

Symbolic arrows

William Skyvington
Choranche (France)
August 7, 2011

I encountered the following logo in 1975, and it immediately intrigued me because of the information it seemed to convey concerning both the entity designated by the logo and the apparent intentions (maybe subconscious) of the people who had designed the logo.



It was the logo of a small group of people in France who were active in various fields of music: the **ACIC** (*Association pour la collaboration des interprètes et des compositeurs*). Two categories of musicians are mentioned explicitly in the name of this association: those who interpret (perform) music, and those who compose it. The essential role of the ACIC was to organize concerts of music composed and performed by members of the association.

The aspect of the logo that struck me was the abundance of arrow forms. Clearly, the five that point to the right represent a musical staff, and it is normal that the arrows point in the same temporal direction as the notes of music when they are read and performed. In fact, it is so normal that the five lines correspond to a musical movement towards the right that one wonders why the logo designers thought it worthwhile to insert the somewhat redundant arrow heads. The big arrow pointing to the left, with its reinforced two-part head, is more unexpected, in that it does not appear to coincide with any obvious reality of a purely musical nature. Before trying to imagine the possible sense of this symbolism, let us move to the giant letter A, which incorporates a fragment of the big arrow as its horizontal bar. The pair of pillars making up this A seem to be planted beneath the surface of the ground, represented by the big arrow, as if they were the massive foundations of a protective structure. The upper part of the A is yet another arrow head, pointing towards the heavens, like the spire of a cathedral. Clearly, it is the vast roof of a place of shelter and safety. There is no doubt whatsoever that the major element in the ACIC is this big sturdy A, for association. Viewed in this sense, the backwards-pointing arrow is probably a

defense mechanism, protecting the sanctuary and its occupants from any kind of stealthy rearguard attack.

My interpretation of the sense of the big arrow might throw light upon the reasons why there are arrow heads on the five lines of the staff. They could well be thought of as offensive arrows, designed to remove obstacles from the path ahead. In other words, the composers and performers are using their musical creations as weapons, enabling them to advance without hindrances along their desired artistic itinerary. Meanwhile, the association shelters them from the elements and protects them from any unexpected threats that might spring into existence behind their backs.

Does the symbolism of the logo suggest that composers and performers have equal status, as it were, within the association? Not really. On the contrary, the performer is represented by a relatively small letter I, firmly planted in the ground as if she were a vegetable, and she is totally engulfed by the great round form of the letter C, designating the composer. An observer has the impression that the ACIC is primarily an association of composers, and that performers are invited to participate in a minor secondary role.

For all I know, my spontaneous analysis of this logo may have been erroneous. I never thought it worthwhile to contact the founders of the association with a view to verifying my conclusions. My reflections left me nevertheless with the conviction that people do not design graphic symbols “innocently”. There is always some kind of underlying method, maybe subconscious, in their inventions. Above all, I was intrigued by the eagerness with which the designers of countless logos exploit arrow symbols. When I started to examine other logos, I was astonished to discover that we are surrounded perpetually by all kinds of arrows. In the arena of metaphorical symbols, I have the impression that the arrow is an Olympic champion, which has come down to us from various mythical archers of Antiquity... not to mention our very real ancestors who once used pointed darts to capture bisons, deers, wild boars and goats for meat. Humanity has always lived in a world of arrows, and we still do. The only difference is that, these days, the arrows that abound in our societies are nearly all purely symbolic.

Fanciful scenario

At the same time I was looking at the arrow-dominated ACIC logo, I happened to read an amusing novel, *Mutant 59, the Plastic Eater* by Kit Pedler and Gerry Davis, based upon an alarming new phenomenon: the proliferation throughout the planet of a virus that “eats” all kinds of plastics. The novelists suggested that plastics have become such a universal and essential ingredient of modern societies (for example, as shielding on electric cables) that the notorious virus soon threatened the continued existence of towns, cities and entire nations.

