

Usable Design History conference

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LECTURE

CUTTING THROUGH TIME AND STYLE: understanding communication strategies in history using visual semiotics and rhetoric.

Over the fifteen years that I have been teaching a basic history of graphic design course, I have sought ways to connect the students to the excitement of discovery and the enthusiasm for materials that I feel. It appears that for a lot of students slide shows in the dark are not sufficient. For their active learning assignments I have tried library treasure hunts, designer flashcards, fantasy studio mates, and more seriously, analysis of obscure design artifacts using selected theories for interpretation. Some combination of this works because there are students who get hooked on history, haunt flea markets and book fairs (and bring their treasures back to show me). Today I'm going to focus on the writing assignments using theory.

Allow me to provide some context. The History of Graphic Design course I teach focuses on the last 150 years and presents design artifacts, designers, design movements, and aesthetic, educational and design philosophies mostly from Europe and the US. All of these are placed within their social, political and cultural context. Various communication and persuasion ideas and strategies are discussed, woven in with the changes in visual vocabulary and the impact of new technologies.

The course is structured over 15 weeks with three 50-minute sessions per week. It is lecture-based and primarily organized by chronology. In addition to my lectures and those of a few others, the students see related videos on Dada films, the Bauhaus, Russian Constructivism, Raymond Loewy, and a selection of Eames films. They also make special visits to view related historical materials and books in the Special Collections of the university library. And I share my collection of primary and secondary materials with the class.

Because the course is a requirement for our major, the enrollment is mostly graphic design students at the sophomore level, with a smattering of design students from other departments (architecture, industrial design). The university has designated the course a humanities elective so there are some students from engineering, history, communications, textiles, as well as a few from the community at large.

In my experience, to maximize student learning and engagement with course material, it's best to connect it with what they already know, and with their experience. In class and at the library, the students handle 'real' objects; this breaks through the distance created by the use of slides and it reminds them that graphic design objects are designed with physical dimensions and tactile properties, and for human interaction.

To connect with their intellectual experiences, I compare design problems of the past with those of today: there are always objects and ideas trying to find their audience or some group trying to change the public's perceptions and behavior through graphic design. This becomes a good way to depart from the organizing principle of chronology and style-based periods and to discuss under what conditions people need and produce printed or broadcast communication, what kinds are used and how they are received.

With some design 'problems' loosely categorized, design solutions can be compared and contrasted. With some 'types' established, we look at variations due to different circumstances, or audiences, or the introduction of new ideas. With chronology and style it's change that is emphasized; when discussing archetypes and concepts the opposite is most interesting: How have images and communication strategies NOT changed over time? What are the adaptations and why? What was shocking? What still is?

Students are asked to think of current examples to compare to historical ones; to begin to appreciate the development of ideas as well as the repetition of effective ones (what attracts? what sells? what persuades? what informs? what motivates?).

To further strengthen the students' ability to understand the image making and communication concepts and strategies used through history, there are writing assignments requiring the use of semiotics and visual rhetoric for analyzing design artifacts. In a 3-step progression, the assignments focus on:

1. semiotic image categories (icon, index and symbol),
2. rhetorical modes of appeal (logos, pathos and ethos), and
3. Visual tropes (such as metonymy, synecdoche, antithesis, visual puns, hyperbole and metaphor) in conjunction with formal analysis.

Here are some examples of promotional concepts and a 'lite' application of theory:

- The use of the idealized female figure – a 1890s Art Nouveau poster selling cigarette papers; and an example of the ethos mode of appeal to aesthetic appreciation.
[Alphonse Mucha, Job, 1896]
- The use of social status in association with a product – here military rank is selling beer in France around 1810; the uniforms are metonyms for military rank and social standing.
[Anon. France, Bonne Double Biere, 1810]
- The reduction of a message to a memory unit of product and brand name – a New Objectivity advertisement from Germany, early 1900s; only the icon of the product and the symbol of the company name.
[Peter Behrens, AEG fan, 1912]
- The persuasive power of facts and functionality (and change from illustration to the objective photo) – selling a scale through New Advertising in the Netherlands in the 1920s; the logical presentation of facts, the use of synecdoche to focus on one feature.
[Paul Schuitema, Berkel scale, 1927]
- The special case of selling war or recruiting soldiers – using pathos or emotion, in this case guilt (and gender construction) for WWI poster; the two individuals represent the citizenry through synecdoche.
[Anon. Ireland, Will You Go or Must I?, c. 1914]
- Selling war or promoting the citizens' war effort during WWII using an ethical appeal of shared ideals and a national symbol.
[Leo Lionni, Keep 'em Rolling!, 1941]

I do not intend to suggest that strategies used in history will necessarily map directly onto semiotic and rhetorical theory. And I am fully aware that some of these theories were developed after the objects being studied. But when used for analysis of design artifacts, I have found that such theories help students to understand both consciously formulated communication concepts by some designers and the more intuitive choices by others, and suggest connections across time.

What will be understood from class is that some strategies and archetypes used over a long period of time are still effective (humans don't change much). Some strategies are effective for specific kinds of messages during social or cultural crises. Some ideas go through cycles of use and can be presented in various visual guises. Different audiences require or appreciate different approaches and visual languages. And that from the choices shown in these documents, we can gain insight into the designers, the intended audiences (and ourselves).

Most importantly, the students (themselves designers or not, but always an audience) learn to identify the parts of a visual message; to dissect the designer's choices into the message intent, the communication strategy, the visual style of presentation and the final message content.

For each writing assignment I provide 6-10 examples of graphic design (a different set for each exercise) from which the students must choose. The examples selected are often anonymous, image-based, advertising examples from the late 19th century but I have started to include some more recent examples too. The examples are colorful, sometimes humorous, rich in detail and, I hope, will reward close examination.

The writing assignment examples join the rest of the materials shown as historical documents whose content and meaning they must discover, and through which they can gain some understanding of the

peoples and time periods. And as with all the materials presented in the course, the design artifacts become examples of applied concepts and theories. When the design students turn to generating their own work, their knowledge of historical precedents gives credibility and legitimacy to their ideas and applications. Examples from history are not studied in this way only as representations of a period or style, but as examples of effective (or not) communication ideas. Design history can be seen as a series of lessons, rather than as grab bag of 'quotable' stuff.

In relating these activities to the theme of the conference, I think I have added a sense of 'utility' to the word 'usable.' In summary, these assignments accomplish several objectives:

- 1 to reiterate from the lectures that design history is a history of problem-solving (and that some problems are constant or repetitive);
- 2 to restate that design strategies and image types are seldom unique (some approaches remain effective; some images always connect);
- 3 to strengthen the learning of theory through written analysis;
- 4 to reinforce understanding through redundancy and practical application; concurrently the graphic design students also apply the theories in design studio for the generation of creative ideas; and
- 5 to inform the students' understanding and consumption of the visual messages surrounding them, and the position of those messages in an historical context.

Beyond teaching history, the assignments:

- 6 address differences in learning styles among students, making evaluation of learning more balanced by using writing in addition to testing; and
- 7 allow the course to fulfill part of the university's 'writing across the curriculum' requirements for the department.

The workshop will focus on the theories, provide full definitions and visual examples, explain the method of the assignments and show some of the works provided for student selection.