, and of why they are here.

To a semiotician, the twenty-fourth letter of the alphabet does not harness its power from pop culture. It is the other way around. It bestows on media culture signifying power of the most extreme kind, semiotically-speaking of course. X has been around for centuries as the mathematical variable par excellence, as an ersatz signature used by those who cannot write, as a blasphemous letter assigned to cartoons, an a sign of danger on bottles of alcohol and boxes of dynamite, and as a symbol marking a secret treasure on a pirate’s map. In a word, X has always constituted a pictography of danger, mystery, the unexplained, and other occult meanings from times that predate X-treme sports and X-File TV programs.

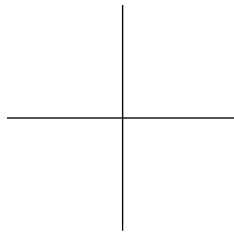
In actual fact, it is a sign with so many meanings that we can hardly pin down what it is about this sign that gives it its magnetism and strange aesthetics. Is it a sign of something much more profound? Is it a sign from God reminding us of our wickedness? Or is it just an ironic sign? I cannot help but think of Woody Allen in this regard—always a witty commentator on the absurdity of life. In his hilarious collections of cynical, but very funny, aphorisms spread across several books, Allen sees the concept of “signs from above” as an engagement in deception. Here’s an example of his wit: If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.

In fact, the semiotic mystery of X is that it reverberates with an inbuilt ambiguity, pitting the divine against the profane, the spiritual against the material. There is little doubt, as just discussed, that it ventures into the territory of profane, conjuring up images of things that are just beyond the realm of decency and righteousness. In today’s sexually-charged culture X means “Look at me, I’m X-rated and X-citing.” X is, in a phrase, one of the most provocative sexual symbols of contemporary pop culture, characterizing it in a compact yet accurate way. And the

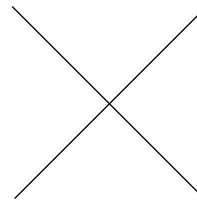
reason is, paradoxically, not because it is an invented sign of the modern age, but because it reaches deeply into the sacred unconscious, reverberating with mythical symbolism that goes right back to the origin of pictography as a craft controlled by those in power. It is, in a word, a modern-day hieroglyph.

Aha, you might say. Another academic propounding some willy-nilly theory about humanity, on a wild goose chase to get noticed. I beg your indulgence for a little while further. In my view, academic or not, the only way to explain why we extract so much meaning from a simple letter is, in fact, to see it as a product of an unconscious pattern of pictorial symbolism that continues to have emotional hold on the modern mind. Its particular design—a cross symbol that has been rotated 45 degrees—reverberates with contradiction and opposition. The cross evokes the divine, and this is why Christ is often designated with X and His birthday often written as X-mas. Its rotation produces, as does any modification of a form, an opposition, a tension of meaning:

Cross



Rotation



No wonder that advertisers, manufacturers, Hollywood moguls, and all the other image-makers have adopted it as a symbol of whatever they wish to represent. They certainly seem to sense this ambiguity and the emotional charge it generates. It is, in a phrase, a symbol that expresses the inbuilt ambiguity of human existence itself—the tension that exists between the sacred and the profane within us—a dualism that finds expression, not only in a simple letter, but also in many artifacts, rituals, representations, works of art, and even religious traditions throughout the world. Before Lent there is Carnival, before the day of the dead, there is Halloween, and so on and so forth. X is both Carnival (a celebration of bodily desires) and Lent (a state that commands us on to contemplation of the divine at the same time that it condemns our bodily desires). Let me quote none other than the Marquis de Sade on this very point—a personage who was much more insightful than history has made him out to be:

Nature has got two voices, you know, one of them condemning all day what the other commands.

Pop culture and its kitschy products is nothing if it is not a channel for expressing this dualism, this tension between the pagan and the divine. X blends the two perfectly, becoming

an emblem for our times. As writer Milan Kundera puts it: “No matter how much we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition.”

Digging further into the history of alphabet characters, this theory of X, so to speak, becomes a much more tangible one. Writing started out, in fact, as a sacred or divine code that was perceived to have magical and supernatural functions. It was used to record the intentions of the gods. At the same time it was used, by the more mischievous and impish of ancient cultures, as graffiti, that is, as an expression of the profane. The ancient Egyptians called their writing system hieroglyphic because it was used to record hymns and prayers, to register the names and titles of individuals and deities, and to record various community activities—hieroglyphic derives from hieros “holy” and glyphein “to carve.” Indeed, in their origins most scripts were deemed to have sacred or mystical origins—for example, the Cretans attributed the origin of writing to Zeus, the Sumerians to Nabu, the Egyptians to Toth, the Greeks to Hermes, and the list could go on and on. However, the outcasts or troublemakers of the same social systems used the very same signs to deface and critique the powers that were.

