Usable Design History conference

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WORKSHOP

CUTTING THROUGH TIME AND STYLE: understanding history through communication strategies / understanding communication through historical example

The lecture provided the course context for these writing assignments. I want to spend this time with details and examples, to explain the method in a way that it is useful to you. Discussion of examples later will help, but please ask questions about what is not clear. And my apologies to anyone here to whom these theories are well known – I have pitched this session to those with less experience.

The writing assignments are formulated to make the students look closer and come to understand the graphic design artifacts more fully by applying the concepts and using the vocabulary of semiotics and visual rhetoric (just two ways of thinking about visual communication among many possibilities).

The examples provided for the students are intended to be provocative. The students' emotions and intellect are actively engaged and they must write about what they see, how they make sense of it, and how the intended audience might have understood it.

For the selected examples the students are given only the date, subject and country of origin, but nothing factual about the creator, the process of creation of the individual work or the intended audience (most of which is not 'known' on the older ones). This 'lack of information' is intentional because they are to do original work and do not have the 'crutch' of references. In addition to their theory-based analysis and interpretation of meaning, they can speculate about the social and cultural context of the work and its audience based on what they have learned from the course or elsewhere.

They study how designers and illustrators of the past presented ideas in visual and symbolic form, what visual techniques and communication strategies they used, and what organizational principles they employed, whether by intuition or conscious use of theory.

Let's look at the different concepts and, perhaps, new vocabulary. You might want to look at the definition handout sheet.

All images and visual messages speak in two ways or at two levels: directly and indirectly or through DENOTATION and CONNOTATION. You know that you understand much more about a good poster than just what the specific words say and what the picture shows. If a poster remained only at the surface level, you would be bored; our minds need places to explore. It is this layer below or beyond the surface, the connotative level, where we will spend our time today.

We understand the world we live in and the messages we receive through the ways we interpret what is around us – we see and interpret SIGNS. We encounter signs everywhere, usually in a context that helps us understand them. We could not operate in society without understanding signs: words, pictures, facial expressions, what people wear and how they wear it, hair styles, trademarks, car choices, etc.

But each sign is part of a sign system, a set of relationships and meanings. In language systems, each letter relates to its alphabet, each word to the whole vocabulary set and utterances are organized by a shared structure. In visual and social terms, all of us will understand the sign system for North American culture; only some of us the culture of the southern states (What is that barbecue debate all about?). Most of us will understand the sign system for white culture in the US; fewer of us will understand the African-American or the Asian-American sign system (What is diversity education about but learning other sign systems?). And the teenager sign system? (It changes weekly!). Each of us participates in overlapping sign systems, which we share with different groups. Signs tell us what we are, and what we are not. What is important is that some group (of at least two) has to agree on meaning. Every visual message is directed to some group and must use the sign system of that group to communicate. In

mass communication the group that creates the message is not necessarily the group that receives it. So designers have a professional need to understand and employ a wide range of sign systems.

The study of these systems and how they operate is SEMIOTICS, first discussed by Ferdinand deSaussure in the context of linguistics.

Each SIGN consists of two parts: the expression and the concept.

I can say "hand" or write "H-A-N-D" or I could draw a picture of a blob with five appendages, and you would understand what part of your body I referred to, completing the sign. We cannot talk about this 'thing' without having a name/sound for it; if I say 'hand' you have a mental image that allows you to understand what I mean, even without a visual example.

According to Charles Pierce (a later American theorist), there are THREE TYPES OF SIGN; applied to images this is how we begin to understand them. You might also see these as increasing in distance between the signifier and the signified, between the expression and the concept.

Let's use one example from graphic design history:
• A.M. Cassandre's poster for a newspaper called "L'Intransigeant," from 1925.

As an aside, I would argue that this is one of the most perfect posters: the composition plays significantly into its interpretation, the semiotic parts are accurately chosen, the level of abstraction says 'modern', and the concision creates an immediately understood message. Even Cassandre called the poster designer a 'telegraphist.'

The ICON or iconic image is understood through its resemblance to the person or thing. An example is a drawing, portrait painting or photograph of a person. It's called a motivated sign because there is an obvious connection between the signifier and signified parts.

• Here we have an icon of Marianne, a representation of France.

Students are sometimes confused by another use of the word; when someone says "Dylan is an icon of the 60s" she makes use of such a close connection between the two that the man can represent a whole era. Technically this is an index conflation so powerful as to become an icon.

The INDEX or indexical image is understood through a logical association or a causal connection; it points to something else. Through your experience or education you perceive connections among objects and events. Some examples of indexical images are your signature or fingerprint as an index of you; a brush stroke as an index of the brush or painting activity; a pixilated image as an index of computer creation.

