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A Brief Look at Meaning in Graphic Design

An Honors Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art

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Under the mentorship of Edward Rushton

ABSTRACT
In this exploration of meaning in design, some of the theories, such as those proposed by
Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, and the different forms meaning takes
are discussed. The project takes the form of analyzing three smaller projects in which
meaning was explored in a different way, including a review of semiotics in design, an
examination of the differences between denotation and connotation, and the creation of a
personal visual identity and the challenge of taking internalized personal meaning and
communicating that visually.

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Soli Deo Gloria.
1. Introduction

Upon observation of peers and the education methods I have been exposed to in my short few years studying the field of graphic design, I have been surprised at the lack of academia, the disinterest in learning theory, the reluctance to read and write about design. There is little concern among my fellow student designers in the creation or even the recognition of meaning in design. A lack of desire to dialogue about or grown in the ability to talk about meaning and semiotics in design is apparent. The why is brushed aside far too quickly and we bow to the aesthetic alone. I begin by telling you this, because it would be oddly ironic if I wrote about meaning in design without telling you why I was doing it. In this exploration of meaning in design, my desire is to make some of the theories, such as those proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, and the different forms meaning takes, more accessible to my peers in context of applying those theories and meanings to how we interact with design.

2. Iconography

Now that you are aware of why I am writing about meaning in design, let’s talk about what this meaning is. One very common topic in the realm of meaning in design is semiotics, a term originally coined in context of linguistic meaning but very applicable to the realm of visual design. Semiotics can be defined as the study of signs (Boulton, web). Signs can be, quite literally, signs: street signs, road signs, and the like. But these signs can also be drawings, paintings, photographs, words, sounds, body language. Ferdinand de Saussure was a linguistic theorist who came up with the “bilateral model” (Noth, book). Saussure excluded the reference object from his theory of semiotics. So, for instance, suppose we were talking about a tree. In the constraints of Saussure’s theory,
sign for tree would be comprised of two elements: the signifier and the signified (see Figure 1). The word “tree” would be the signifier, and the concept, the thought produced due to the word would be the signified. But the actual tree itself is excluded from the sign. It is because of this two-fold nature that the Saussure’s model is called bilateral.

It is not hard to see that, though this proved helpful to designers, the exclusion of the reference object – a very visual element – would pose some challenges for designers in their attempts to relate work to Saussure’s theory. Saussure was focused on the linguistic aspect of semiotics, not the visual (Storkerson 7). Peirce’s theory of the sign is more triadic, and a bit easier to relate to the visual. His definition of the sign is as follows:
“A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea.” (qtd. in Noth 42)

For example (see Figure 2), if we were talking about a tree again, the sign, more commonly called the representamen, would be the word used, the object would be the actual, physical thing being talked about, and the interpretant would be the concept (visual, mental, etc.) that the representamen triggers. Peirce’s theory is different from Saussure’s in many ways, but primarily to designers in that it does not take the actual object into the definition.

Abraham Moles brought some of these more abstract meanings home to designers in the 80s, when he wrote about the role of designers in the creation of meaning. He said that the role of a graphic designer is “that of a sign engineer who precisely designates the symbolic aspects of the environment to prepare us for real actions” (44). Semiotics, on a deeper level, is the study of how meaning is formed and attributed. (Boulton) In a designer’s world, their task regarding meaning is to engineer it in a way that that meaning
is, visually, communicated, whether this be through language in visual communication, the systems used to create sign systems, icon-based design (based on semantic meaning, not resemblance). (Storkerson 18) In this review, we will look primarily at sign systems and semiotics as related to iconography and informational graphics.

It is interesting to think about how meaning changes over time. Some icons that began as representational have become much more abstract. The call icon on most cell phones, for instance, is still a simplified graphic of an analog phone (see Figure 3). This image is very relevant to those who grew up with analog phones as an everyday household item, but for those who are now growing up in homes where cell phones are the only thing they relate calls to, this icon is much more abstract. The icon essentially means the same thing to each person, but the way in which they attribute meaning is different. For the first person, meaning is very representational – they see the icon, and, however subconsciously, relate it to the actual object. Remember Peirce’s theory (Figure 2)? In this case, the icon would be the representamen, and the object would be the actual landline, and the interpretant would be the perceived action that the icon brings to mind.

But what about the second person? They don’t have an object to relate the icon to. It is a rather abstract concept. Their thought process aligns more with Saussure’s theory of signs (Figure 1). They see the icon and, through learned association, attribute meaning to the icon. The icon is the signifier, and the idea or action of making a call is the signified.