Inspired by the theme of this novel, I asked myself: What would happen if the modern world were to be attacked by a mysterious bug, of a somewhat virtual nature, whose toxicity consisted in its habit of gobbling up symbolic arrows of every imaginable kind? The ACIC logo would, of course, be reduced rapidly to a few dull letters. The bug would soon destroy all the familiar arrow-based signs that help us to move around safely on

urban streets and rural roads, provoking serious accidents. Innumerable science and technology textbooks would become unreadable, because arrow-eating bugs had caused a vital symbol to vanish. Countless commercial logos would lose their piercing dynamism as their arrows disappeared. Et cetera...

Setting aside this unreal scenario (which would necessitate the existence of magic bugs capable of performing pattern recognition upon all kinds of accessible and less accessible documents), I decided to envisage a study of the origins of arrow symbols within a broad spectrum of domains ranging from mathematics and computer science through to graphic design of the kind expressed in advertising and commercial logos.

History and typology of arrow symbols

What I had in mind might be described as a history and typology of arrow symbols. Not suprisingly, I soon discovered that a strictly historical study of symbolic arrows would need to be accompanied by investigations into both mythology and prehistory. I realized rapidly that the initial challenge facing me would consist of defining a fundamental concept that might be termed *arrowness*, or *sagittality*. It would be unthinkable to set out on a quest for arrow symbols throughout the ages unless I had a clear idea of what I was looking for. For example (just to take one of the earliest prehistoric objects I encountered), should we think of the small hunting darts of Lascaux—called *sagaies* in French—as primeval arrows?



They were launched, not by a bow, but by a throwing stick, like the Aboriginal *woomera*. Where do we draw the line (if we must) between arrows and spears? In a modern Olympic context, most people would find it strange if the authorities were to decide that archery and javelin-throwing were basically the same kind of sporting activity.

If, on the other hand, we were to admit that throwing sticks and darts were akin to bows and arrows, then we might be tempted to include slings and stones in our sagittal

typology. The following drawing appeared in an article by Manfred Korfmann, “The Sling as a Weapon”, *Scientific American* (October 1973):



Based upon an Assyrian relief from Nineveh, it depicts archers and slingers taking part in a campaign of Sennacherib [704-681 BCE]. The author points out that the slingers are marching behind the archers, which suggests that their stone projectiles outranged arrows. However, if our sagittal typology were to include stones hurled from slings, we would finally be obliged to draw the line between slings and modern firearms. So, to reduce the domain to reasonable limits, we would need to adopt a narrower definition of sagittality.

Themes symbolized by arrows

After having decided what to include in the category of real-world “arrows”, let us look at themes that an arrow might symbolize. First and foremost, the arrow is an instrument capable of killing. The target might be an enemy, which means that the arrow can symbolize the power of the archer and his capacity to protect his people. If the target is an animal, then the archer is possibly obtaining food for his family. So, once again, it could symbolize protection. Among the other major aspects of arrows giving rise to symbols, we find, of course, speed and precision... although bows and arrows ceased, long ago, to stand up to comparison with firearms.

Funnily enough, for millennia, we have heard of a famous symbolic arrow that has struck countless human individuals, often with deep and lasting effects, but never in a murderous fashion. I am talking of the little winged fellow, son of Venus and Mars, named Cupid (or Eros in the Greek tradition), who flits around naked, armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows, looking for pairs of “victims” who will be condemned—after being “wounded” by an arrow from Cupid—to falling in love with one another.



Another celebrated personage associated with arrows was Saint Sebastian, who was revered as the patron saint of archers before attaining stardom as a cult figure among gay males. In the following composition, the saint is depicted on the left, whereas the fellow on the right is simply a French model posing in a saintly fashion for a gay magazine cover.



The arrows did not actually kill Sebastian. He was nursed back to health by a Roman woman named Irene, who would later become a saint. However Sebastian finally attained martyrdom through being clubbed to death.



One wonders whether the arrows piercing the flesh of the handsome youth might have phallic connotations, which would throw light upon Saint Sebastian's cultic role among homosexuals. The upwards-slanted arrow in the biological symbol for males certainly gives the impression that it might be interpreted symbolically as an erect penis.

Mixing arrow metaphors

An arrow—both at rest, and in flight—conveys many messages. The object itself is aesthetic. With respect to its linear axis, it is beautifully symmetrical... otherwise it would wobble in flight, and never attain the archer's target. Viewed at a right angle, however, the arrow becomes the most harshly asymmetrical object that could ever be imagined. At its attack end, there is sharpness, indeed death. At its rear guiding end, on the other hand, there is an alignment of soft feathers. And they are connected by a sturdy wooden shaft.