• Here we have indexes to the telegraph and quick communication.

The SYMBOL is an image whose meaning is 'conventional', that is, the meaning is the result of social/cultural agreement. If the meaning must be learned, it is called an arbitrary sign; there is no 'natural' relationship between the signifier and the signified. There are lots of good examples among trademarks; and a basic one is your name, an arbitrary connection your parents made between a cute baby and a sound. Any alphabet is an arbitrary symbol system for the languages that use it; a mark stands for a sound. The sound of your name and its written form are both symbols for you.

The use of this term is often confusing to students because the semiotic definition is narrower than their previous understanding. In school they have learned a 'symbol' is anything that stands for something else and they tend to use the term very loosely.

• Here Marianne is a symbol for France the nation and the word a symbol for the newspaper. In the decoded message the newspaper claims to receive and broadcast the news from and to France.

Next let's look at RHETORICAL MODES OF APPEAL which come from Greek rhetorical writing. When the designer decides what is the most effective way to present a certain message to a certain audience she is choosing a mode of appeal; how should the design 'hit' the viewer?

Using some examples you saw in the lecture:

A LOGOS appeal works on the head; it connects with the intellect and uses facts, organizes information, or employs logic in its argument.

- Here in the Berkel scale advertisement the functional qualities of the scale are emphasized; the claim is made that the scale is small but can measure to a fine degree of accuracy and is easy to read.
  [Paul Schuitema, Berkel scale, 1927]

A PATHOS appeal goes for the gut and works on feelings: sympathy, empathy or stronger emotions of guilt, revenge, envy, love.

- This recruitment poster presents a classic confrontation of male and female social expectations and uses guilt to make its point.
  [Anon. Ireland, Will You Go or Must I?, c. 1914]

An ETHOS appeal speaks to values and morals, the ethics and ideals shared by some group; it can also appeal to an appreciation for Beauty or aesthetic form.

- Here the archetypal beautiful woman is used to sell anything; and the product is lost among all that hair.
  [Alphonse Mucha, Job, 1896]

Lastly we arrive at the more detailed level of connotation, where each part of the image is working in several ways: as icon always, and often as index or symbol as well. This is the stuff of interpretation and reveals the meaning or message of the work. Again from the Greeks we have these useful categories, the RHETORICAL TROPES or FIGURES OF SPEECH, to explain the nature of the operation or the relationship between the thing (signifier) and what it means (the signified) -- here adapted for application to the visual. These seldom appear alone but some simple examples will help with definitions.

With a VISUAL PUN the designer uses visual similarity between two things with different meanings; the viewer can see both images simultaneously. Frequently objects with a like shape replace letters in words.

- In this example from the student/worker demonstrations of 1968, you can see the raised fist of revolution in the factory tower.
  [Anon. France, La Lutte Continue, 1968]

With HYPERBOLE the designer uses an exaggeration of scale (large or small) of an object or an effect; it's not to be taken literally and is often humorous.

- In this exhibition poster for Big Nudes, they are so big the paper is not large enough to contain even one of them.
  [Milton Glaser, Big Nudes, 1969]

Using ANTITHESIS the designer presents a direct comparison between opposing or contrasting images or ideas; both must be present in juxtaposition.

- Here in a VD poster (that would also work for AIDS) we see the comparison of love/life and death using the rose and the noose.
  [David Lance Goines, VD-Don't Give the Gift that Goes on Giving, 1971]

Using IRONY the designer uses one image to mean something different, usually its opposite; there is the literal meaning contrasted with the figurative meaning.

- In this anti-war poster the two American exports of Napalm and Coke are conflated; and there is also a visual pun.
  [Anon. US, It's the Real Thing for S.E. Asia, c.1971]

With PERSONIFICATION the designer gives human features or emotions to inanimate objects, or abstract ideas or institutions are represented in terms of human figures. As symbols, in this way Miss Liberty and Marianne represent the nations of America and France.

- Here the literal target has become a smiling person in the target audience.
  [Paul Rand, Subway Posters Score, 1947]

Using METAPHOR the designer suggests an analogy or similarity between two things; most often it's a physical object to represent an abstract idea or emotion. This is one of the most common tropes used in communication design.

- In this WWII poster the sword/bayonet is a metaphor for dangerous speech.
  [Abram Games, Your Talk May Kill Your Comrades, 1943]

Using SYNECDOCHE the designer substitutes part of a thing to stand for the whole thing (an object, a group, an institution), or sometimes the whole stands in for the part. The material of which a thing is made can also represent it.

