

Semiotics and Visual Communication

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Expressing ideas is probably nothing new to us. Since we were young, most of us have been transmitting messages by either the spoken or written word. Whatever the mode, communication has been taking place. Communication is, by definition, a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior (Merriam Webster 2011). This seemingly basic and straightforward concept is fundamental to the education of Visual Communicators. Design instructors often refer their students to some variation of a standard definition of Graphic Design as: *a form of visual communication used to convey a message or information to an audience* (Landa, 2011). Some variations may say, a “specific message” or a “target audience”, but the idea is the same -- communication. The simple transfer of information from one to another becomes more complex, however, as we begin to contemplate this “*common system of symbols, signs, or behavior*”.

When contemplating with symbols, signs, and behavior, one is dealing with Semiotics. While the term semiotics may not be totally new, ones understanding of the term may be limited to the fact that it deals with signs and symbols. Since communication is built upon signs, symbols, or behavior, and visual communications goal is to communicate, then could a more thorough understanding of Semiotics be valuable to Visual Communication students?

Even a cursory look into the field of semiotics requires wading through vast amounts of technical jargon. It is quite an effort, but an effort worth pursuing. Albert Einstein once stated, “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”

This paper will attempt to give a simplified explanation of semiotics, an overview of the two primary sources of semiotic theory utilized today in the area of visual communication education, and reasons why a more thorough understanding of semiotics would be of value to visual communication students.

### **What is Semiotics?**

*Semiotics: the study of signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication. (Wikipedia 2011)* Reduced to a simple definition, Semiotics is the study of signs. Not just signs that might readily come to mind like highway signs or store marquees, but also anything that has the capacity to stand for or represent some other meaning. “In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects.” (Chandler 2002) In a very broad sense Semiotics relates to everything that could be taken as a sign (Eco, 1976, 7). “Semiotics represents a range of studies in art, literature, anthropology, and the mass media rather than an independent academic discipline. The disciplines involved in semiotics include linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, aesthetic and media theory, psychoanalysis and education” (Hodge, 2003, para. 3).

While the study of signs has been around for centuries, much information on semiotics is theoretical and seeks to establish its scope and principles. Current studies usually center around two branches of thought developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure called his study Semiology, while Peirce called his Semiotics. Although terminology and pursuits differ, Chandler (2002, p. 4) noted that Peirce and Saussure were both concerned with the fundamental definition of signs. “The key to semiotics is the concept of the entity called

'sign'. Signs participate in a symbiotic relationship with language, but it is in fact a priori to language. Roughly stated, a sign is that entity which allows someone to interpret something that represents meaning in reference to something else. In other words a sign is a process. Through signs we are able to represent and interpret, and to develop knowledge and signification" (Ockerse, 1984, para. 5)

Saussure and Peirce approached the study of semiotics from unique perspectives. Skaggs (2011) notes that "Saussure envisioned a sign as a two-faced thing, like a coin with a head and tail sides. In a spoken word, one side of the "coin" is the sound pattern while the other side is the conceptual idea. Saussure called these two sides of the sign the signifier and the signified."

**SIGNIFIER:** the form the sign takes, i.e. a sound pattern.

**SIGNIFIED:** the concept to which it refers.

The relationship formed between the signifier and the signified, Saussure referred to as "signification", and both parts must be present in order to have a "sign". The Saussurean model holds that all signs need a relational system in order to make sense because signs relate to each other. "No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs. Both signifier and signified are purely relational entities (Saussure 1983, 121). To Saussure, language was primary to the sign, yet he stressed that the association of the word and the sound was arbitrary. Meaning that something is called by a name because it is decided arbitrarily what it will be called within our language system.

**ARBITRARINESS:** the term given to choices and actions subject to individual will, judgment or preference, based solely upon an individual's opinion or discretion. not absolute.

However, 'the arbitrariness principle does not, of course mean that an individual can arbitrarily choose any signifier for a given signified. The relationship between a signifier and its signified is not a matter of individual choice; if it were, then communication would become impossible' (Chandler, 2002, 27). So after a sign becomes established by any language system, individuals cannot change them. In dealing with Saussurian semiotics, 'when attention is turned to language-as-system, it becomes clear that our concern is really with various interactions of sign, of which the linguistic sign is central (Skaggs, 2011).