The time-honored Parker Pen Company, founded in Wisconsin in 1888, incorporated an arrow symbol in their pen clips in 1933. They soon realized the marketing potential of this elegant form, which even resembled the shape of a writing implement. So, Parker's production soon became a splendid assortment of sophisticated arrow-inspired instruments. Around 1978, the French branch of Parker had the imagination to ask the cartoonist Claire Brétecher to create a delightful publicity drawing.



This drawing has always amused me greatly, because its “arrowness” is a reflection of certain social behavior at that epoch. To appreciate the humor, you need to understand what is written (using a Parker pen, of course). The dispirited fellow is trying to pen a short message (to be published in a newspaper, no doubt, because this was well before the birth of the Internet) that might enable him to find a female. We can read the first three versions, all of which have been crossed out and discarded. I have expanded the abbreviations and translated them into English:

— *Man, 40 years old, dynamic, intelligent, cultivated, sense of humor, is seeking a young woman, maximum age 28, for a private relationship.*

— *Male, new style, is looking for a moderate feminist, maximum age 28, for contacts of a different kind, prospective happiness.*

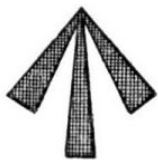
— *Creative guy, tender and intense, wishes to encounter a young woman of 28 for excursions into space-time.*

The final version, alas, is definitely less inspired, more down to earth:

— *Fellow, depressive, inwardly phallocratic, outwardly open-minded, is looking for anything at all, maximum age 28, so he can listen to her moaning.*

Cupid seems to be somewhat dubitative about the tone of the looking-for-love message. Is he truly prepared to fire an arrow at such-and-such a lucky female “maximum age 28”?

Several famous arrow logos



For centuries, in the English-speaking world, the so-called *broad arrow* has been used as a sign designating government property. It first appeared as a heraldic device, probably indicating that the individual in question was in charge of weapons (initially, bows and arrows). This sign was printed on the garments of convicts transported to Australia. Apparently, there is still a law in the UK that prohibits a private citizen from using this sign on his personal belongings.



On the Great Seal of the USA, the bald eagle is clutching 13 arrows in its left talon, and an olive branch in its other talon. The arrows symbolize war and the olive branch, peace. And the eagle’s regard is turned towards peace. This so-called *bundle of arrows* symbol is meant to evoke a dense cohort of archers. In this sense, it is similar to symbols based upon a Macedonian pack of spears and shields, known as a phalanx.



Ever since the start of the 19th century, logos based upon a bundle of 5 arrows have been used by several branches of the Rothschild banking family, both in England and in France. In the spirit of Psalm 127 (“*like arrows in the hand of a warrior*”), the arrows represent the five sons of the patriarch Mayer Amschel Rothschild [1744-1812].

An object and its flight

A primeval disturbance was created by the philosopher Zeno of Elea, who enunciated his so-called *Arrow Paradox*, which would lead us to believe (if we were the kinds of souls who believed smart Greek talkers like Zeno) that motion itself is impossible. Insofar as Zeno had already "proven" that Achilles could never overtake a tortoise, his credibility was in doubt, even though his philosophical logic appeared to be impeccable. For many centuries, philosophers simply preferred to ignore the alleged paradoxes of Zeno... up until the great Bertrand Russell appeared on the scene, and cleaned up all this mess.

An interesting question arose as soon as I ascended from the terrain of real-world bows and arrows, and glided into the realms of symbols. Is the source of sagittal symbols the arrow itself, with its slender shaft and pointed head, or would it rather be the *trajectory* described by an arrow in flight? I soon reached the conclusion that the only satisfactory answer is: *A bit of both!* That's to say, we should not seek to split hairs about all that might be evoked by symbolic arrows. Fair enough...



Meanwhile, with the help of friends, I continued to collect—like a philatelist—examples of arrow symbols of all kinds. Most of them were banal, exploiting all the expected connotations of arrows. This simple road sign demonstrates the splendid clarity of arrows when they are used correctly: that is, in such a way that there is no confusion, only an unambiguous message that the viewer should be able to grasp instantly.