Iconography and meaning in design are things that have captured the interest of many in the past few years, including Google, who has released a system called Material
Design (material.io) that aims to unite “style, branding, interaction, and motion under a consistent set of principles.” Their primary audience is designers, specifically those working with app and UX/UI development. Among many other standards and guidelines provided by Material Design, there is a library of over 900 icons that have been created with meticulous care to detail. There are standards designed to simplify but also to make meaning clear. They require icons to be simple, intuitive, actionable, and consistent. They have defined meaning for each of the 900+ icons, essentially creating a new language – a language of the visual, which can be related in many ways to theories of semiotics.

This is an interesting environment in which to discuss a few of the things I have talked about in my paper, specifically meaning in design and how it is created. In Material Design, this meaning is created in four ways: through simplicity – giving the viewer simple shapes which do not confuse, through the intuitive – most of the icons are representational or have some visual familiarity either through association to other objects or through created meaning over time. Actionable means that the icons are not just informational – rather they prompt a certain action from a user. The icon is related to an action in some way that spurs the user to interact with it. And they are consistent – consistent graphically, in that they follow a set of defined visual standards, and are consistent across platforms.

This is far from a comprehensive look into meaning in design. And brief overview into the theories of Peirce and Saussure, and how those relate to iconography and current trends in the design of information online and in apps is all this is. But I hope that is will pique some interest in the further exploration of meaning in design and the potential it
holds to make good design into great design, design that has a meaning deeper than the aesthetically pleasing.

3. Denotation and Connotation

In addition to theories of design, meaning can be explored by learning about the different forms meaning takes and either applying those in the creation or interpretation of a design. In the following project, you will see how I explored meaning in graphic design by taking two different interpretations, two different kinds of meaning behind three particular songs, and creating a single cover for each interpretation of the three songs. More specifically, I explored the ideas of denotation and connotation in design, inspired by what Crow (2003) wrote about the dichotomy between the two concepts in design.

The result was a single cover for each song to visually show what they were denoting – what was literally suggested by the title, as well as a single cover showing what is connoted by each song – meaning deeper than what we can derive literally from the title. Six single covers, three songs, two different interpretations. My desire for the project was to explore deeper the concept of meaning, semiotics, and design. The relationship between semiotics (in a very broad sense) and design is a fascinating one – one that many graphic designers overlook. The first thing many amateur designers talk about is “aesthetic”; making something beautiful. As they learn and develop their skills as designers, they begin to talk about functionality. But rarely do I hear my peers in graphic design spheres talk about meaning in design. In some senses, meaning is the missing link between the aesthetic and the functional.
All the single covers had their own challenges, especially the connotative interpretations. Other than the initial conceptual challenges I faced in coming up with the material for each cover, I struggled with relating the type to the images in meaningful ways. I did a lot of outside research on different methods of combining type with images, and learned quite a bit about the ideas of text fusion, separation, fragmentation, and inversion, primarily from Skolos and Wedell’s *Type, Image, Message: A Graphic Layout Workshop* (2006). These methods deal with the concepts of relating type to images within a design. Fusion refers to when the type and the image fuse into one entity and become visually unified. Separation is essentially the opposite, where the type and image work independently of each other. Fragmentation is when the type and image are interacting in a disruptive way, not blending in or acting separately. And finally, inversion is where the image takes on the role of the type and the type acts as the image: they essentially switch roles.

Though I explored all four of these concepts, I primarily worked with the ideas of text fusion and separation on the designs I created. I also learned quite a bit about the challenges of interpreting meaning, of the subtle differences between connotation and denotation. It was not an easy project, but it was rewarding in that I learned about many concepts that were completely new to me, and also came out with a finished product – six single cover designs – that I am proud to share.

The first song, *Dirty Paws*, by Of Monsters and Men, is pretty easy to interpret literally. The denotation of the song (Figure 4) shows paw prints in the dirt and features dynamic, separated type. The other interpretation (Figure 5) focuses on the idea that the animals talked about in the song are a metaphor for the different countries involved in the
Figure 4

Figure 5
conflict in World War 2. Thus, the connotative single cover shows several of those animals filled with their country’s flag (at the time of the war).

The second song, *Ophelia*, by the Lumineers, seems, at face value, to be a song about Shakespeare’s *Ophelia*, so the denotative interpretation (Figure 6) of *Ophelia* features the famous painting of the latter by John Everett Millais and the song title is merged with the image in a dynamic way, seeming to float behind her body. The connotative interpretation (Figure 7) is marked by the idea of fame and its allure. It is shown by placing the viewer in front of a microphone while the crowd is blurred out. The text is purposely subtle and slightly blurred to suggest the idea of the transience of fame.