In contrast, Charles Peirce constructed a model of signs based on his theory of reality which characterized how things relate to each other according to his three forms of being: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

FIRSTNESS: pure feeling or simply existing

SECONDNESS: one thing in relation to something else. 'Peirce often called secondness "brute" relations (Skaggs, 2011).

THIRDNESS: one thing relates to another thing through the intercession of a third thing. – the sign.

For example, morning comes and we open our eyes and realize we are awake (firstness), we can see through our opened eyes because of light shining through the window (secondness), and looking out the window we enjoy the sunrise (thirdness). While each form of being is unique, each builds on and includes the predecessor. We enjoy the sunrise (thirdness) because we saw the light (secondness) through our awakened eyes (firstness). It would be impossible for us to enjoy the sunrise if we had never awoke and opened our eyes. So it would be impossible to experience Thirdness, without Secondness and Firstness. They are all in relation to one another.

Chandler (2011) characterized the Peircean approach to signs, not as a double sided coin like Saussure, but more like the three points of a triangle with each component interrelated to the other: the Sign, the Referent, and the Interpretant. These three components also relate to each other in an inclusive manner. The Referent is inclusive of the Sign, and the Interpretant is inclusive of both the Sign and the Referent. Each of these three components also have expressions of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

In Steven Skaggs Visual Design Semiotic Primer (2011) he deals with each of the three components of a sign. First the Sign, which is something that stands for its Referent to an Interpretant. Skaggs interpreted Peirce's understanding of what can act as the Sign as Qualities, Displays, and Systems.

QUALITIES: aspects, characteristics, traits, potentialities (firstness)

DISPLAYS: includes the qualities as they are employed in real life production (secondness)

SYSTEMS: principles, laws, habits or customs. (thirdness)

Skaggs (2011) used the example of a particular color (Qualities; Firstness) applied to a length of ribbon (Displays; Secondness) which is folded over itself to form the familiar shape of ribbons used to show your support for a particular cause (Systems; Thirdness).

Now, because this system exists, yellow ribbons are a "sign" of support for our troops, red ribbons are a "sign" of support for the fight against HIV, and pink ribbons are a "sign" for the fight against breast cancer. Even now, just the color pink can be a "sign" for the fight against breast cancer, or a pink t-shirt can be a "sign", especially when worn to an event where a system exists for everyone in a stadium to be wearing pink shirts to show support for breast cancer awareness.

Dealing with the Referent: the thing or object the sign stands for or represents, Skaggs (2011) explained that a sign relates to its Referent in three expressions: Iconic, Indexic, and Symbolic.

ICONIC- a resemblance to the object in some way (firstness)

INDEXIC- suggest location and placement by some actual physical contact. (secondness)

SYMBOLIC - is established by agreement, habit , principles, rules, or customs. (thirdness)

If we take for instance a portrait of a person as the Referent, it could be iconically represented by a silhouette inside a white border; indexically by the actual photograph of the subject; and sepia toned it might be symbolic of a by gone era. Road signs many times combine a symbol (yellow triangle for caution) with an index of a man working.

The third part of a sign according to Peirce is the Interpretant: the consequence of the object being represented by the sign. Skaggs (2011) asserts it is “concerned with how the sign/referent pair drives one to act. One might call this the sign’s interpretive authority.” He classifies the three terms as Image, Assertion, and Argument.

The Image is mainly concerned with identification and recognition. The interpretant can analyze and interpret the qualities of the image. The Assertion is concerned with the claims made and makes the interpretant question the validity of it. The Argument is usually implied but moves the interpretant to draw a conclusion. Skaggs (2011) illustrates the concept with the following:

- 1) an image: a homeless child
- 2) an assertion: This child before me is homeless.
- 3) an argument: This child before me is homeless.

(if a homeless child finds no shelter, he will die)

Therefore, I ought to find shelter for the child.”