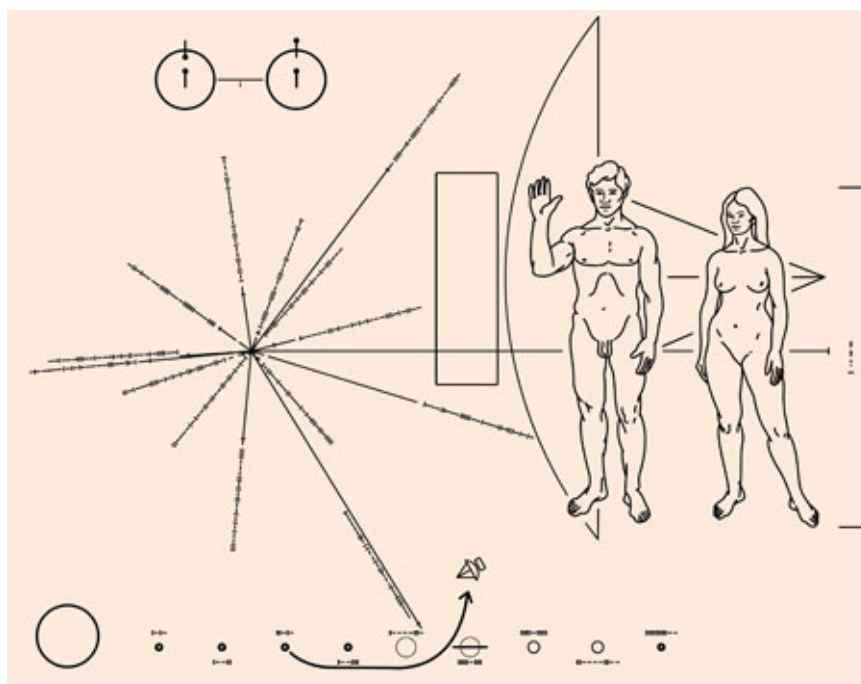
But some uses of arrow symbols can be comically confusing, such as this French road sign stating that the driver must pursue an obligatory itinerary, and then offering him an arrow choice of going either to the left or to the right. It might be said that the sign implies, at least, that the driver does not have the right to turn around and simply return to where he came from!

Clearly, arrow symbols are being used here and elsewhere to evoke, no longer a pointed shaft with feathers at its rear end, but the *directions* in which such a projectile might travel.

Pioneer plaque

And that takes us immediately to one of the most celebrated cases ever of an arrow symbol: in the Pioneer plaque, placed aboard US spacecraft in 1972 and 1973, which might enter in contact with extraterrestrial life.

At the bottom of this famous graphism (created by the wife of Carl Sagan), a lengthy arrow-headed curve extends from the black dot representing the third planet, and terminates alongside a pictorial representation of a spacecraft. We earthly observers have no trouble in understanding that this means that the spacecraft departed from the third planet, Earth, and followed an itinerary that placed it in the vicinity of the orbit of Saturn.



But would extraterrestrial observers be capable of detecting the essential information conveyed by this graphic symbolism? Suppose that their ancestors had hunted wild animals with bows and arrows, enabling the extraterrestrials to recognize the pointed arrow-head on the curved line. Could we then expect them to grasp the intended sense of the latter as a trajectory? It is by no means certain that typical extraterrestrials (if such creatures can be imagined) would indeed grasp the idea of a curved arrow.

Article on symbols by Ernst Gombrich

The September 1972 issue of *Scientific American* contained an article by Ernst Gombrich, "The Visual Image", which inspired me greatly in my research into symbolic arrows. In particular, I had the impression that Gombrich would surely be able to guide me concerning an underlying problem that had bothered me constantly from the beginning of my reflections upon arrow-based symbols: namely, the precise *metalanguage* that I should adopt in order to talk coherently about visual symbols. So, I sent him a lengthy letter concerning my project. And I was delighted to receive a friendly reply from the great art historian. Copies of these two documents can be found at the end of the present article.