Pictography was used, since its origin, to express the sacred and the scatological. Obscenity seems to have always gone hand and hand with moralism, defilement with adornment. As the French novelist Georges Bataille has so aptly put it: “Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled; not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it.”

Pictography, as its name implies, consisted of drawing pictures to represent objects and ideas. So intuitive and fundamental is pictography as a sign-making technique that it comes as little surprise to find that it has not disappeared from even our alphabet-based world. The figures designating male and female on washrooms and the no-smoking signs found in public buildings, to mention but two common examples, are modern-day pictographs.

One of the first civilizations to institutionalize pictographic writing as a means of recording ideas, keeping track of business transactions, and transmitting knowledge was the ancient Chinese one. According to some archeological estimates, Chinese pictography may date as far as back the fifteenth century BC. Another fully-developed ancient pictographic system was the Sumerian-Babylonian one that was developed nearly five thousand years ago. The Sumerians recorded their representations on clay tablets with wedge-shaped forms, hence the name cuneiform. Cuneiform writing was a very expensive and impracticable means of writing. For this reason it was developed, learned, and used primarily by rulers and clerics. In Egypt, hieroglyphic writing emerged around 2,700 to 2,500 BC. The Egyptians used papyrus (a type of early paper made from reeds) to record their writings, making it more practicable for many more classes of people.

More abstract forms of pictographic signs developed over time. These are called ideographs, since they bear some resemblance to the ideas they represent, assuming much more of a conventional knowledge of the relation between picture and idea on the part of the user. International symbols for such things as public telephones, washrooms, etc. are all ideographic. They are so common that we are hardly ever conscious of their ideographic structure and origin. Here are a

few that will confirm what I mean, since I am sure you will have no trouble instantly recognizing them:



As ideographs were used more and more they developed into logographs, which became even more abstract. Abbreviated to logo, it has become the signature of modern marketing and manufacturing styles. Logos based on font design, such as the Coca Cola logo are especially relevant to the present discussion. Such logos have become an unconscious part of modern-day symbolism. To wit: logos of Nike, Apple, Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Levi’s, etc. have become “meta-cultural signs” recognized by virtually anyone living in a modern consumerist society. As Naomi Klein remarks in her controversial book *No Logo*, for most firms today the symbolism constitutes “the very fabric of their companies.”

Consider the apple logo adopted by the Apple Computer Company: 🍏. It is a logo, clearly, suffused with latent religious symbolism suggesting, above all else, the story of Adam and Eve in the Western Bible, which revolves around the eating of an apple that contained forbidden knowledge. The logo reinforces this symbolic association because it shows an apple that has had a bite taken from it. The creator of the logo, a man named Rob Janoff of Regis McKenna Advertising, denies any intent to connect the logo to the Genesis story, claiming instead that he put the bite there in order to ensure that the figure was not interpreted as a tomato. Whatever the truth, the

bite in the apple evokes the Genesis story nonetheless because we cannot help but interpret signs in historical terms.

The use of logos is directed to the unconscious region of the human mind. Psychoanalysts claim that it is this region which contains our hidden wishes, memories, fears, feelings, and images that are prevented from gaining expression by the conscious part of the mind. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) divided the unconscious into two regions: a personal unconscious, containing the feelings and thoughts developed by an individual that are directive of his/her particular life schemes, and a collective unconscious, containing the feelings and thoughts developed cumulatively by the species that are directive of its overall life pattern. Jung described the latter as a “receptacle” of primordial images shared by all humanity that have become such an intrinsic part of the unconscious as to be beyond reflection. So, they gain expression instead in the symbols and forms that constitute the myths, tales, tunes, rituals, and the like that are found in cultures across the world. He called these universal images archetypes. In a sense, the letter X is an archetype, an unconscious symbol evoking the universally-felt dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.

A similar symbol, believe it or not, is the Playboy logo of a bunny wearing a bow tie: Its ambiguous design opens up at least two interpretive paths:

- rabbit = female = highly fertile = sexually active = promiscuous BUT ALSO: a friendly and reassuring animal (as in the Easter Bunny), OR a satirist (as in BUGS BUNNY)
- bow tie = elegance = night club scene = finesse = etc. =masculinity.

The appeal and staying power of this logo is due, arguably, to this inbuilt ambiguity. Ambiguity is what makes signs psychologically powerful. By not being able to pin down what a particular sign stands for at a conscious level, we start experiencing it more holistically and, thus, sensing great significance in it (at least unconsciously).