While both the Saussure and Peirce approach to semiotics have application to the field of visual communications, Ockerse (1984) noted that “ since Pierce’s work is by far the most elaborate and determined attempt to give an account of most signs and their meaning, Peirce’s work lends itself best as the source to develop a design or visual communication theory on semiotics.” Skaggs (2011), who forms his theories of graphic design on the Peirce’s model of semiotics, relates that with Saussure’s theory being based on linguistics it is harder to make the transition from word-based concepts to visual concepts. He explains,

In visual communication, a letter does have a meaning. A portion of a letter - such as a serif - has meaning, too. Printing a word in red ink has meaning. The entire block of text has meaning depending on its relationship with the edges of the page, the typeface, its boldness, its leading, etc.... Deriving graphic design theory from continentalist [Saussurean] semiology is like putting a sport jacket on a horse: trying to fit an essentially linguistic suit of clothes onto a body that has a very different anatomy.

### **Why Semiotics?**

Richard Pratt (2007), in the article Making Semiotic Theory More Relevant to Professional Graphic Design, ranked one priority higher among members of the AIGA than all others: “proving the value of design to the general public, and specifically, the business community.” With the increase accessibility the general public has to the tools (computer workstations and design software) of the graphic design professionals, it become increasingly easier for the public to create their own designs that maintain a professional



high production value. This causes businesses to question why they should pay for professional work when amateurs do the work for less. He reasons that it takes someone with knowledge to differentiate themselves to their clients. Designers should be able to explain how their choices are making the message of the client more effective, and how they, as professionals add a value to a product that separates them from the amateur. In analyzing and explaining the the knowledge and tools designers are using, Pratt feels that knowledge of semiotics is foundational to visual communicators defense of their positions.

Daniel Chandler, in *Semiotics: The Basics* (2007), reasons why visual communicators must be well versed in semiotics. "The study of signs is the study of construction and maintenance of reality. To decline such a study is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings." As visual communicators seek convey their messages to an audiences, they cannot overlook the fact that for their intended meaning to be perceived correctly, they must be in control. They must think and act with knowledge for their solutions to be effective. Since, as Skaggs (2011) noted "all sighted human being sue visual signs to communicate," it is imperative for the visual communicator to make their messages more clear, understandable, and memorable.

In the article, *Semiotics: A Primer for Designers*, Challis Hodge made some interesting observations as to the importance of semiotics.

Semiotics is important for designers as it allows us to understand the relationships between signs, what they stand for, and the people who must interpret them - the people we design for. Semiotics teaches us as designers that our work has no meaning outside the complex set of factors that define it. Semiotics teaches us as designers that our work has no meaning outside the complex set of factors that

define it. These factors are not static, but rather constantly changing because we are changing and creating them. The deeper our understanding and awareness of these factors, the better our control over the success of the work products we create. Semiotics also helps us not to take reality for granted as something that simply exists. It helps us to understand that reality depends not only on the intentions we put into our work but also the interpretation of the people who experience our work. Meaning is not contained in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. It is not simply transmitted—it is actively created, according to a complex interplay of systems and rules of which we are normally unaware. Becoming aware of these systems and rules and learning to master them is the true power of visual communication and design. “

For designers to do what they do, they must design with understanding. “The task of design, in general terms, is to turn requirements and needs into concrete things. In meeting these requirements and needs, the designer must turn ideas into concrete things, to turn analysis into synthesis, and to define things for use. This means that the notion of a thing, in the most general sense of the word, and the notion of defining things are of fundamental importance in design practice.” (Hallas, 2011) If this “notion of a thing” is a sign, then the more understanding one gains of semiotics, the more they understand that signs are fundamental to all that they do.

Communicating the message to the audience, the fundamental mission of visual communication, can be accomplished through various avenues, and semiotics gives numerous options. Sean Hall (2007), in the book “ This Means This, That Means That - A

Users Guide to Semiotics” explains that semiotics gives “many ways to not mean what you literally say” through simile, metaphors, clever metonyms, ironies, etc. By understanding semiotics, it will be easier for one to say what they mean in a non literal way, and offer “non literal communication is more interesting and no less important” (Hall). Good uses of semiotics help to produce new insights into the meaning of objects, images and texts.

“Sometimes in semiotics what matters is not what you put into a piece of communication, but what you leave out.” (Hall)

While no one theory or experience can predict what will work in all situations, it seems clear that a more thorough understanding of Semiotics would give visual communications students an advantage in the marketplace by providing them with applicable knowledge that would be beneficial to both themselves and their clients.

Understanding this, design instructors should do more to incorporate a good understanding to the principles of semiotics to their students.

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