Conclusions

This exchange of letters was followed rapidly by my decision to abandon my project, because I was starting to realize that the veritable objects of my quest—embryonic arrow symbols from the past—were highly elusive, and almost impossible to track down. Even in such an apparently clearcut domain as mathematical notation, I found it an extremely arduous task to attempt to ascertain the various stages in the gestation of arrow symbols. In the case of vectors, for example, I finally gathered that several mathematicians started to designate vectors by small horizontal arrows (placed above the alphabetic symbol

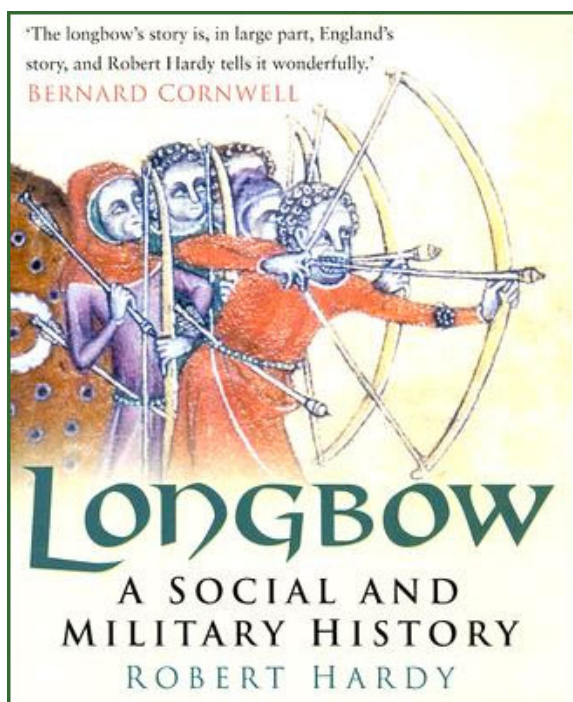
indicating the vector 's value) towards the end of the 19th century. Likewise, I discovered that a certain J G Leathem of St John's College, Cambridge, appeared to be the first mathematician to use an arrow, in 1905, to indicate the continuous passage of a variable to a limit (as in calculus)... although it has been suggested that Riemann [1826-1866] may have introduced a similar device in a German-language lecture in 1856-57.

Several interesting sagittal themes have not yet been mentioned in the present article:

- **Myths**

Besides the case of Eros, bows and arrows reappear constantly in classical Greek mythology in the context of heroes such as Apollo, Heracles and Artemis, and these arms are often mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. Later, the mysterious religion of Mithraism, which seems to have been a rival of Christianity within the Roman Empire, included two fundamental legends involving bows and arrows. In one, the god fired an arrow into a rock, whereupon water gushed out. In the other, Mithra rode out on a horse to hunt, and every one of his arrows killed a wild beast (which were thought of as symbolizing evil). But the Mediterranean world was not alone in imagining mythical bows and arrows, which are found in cosmological tales in many remote corners of the planet. For example, the great British anthropologist James Frazer [1854-1941], in his *Myths of the Origin of Fire*, transcribed a tale from the Okanagan natives of British Columbia (Canada). Intent upon entering in contact with the heavens, they decided to construct a chain of arrows. Their arrows refused, however, to stick in the sky. A magic bird, capable of performing archery while it was flying, succeeded in fixing a first arrow in the celestial vault, and the human archers could then use this fixed arrow as a support for their chain. Once the chain of arrows existed, they were able to clamber up it and capture fire.

- **Archery through the ages**



An excellent book on the history of archery was written by the English actor Robert Hardy back in 1976. (These days, this distinguished specialist of the English longbow is better known for having played the role of Cornelius Fudge in the Harry Potter films.) Hardy describes the major battles in which British and French archers occupied the center of a bloody stage. Finally, he presents the technical aspects of the modern sport of archery, which was introduced into the Olympic Games in 1900.

There is a vast and intriguing subject that Hardy mentions briefly: the role of archery in Zen Buddhism.

- **Legends**

In medieval England, the popular outlaw Robin Hood was an outstanding archer.



In Switzerland, at about the same time, William Tell found fame through his crossbow.