Logos have been responsible for linking products with life. Until the 1970s, logos on clothes, for instance, were concealed discretely inside a collar or on a pocket. But since then, they can be seen conspicuously, indicating, not surprisingly, that our society has become “logo conscious.” Ralph Lauren’s polo horseman, Lacoste’s alligator, and Nike’s “swoosh” symbol, to mention but three, are now shown prominently on clothing items, evoking images of heraldry and, thus, nobility. They constitute symbols that legions of people are seemingly eager to put on view in order to convey an aura of high class “blue-blooded” fashionableness.

Take, as another example, of logo power, the Nike logo, which is essentially a checkmark:  $\surd$ . As a visual sign suggesting speed, it works on several levels, from the iconic to the mythical. At the iconic level, it implies the activity of running at top speed with the Nike shoe; at the mythic level, it taps into the idea of speed as symbolic of power and conquest (such as in the Olympic races). The combination of these two signifying levels creates a perception of the logo, and thus the product, as having a connection to both reality and narrative history. After all, Nike was the goddess of victory. The Nike logo is a classic case of a company gradually simplifying its corporate identity as its fame increases. The company’s first logo appeared in 1971, when the word

Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, was printed in orange over the outline of a checkmark, the sign of a positive mark. Used as a motif on sports shoes since the 1970s, this checkmark is now so recognizable that the company name itself has become superfluous. The solid corporate logo design check was registered as a trademark in 1995.

The Nike logo design is an abstract wing. It was designed by Carolyn Davidson, as an appropriate and meaningful symbol for a company that marketed running shoes. The “JUST DO IT” slogan and logo design campaign communicated such a strong point of view to their target market that the meaning for the logo design symbol evolved into a battle cry and the way of life for an entire generation. Isn't it amazing how a simple checkmark can make a company into a huge success? Not to a semiotician. You get my point then about X?

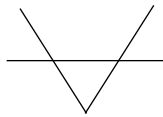
Given their semiotic power, it is little wonder to find that logos are used as well by non-commercial enterprises and organizations. One of the most widely known ones of this kind is the peace sign, often worn on chains and necklaces. Derived from an ancient runic symbol of despair and grief, it became the logo for philosopher Bertrand Russell's “Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament” in the 1950s. The logo's first widespread exposure came when it surfaced in the 1962 sci-fi film *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, leading to its adoption by the counterculture youth of the era.

Entire corporations (IBM, Ford, etc.) are now identified through their logography. Take, as a concrete example, the Disney Corporation, whose cartoon character Mickey Mouse became its logo 1929, when Disney allowed Mickey Mouse to be reproduced on school slates. A year later Mickey Mouse dolls went into production and throughout the 1930s the Mickey Mouse brand name and image were licensed with huge success. In 1955 *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on US network television, further entrenching the brand and image—and by association all Disney products—into the cultural mainstream. The case of Mickey Mouse has repeated itself throughout modern corporate society. The idea is to get the brand to become intertwined with cultural spectacles (movies, TV programs, etc.) and thus indistinguishable as a sign from other culturally-meaningful signs and sign systems. In the case of the Disney Corporation, for example, toys TV programs, films, videos, DVDs, theme parks, and the like have become part of the mythology of childhood. Children now largely experience their childhood through such symbolic products.

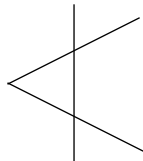
But you might still legitimately ask me: how can one read so much symbolism and meaning into something like an alphabet character? X is, when it comes right down to it, the twenty-fourth letter in the English alphabet. Ah, but therein lies the rub, as Shakespeare would say. The X design comes from an Egyptian hieroglyph. As a rotated cross it acts on our unconscious as it did way back then. Our mind is programmed by its nature to process it in this way. Indeed, every single alphabet character was born as a pictograph, whether we realize this or not. It was to facilitate the speed of writing that the Sumerians and the Egyptians eventually streamlined their pictographs and transformed them into symbols for the actual sounds of speech. The first alphabetic system emerged in the Middle East around 1000 BC, and was then transported by

the Phoenicians (a people from a territory on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, located largely in modern-day Lebanon) to Greece. It contained signs for consonant sounds only. When it reached Greece, signs for vowel sounds were added to it, making the Greek system the first full-fledged alphabetic one.

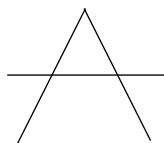
The transition from pictorial to sound representation came about to make writing rapid and efficient in its use of space. So, for example, instead of drawing the full head of an ox only its bare outline was at first drawn:



This then came to stand for the ox, which, eventually, came to stand for the word for ox (aleph in Hebrew). Finally, it came to stand just for the first sound in the word (a in aleph), which was represented by simply turning the pictograph 180 (and removing any minor details from it). In actual fact, archeological findings suggest that the Phoenician scribes, who wrote from right to left, drew the ox figure sideways (probably because it was quicker for them to do so). The Greeks, who adapted Phoenician letters, generally wrote from left to right, and so turned the A around the other way:



Around 500 BC writing became more standardized and letters stopped changing directions. By that time the A assumed the upright position it has today—the ox had finally settled on its horns.