- Here, three children of different colors stand for three different ethnic groups who represent "all."
  [Milton Ackoff, Polio Care for All, 1949]

With METONYMY the designer makes reference through association or context; the relationship of the signs is understood through a temporal, causal or spatial proximity.

- In this railroad poster the train is not seen but has a large presence through its known spatial proximity to the tracks.
  [A M Cassandre, Etoile du Nord, 1927]

Now, we will move to the assignments. The full text of my assignments will be on the conference website. What I will show are some of the examples I provide for the students. We can discuss what you see using the theories and terms just explained.

To report briefly on student response to these exercises. Some fulfill the requirements rather mechanically, but more really get involved the 'game' and go very deep and often speculate wildly. These are usually the most interesting to read and they often find details I have not noticed or go down speculative paths my experience would not suggest. Because interpretation is subjective in many ways, I tend to accept most reasonable and properly argued and supported statements, as long as the student has used the vocabulary and theories correctly. There are some wrong answers (when terms are not understood and improperly used), but mostly there are lots of good and possible interpretations.

I mentioned that studio instructors also teach semiotics and visual rhetoric as creative methodologies for generating design work. I will return to this after the discussion

Now we can play "Name that trope." This will work best if you participate. Here are some of the examples used for assignments. I have here some beginning thoughts on the tropes to get us started:

Production [Jean Carlu, 1941]
Mode: ethos (war effort)
Symbols: words
Tropes:
Metonymy: glove=worker=larger effort, glove=hand, wrench= tools of production

Pun: nut/O

End Bad Breath [Seymour Chwast, 1967]
Mode: ethos (peace ideal)
Symbols: Uncle Sam=US, words
Tropes:
Metaphor: war=bad breath
Pun: houses=teeth
Metonymy: green face=illness (of US in war)

Rhubarb crate label [Anon. US]
Mode: logos (explains full production, distribution)
Symbols: words
Tropes:
Hyperbole: size of foreground rhubarb to background
Synecdoche: rhubarb bunch=whole crop
Metonymy: family farm, neat fields=careful farming, train=distribution of fresh produce

It takes up to 40 dumb animals [Yellowhammer, commissioned by Greenpeace, 1985]
Mode: pathos (blood), ethos (killing); weaker is logos (following argument)
Symbols: words, LYNX mark
Tropes:
Synecdoche: legs/woman, woman/humans, fur/animals, blood/living thing
Metonymy: blood=killing, dragging=hunting, fashion walk
Metaphor: dumb animals
Antithesis: coat/blood, glamour/brutality
Verbal pun: dumb
Verbal irony: headline

Yams can label [Anon. US}
Mode: logos (explaining contents)
Symbols: words
Tropes:
Personification: woman=Aunt Lody brand
Synecdoche: woman, basket, field=whole picking, production
Metonymy: head wrap/clothes=field hand, black dialect=southern culture
Irony: (intended?) LeBlanc company/African-American 'spokesmodel'
Added note: an opportunity to discuss racial stereotypes too.

Pro-Choice [Rob Cheung, 1989]
Mode: pathos (reaction to attack), ethos (ideals)
Symbols: RWB, words
Tropes:
Antithesis: b/w, fist/hand, empowered/victim
Metonymy: colors=freedom, fist=power, hands=rapist
Synecdoche: woman=all women, hands=attackers
Hyperbole: hand size
Metaphor: rape=racism

Hudson's soap [Anon. England]
Mode: logos (presents features), ethos (community)
Symbols: words, Hudson's packaging/colors
Tropes:
Synecdoche: figures=common social grouping/family, background
      buildings=village
Metonymy: animals, tools=smithing, dirty profession, woman/child=homespun

cleanliness, dull colors=dirty, clear bright colors=clean, village/church=civilization
Antithesis: dirty man/clean woman/child

Keep it under your Stetson [Anon. US, 1947]
Mode: ethos (loyalty)
Symbols: words, diagrams
Tropes:
Synecdoche: head=man, man=population, factory=production,
        wings=airplanes
Metonymy: smokestack=factory, diagrams=specialized knowledge,
        diagrams=products (airplanes)

In my teaching, I have used these semiotic categories and rhetorical tropes to help students generate better concepts and more unusual images for their studio projects.

These are book covers for biographies of famous people, using predominantly one sign type (icon, index, symbol) for each of three covers. Discussion during critique revealed that strictly using only one sign type produced a less interesting cover than when combined signs are used. Getting students to think through to intriguing indexical signs produced improved concepts.

This second set of examples is from a studio project exploring rhetorical tropes for addressing current social issues. Students have used synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, and verbal pun. At another time we used these to expand the visual language for political campaign posters with great success; the students were able to go beyond the trite political symbols and imagery that surround us.