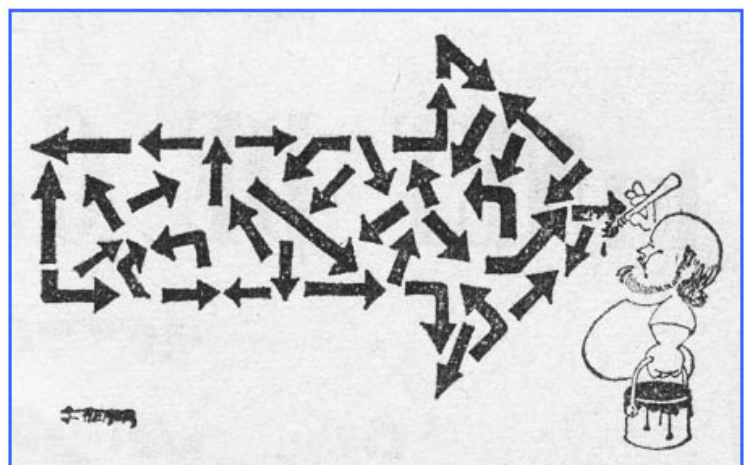
- **Universal graphic-symbol language**

Finally, within the general context of a study of symbolic arrows, there is an exceptional theme that certainly deserves to be discussed: the challenge of designing graphic symbols to create a veritable language. The US designer Henry Dreyfuss [1904-1972] imagined such a system, outlined in his *Symbol Sourcebook* (1971). In 1976, I had the privilege of talking with the famous French cartoonist Jean Effel [1908-1982] about a similar system that he had described in his privately-printed *Avant-Projet pour une écriture universelle* (1968).

Observing my project today, I am convinced that

(a) it should appear worthwhile to certain young researchers in the domain of graphic design, and that

(b) the resources of the Internet would greatly facilitate research operations in this domain.



— drawing by **Bernard Chenez** in *Le Monde* of 28 July 1976

William Skyvington
16 rue Rambuteau
75003 Paris
France
December 14, 1976

Sir Ernst Gombrich
19 Briardale Gardens
London NW3
United Kingdom

Dear Sir Ernst,

I am an Australian, living in Paris, where I work as a writer (two books written directly in French, on subjects related to computers and cybernetics, the more recent one published by the *Editions du Seuil*, **Machina sapiens**, 1976).

At present I am carrying out research for what I hope will develop into a book. The subject: *the symbolic role of the arrow*.

Naturally, I was thrilled to discover your article, *The Visual Image*, in the September 1972 **Scientific American**, in which you actually mention the very subject with which I am concerned... and I therefore thought it would be a good idea to write to you directly to ask whether you would be kind enough to provide me with further valuable information. I am obliged to set down a few of my ideas and problems. So, I beg you beforehand to excuse me for encroaching upon your time.

I am faced with two distinct tasks. One is the obvious problem of gathering together the actual *subject matter* of my future manuscript, and the other is the delicate question of deciding upon a coherent *form* and a consistent *language* in which to present my subject. In many ways, I already suspect that this second problem is going to turn out the more difficult of the two... and the problem about which I would be most grateful to receive your advice. But let me first say a few words concerning the subject matter:

1. Obviously, in a book about arrows, I am going to spend quite a lot of time talking about *real* arrows: the invention of the bow, examples from history of the use of arrows in warfare and hunting, the survival of this arm in today's so-called primitive societies, and in the sporting field.
2. The arrow is present in many *myths* (Apollo, Artemis, Hercules, Cupid, Mithra) and *legends* (William Tell, Robin Hood). These are still, in a sense, "real" arrows... and museums contain countless pictorial and sculptural representations of these heroic archers. But, here already, especially in the case of Mithra, the arrow is

developing “overtones” of something more than a mere projectile weapon. Driven into a rock, it can cause a miraculous spring to gush out; sent into the heavens, it can give rise to the constellation Sagittarius.