The Greeks started the practice of naming each alphabet sign by such words as alpha, beta, gamma, etc., which were imitations of Phoenician words: aleph “ox,” beth “house,” gimel “cam-

el,” etc. Incidentally, the idea of an “alphabetic order” of letters from A to Z emerged because the letters were used to count the numbers in order—A stood for 1, B for 2, C for 3, and so on. The earliest record of alphabetic order is Psalm thirty-seven where verses follow the Hebraic sequence. Alphabetic writing has become the norm in many cultures. But in every alphabetic sign, there is a pictographic history and prehistory similar to the one described for the letter A. The pictographic content of our letters goes unnoticed because our eyes are no longer inclined to extract pictorial meaning from them, just phonetic representation. However, in the case of X not even that can be claimed. What sound does it stand for? In words such as Xerox or xylophone we actually pronounce it like a z. In a fascinating book titled *Sign after the X*, artist and writer Marina Roy has traced the history of this sign, showing that it has had very little to do with phonetics. It has been found on cave walls, appearing throughout history, and ending up today as an emblem of cyber culture. I have counted over 250 meanings for it, compared to just over 100 for its next rival, the letter A. Here are a few of its meanings, old and new. X stands for or has stood for:

- any unknown or unnamed factor, thing, or person
- the signature of any illiterate person
- the sign for mistake
- cancellation
- the unknown, especially in mathematics
- the multiplication symbol
- the Roman numeral ten
- a mechanical defect
- on a map a location
- choice on a ballot
- a motion picture rating
- a symbol for Christ
- the symbol for a kiss
- the symbol for Chronos, the god of Time, and the planet Saturn in Greek and Roman mythology

Today, it stands for youth culture (Generation X), comics (X-Men), and virtually anything appealing in cyber culture. It is no exaggeration to say that X is everywhere. It is a statement about who we are. It is an emblem, an allegorical picture for understanding the power of pop culture today. One can approach the study of pop culture from the standpoint of ideology, political theories, and other trendy “Chomskyan-like” approaches. But there is nothing more intellectually effective than deconstructing it by analyzing the nature of the signs used within it, such as the current ingenious spread of X. In its simple, yet powerful way, semiotics makes it possible to dismiss subversive warnings about the inanity of a lifestyle that “radical” academic pundits view as all superficial symbolism and little depth. I couldn’t disagree more. Are they implying that only

the symbols of the past and their attendant lifestyles had meaning?

The use and overuse of X actually reveals a truly interesting dimension of human evolution, explained by what has come to be known as Zipf's Law, after Harvard Linguistics Professor George Kingsley Zipf in the 1940s. Basically it states that in social evolution we tend towards least effort and the condensation of form. This tendency can be seen, for example, in the use (and constant growth) of abbreviations and acronyms: ad = advertisement; NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization, laser = light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation, etc. It can also be seen in tables, technical and scientific notation systems, indexes, footnotes, bibliographic traditions, and so on and so forth. All such phenomena validate the underlying implication in Zipf's Law that compression saves effort. The operation of Zipf's Law is particularly evident in how language has developed in cyberspace. Known as "Internetese," the language of cyberspace can be characterized as a condensed Zipfian code with its own type of abbreviations, acronyms, and slang aimed at reducing the time and effort required to relay messages in cyberspace e.g. b4 = "before," f2f = "face-to-face," gr8 = "great," h2cus = "hope to see you soon," g2g = "gotta go," and so on. This new code also contains emoticons, as they have come to be called, which are designed to lend compressed iconic commentary to messages: e.g. ;- ) = "winking," :-o = "shocked," }:-| = "anger," and so on. The crucial thing to note is that the characteristics of the Internetese code are now spreading to language generally. Spelling patterns that would have been seen as improper not too long ago are now much more acceptable, thanks to Internetese and to the unconscious force within humans, known as the Principle of Least Effort, that has generated it. In a basic sense the use of X fits in perfectly with Zipf's Law, both shaping us and revealing how far we have come as single-symbol users in modern society.

To conclude, we seem to be living today not in a morass of consumerist symbology gone amok, as some would claim, but rather in a magical kingdom of symbols and signs—a kind of Xanadu of the mind. In his marvelous poem Xanadu, a mythical region represented by the initial x of its name [no coincidence here], the words of the great poet Samuel Coleridge ring especially true today: "And in this tumult Kubla heard from far, ancestral voices prophesying war!" Those voices are heard each time X is used today. The unconscious symbolism that it expresses reveals that we truly want to leave a mark on the landscape of existence. There is very little doubt (to my mind at least), that today X marks that very spot today.