*Trees*, by *The Oh Hellos*, is also a fairly simple song to interpret denotatively. The first single cover (Figure 8) shows trees, changing color slightly to avoid the cliché of green associated with trees. The connotative interpretation (Figure 9) focuses on the theme of the song that talks about breaking down barriers that we have created, using the trees that we used to climb as children. It shows a fence (and trees), but the focus of the image, other than the very dynamic text, is the hand reaching over the top of the fence.
Figure 6

Figure 7
4. Personal Branding

*Introduction*

Personal branding has become more and more popular with the rapid growth of technology, social media, and having to market yourself online, whether that be for the purpose of simply finding a job, or for people like freelancers or business owners. As a graphic designer, having a personal brand is effective, especially when considering the design of promotional and portfolio design such as a website and business cards. The advent of my final semester brought a desire to create some sort of visual identification for myself to use on my website and on business cards or other promotional pieces like stickers.

This exercise was a much more introspective artistic endeavor, as opposed to something more research or theory based. I focused primarily on personal meaning and how to communicate that personal meaning in a visually effective way. I examined what characterizes me and my design style, and other personal aspects of my life that I wanted to include in my design.

*Signature*

A large part of my identity for me rests in my name, Elise Rustine. It tells of my family, my history. The challenge was how to take the name and use it somehow in my visual identity. I spent considerable time working to decide if I wanted my whole name in the official identity. One benefit in using my full name is its uniqueness. I am unaware of anyone else currently living who has the same name as I do, so in that sense it made sense to incorporate it into the final identity.
One of the most common visual marks for a person, dating back to pretty much the beginning of time, is the signature. It is generally handwritten in a form of script, and includes the first and last name. After quite a bit of exploration of typography of the letterforms, I began exploring my own signature as a starting point. I realized fairly early on in the exploration that the “E” and the “R” are my favorite letterforms in the signature, so I isolated those and began to work with them to create a unique initialism based on my signature. I wanted to incorporate my hand into the design, so I handwrote the E and the R to begin with.

As my sketches developed, I ended up connecting the E and R, using the last stroke of the E to curve into the stem of the R letterform. Interestingly enough, if you look closely at the center of the final initialism (see Figure 10), you can see that the connection between the E and R resembles the curve of an S if viewed sideways, which seems appropriate, since my middle name is Susanne. The meaning of that is pretty veiled, though, since the likelihood of someone knowing my middle initial and spotting the S shape in there is quite small.

After more refinement in sketching, I came up with an initialism that I was happy with. I thought about working to simply recreate it on the computer, but decided rather to scan it. I wanted to retain a bit of the handwritten look that it had. I used the pen tool in Illustrator to trace the letters out, and added a rounded tip to the line to make the ends of the line a little less harsh.
Symbol

In addition to an initialism, I created a more abstract symbol for myself. It is a simplified graphic of a sun (Figure 11). The linear quality of it is very similar to the initialism, with a similar stroke weight and rounded caps. The meaning of the symbol for myself is more hidden, in that someone would not just look at the symbol on my website or a business card and interpret the meaning of it to its fullest meaning in my mind. I would expect someone to look at it and connected it with a sunny, joyful disposition, or a love of the outdoors, both of which I aspire to.

But the meaning goes deeper than that. I grew up to my mother singing “You Are My Sunshine” to me every night before I went to sleep, and in a sense that has continued to be an identity I seek – to be a person filled with joy, joy that is rooted deeply and sincere. You can see in Figure 12 a few of the variations of the initialism and symbol. The color yellow was chosen for similar reasons that I selected the sun as a symbol. It has been my favorite color since I can remember, and though I rarely incorporate yellow into my work, it seemed appropriate to tackle that challenge now. I worked to find a specific shade of it that was not overpowering and that would print well. It ended up being a nice addition to both the symbol and the initialism. They can be used without color easily as well, since there is no change in color within the graphics and they are very linear.
5. Conclusion

These three projects were all interesting explorations of meaning in design. I was able to look at a variety of ways to talk about and pursue meaning in the field of the visual arts. It was a valuable exercise to think more consciously about the why behind what I create visually. On a personal level, I am far more passionate about it than when I started. I have a desire to not only pursue, but be able to vocalize that meaning, which has
proved valuable in the beginning stages of starting to work with clients, who usually want to work with someone who can vocalize why they do what they do with a design.

On a broader level, my hope is that this small collection of work and writing will prompt others to seek to design with a consideration of why they are doing it – a why with an answer far deeper than “this is what my client likes” or “I think it looks good.” Meaning matters, and our ability to understand it and vocalize it as designers is an important part of what we do.
Works Cited