3. In cases such as Zen Buddhism and medieval chivalry, the practice of archery takes on a mystical character... which still survives today in archery sects and companionships. (While typing these words, I suddenly realized that my letter is addressed to a Knight Bachelor of the British Kingdom! And that you are no doubt in touch with a wealth of information concerning the role of the arrow in heraldry.)
4. At some time or another (that remains for me a thing that I will have to “track down” precisely), people started making use of a simplified pictorial representation of the arrow as a shaft and pointed tip, generally without feathers. If one were to speak of “arrow-ness” as the general concept covering everything concerned with real and imaginary arrows, it could be said that this graphical arrow refers to various specific subsets of the (denoted and connoted) attributes of “arrow-ness”.
 - a. In scientific applications, it is used as a *sign* for numerous statements and operations involving the notions of displacement, connectivity, transformation, causality, etc. The “archer” and the “target” can generally be interpreted merely as successive points on a directed trajectory. (Curved and double-headed “arrows” do require a little bit of imaginative explanation!)
 - b. As a directional *signal*, the arrow would appear to be related to an obvious convention that might be summarized as: “Act like an arrow, and head off in the direction that’s indicated!”
 - c. Publicity and trademark designers—not to speak also of Freudian-inspired people in all walks of life—make use of the arrow as a *symbol* for evoking many of the more remote connotations of the concept of “arrow-ness”: progress into the future, penetration into the target, ethereal soaring, boldness, protection (an arrow pointing upwards reminds one of a house roof), esthetic grace (Parker pens), non-stop movement and circulation, etc.
5. Finally, there are various subsidiary themes such as, for example, reference to arrows in *literary metaphors*, and the construction of *objects* (church steeples, towers, fountains, fountain pens, etc) that are “streamlined” to resemble arrows. Such objects are often referred to metaphorically (at least in French) as arrows.

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First of all, may I ask you whether there are any particular works that come to your mind on these topics? Perhaps your extensive knowledge in the universe of art and culture might lead to my discovering that the subject has already been treated in English or Germanic literature.

Second, there is the whole question of the *language* and correct *terminology*. I noticed three terms—*sign*, *signal* and *symbol*—that occur in your article, together with *symptom*. Unfortunately, I am not sufficiently familiar with the Würzburg school of psychology to know whether Bühler's terminology would be suitable for talking about arrows. Intuitively, I am inclined to be doubtful, for the following reasons:

- *Symptom* seems to me a rather strange word for describing, say, the artistic expression to be found in Bernini's Teresa of Avila, with its arrow-armed angel, or in Giorgetti's arrow-riddled Sebastian. The medical associations brought to mind by the word make it a dangerous candidate for use within such a pierced-flesh environment!
- *Signal* seems almost "wrong" when applied to the idea of arousing interest or emotion on the part of the message receiver. I suppose communications theory is to blame for relegating this word to such a coldly mechanical level. And, if I were to refer to the feeling of discomfort aroused in me by Paul Klee's arrow-dominated faces in *Figuren und Masken*, or by Steinberg's arrow-invaded cities, as a "signal", I think this would create an ambiguity, since the arrow itself must sometimes be called a signal... for example, when it informs a motorist that he must turn right to avoid driving over a cliff, or when a lighted flare is fired into the sky—like the flaming arrows used by Hercules against the Hydra—as a distress signal.
- *Symbol* is, of course, the most difficult word to use correctly. Certainly, if the entire range of descriptive (statement) functions in language and imagery is to be thought of as "symbolic", then this is in fact a step in the same direction as Ludwig von Bertalanffy when he says: "Except for the immediate satisfaction of biological needs, man lives in a world not of things but of symbols." But, to my way of thinking, if we end up calling practically everything a "symbol", then this merely means that we have decided consciously to reduce the information content of the word, thus producing a corruption that bears little resemblance to the original word as it appears, for example, in the phrase: "Picasso's dove is a symbol of peace." Mathematicians, of course, have fallen into this trap: what I used to call a plus *sign* (+) when I was a schoolboy would now be referred to, by most American writers, as a mathematical *symbol*.

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The major problem, I think, is the distinction between what we are going to call a *sign* and what we are going to call a *symbol*. Here in France, as you are no doubt aware, it has become fashionable—ever since latter-day structuralists have rediscovered Saussure—to use certain French terms in specific ways:

- a. The word "*symbole*" is avoided as much as possible. For example, Leroi-Gourhan uses only the term "*signe*" when talking about the arrow-like markings found in paleolithic cave paintings, even though he sometimes points out certain clearly-elucidated symbolic relationships.

- b. Whenever possible, the words “*signe*”, “*signifiant*” (*signans*) and “*signifié*” (*signatum*) are preferred, conforming to general semiological practice.

In your article in *Scientific American*, I notice that you have used the word *sign* for the Olympic Games indicators, horseshoes, the skull-and-crossbones and also for heraldic elements, whereas arrows and crosses (in religion) are called *symbols*. Then you brought in the words *pictograph* and *rebus*. Would you say in fact that the graphic arrow can be a pictograph in certain cases?

Also, I was most interested in your analysis of image reading in terms of “three variables: the *code*, the *caption* and the *context*” ... although I am still a little doubtful concerning the precise meaning of these variables, which seem to overlap one another. For example, are not the code and the caption merely, respectively, the *implicit* and the *explicit* (or imposed) segments of that part of the context that affects the interpretation of such-and-such an image? And isn’t there yet another essential variable, which you must surely refer to as the *content* of the image itself? For example, if I walked into a shop selling archery equipment, and saw the image of an arrow on the wall in front of me, there are (irrespective of code and the context such as I have just defined it) three theoretical possibilities depending on the inherent content of the image:

1. If the image appeared as a conventional stylized arrow (simple pointed shaft), I would merely imagine it as a direction indicator for finding my way into the shop.
2. If the image was rather ornate, with all sorts of graphic flourishes, I would no doubt conclude that it was the shopkeeper’s trademark.
3. Finally, if the image looked like a skillful replica of an Easton or Micro-Flite competition shaft, I would probably conclude that this was the corner of the shop where they stock and sell their arrows!

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I really must leave off there, as I see that my letter is becoming rather lengthy. I do hope you understand that I have reached the point (!) in my thinking about arrows at which I need, as it were, to “talk about” certain aspects of the subject with an interesting—and, I hope, interested—listener. When I discovered your article this afternoon, I immediately “identified” you as just the person I was looking for, and so I sprang to my typewriter without even waiting until I’d gone along to the British Council to read your books. So, please, if you find that any of my problems are likely to be solved by my serious study of your books (which I plan to start out on tomorrow morning), then these questions can be simply disregarded.

Thanking you, Sir Ernst, for your attention,

Yours sincerely,

(signed) William Skyvington

19 Briardale Gardens, N.W.3.

18th December 1976

Dear Mr Skyvington,

Many thanks for your interesting letter. To give first a straight answer to your straight question, no, I have not written more about the arrow. I have written a book (really a collection of essays with additions and expansions) called "Symbolic Images," in which I deal with some questions of method, and in the long and somewhat long-winded chapter 'Icones Symbolicae' also with the history of the doctrines of Symbolism etc. You may find some material there to explain the semantic confusions which beset us. By the way, don't blame Bühler for the terminology I used, he wrote in German in a self-made terminology I did not wish to adopt in a popular article.

I hope I will not shock and surprise you too much, however, if I advise you not to worry over-much about words and terms. I learned this attitude from my friend the philosopher K.R. Pepper who first drew attention to these matters in chapter XI of his book *The Open Society and its Enemies*. There he explains that scientists never worry about "what is?" questions and never over words. No geologist is unhappy because he cannot define the distinction between a mountain and a hill, or a river and a stream. It is always possible in any given context to make clear what you mean and how you propose to use a term.

Popper has recently elaborated and explained this anti-'essentialist' position in his intellectual autobiography, published under the title Unended Quest by Fontana publishers. I am afraid the humanities are still largely caught in the coils of Aristotelian scholasticism and find it hard to liberate themselves.

I do not want by this to discourage your search for a better terminology which will enable you to make the distinctions you find useful; but if it is not one term, make it two!

On the whole, though, it seems to me that the very examples you use show the importance of fluidity in cultural symbolism. I have also written a little about this area of flux in a chapter of my book Art and Illusion headed "Pygmalion's Power", but the main problem always to be faced again is that of metaphor (to which, if I may quote myself again, I have drawn attention in Icones Symbolicae when discussing emblematics).

It so happens that I have been invited to Paris in March to give four lectures on the "Analysis of Image Making" at the College de France; an ~~intimidating~~ intimidating task. It would be a pleasure, though, if we might meet on that occasion, unless you plan to come to London before. In any case I am looking forward to your book.

Yours sincerely

EF Egon W. L.