



Signs, symbols, and subjectivity: An alternative view of the visual

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Abstract

Though generally in agreement with Gunther Kress and his views favoring the multimodal workings of contemporary communication, the authors take issue with his construction of a binary opposition between words and images. This paper argues against the notion that images are inherently specific and full of meaning. Symbolic imagery and mood board examples are used to counter this view of visual communication workings.

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1. Introduction

In “Gains and Losses,” [Gunther Kress \(2005\)](#) makes strong and convincing arguments in favor of a multimodal understanding of communication. We agree with his assessment that the communication landscape is in the midst of a revolutionary change characterized by a shift “from the centrality of writing to the increasing significance of image.” An important outcome of Kress’ work is that his arguments expand the opportunity for other voices to enter the discourse about writing studies. Our field of expertise is not the written but the visual; the team of authors is comprised of an industrial designer (McDonagh), a graphic designer/fine artist (Goggin), and a photographer (Squier). As designers and visual communicators, our work takes multiple forms—manufactured objects, the printed page, screen-based experiences—and is constructed for a multitude of venues and audiences: popular culture, consumer culture, network culture, and museums. As such, we bring highly developed sensibilities and experiences to the sphere of communication but with a decidedly visual bias. Kress’ comparison of written and visual communication, and the polarity that he sets up between them, affords us an opportunity to express our own perspective on how these two modes function—their similarities and differences.

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Our comments focus on the two paragraphs below, in which Kress establishes a dichotomy between words and images:

Because words rely on convention and on conventional acceptance, words are always general, and therefore vague. Words being nearly empty of meaning need filling with the hearer/reader's meaning.

We treat that as the act of interpretation. With 'depiction' and with images the situation is different: that which I wish to depict, I can depict—at the moment at any rate. I can draw whatever I like whenever I like to draw it. Unlike words, depictions are full of meaning; they are always specific. So on the one hand there is a finite stock of words—vague, general, nearly empty of meaning; on the other hand there is an infinitely large potential of depictions—precise, specific, and full of meaning.

Although there certainly are instances when words and images behave exactly according to Kress' above description—vague words and precise images—to categorize them so broadly tends to oversimplify reality. This binary, under inspection, simply does not hold up.

2. The three categories of signs

Peirce (Crow, 2003) defined three categories of signs: icon, index, and symbol. Only in the case of iconic imagery, the most literal category defined by Peirce, is depiction clear in the way that Kress argues. The ice cream cone in Figure 1 physically resembles the object that it represents; one immediately knows that ice cream cones are sold here. But there are few

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Thank you for choosing us!

**Opening
 March 5**

Jarling's
CUSTARD CUP

- Spoon up our snowstorms
- Super thick shakes & malts
- Yummy Sundaes
- Delicious Custard Cups & Cones
- Fresh baked waffle cones
- 30% less calories & butterfat than ice cream
- Made fresh daily right in our store for your enjoyment!
- Well worth the walk or drive from campus!

Mon-Sat 12-10PM
 Sunday 1-10PM

309 W. Kirby, Champaign
352-2273
across from Jerry's IGA

Map labels: Green, Gregory, Kirby, Memorial Stadium, Jarling's

Fig. 1. Advertising flyer for Jarling's, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

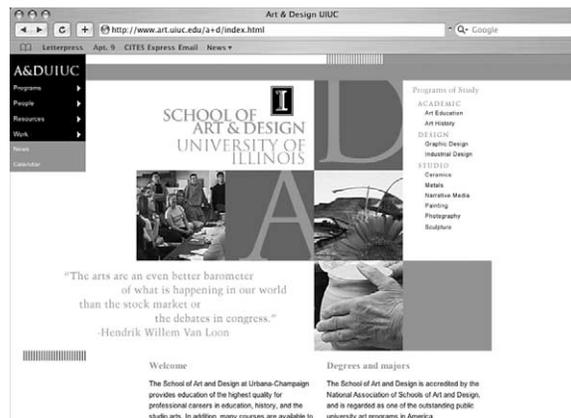


Fig. 2. Website screen shot, School of Art and Design, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

images that one can point to and see a complete and direct representation of its object. Even in the case of the ice cream advertisement, some subtle contextualizing and interpretation occurs. Most readers will know immediately, for instance, that this is not a national franchise's advertisement. The advertisement's style—not just the icon's stylistic qualities, but also the layout and typography—all suggest a retro nostalgia quite distinct from national food chains in the United States, such as Baskin Robbins or Dairy Queen.

Figure 2 is a screen shot of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana (UIUC), School of Art and Design website that features three images that fit Peirce's symbolic category. Contrary to Kress' assertion that depiction is always specific, it is their context and the surrounding information that gives these images their actual specificity. The typeface choice, the arrangement of image and type, the use of a grid system, and the amount of negative space all suggest a visual awareness. One can even begin to conclude that this website is from the College of Fine Arts. It reads differently, for instance, from the College of Engineering's website. Without this context, these images present only vague facts: a group meeting of some sort, a human hand touching a clay object. But the written text, in combination with the layout and organization of the screen, is what supplies these images with their meaning and their specificity: We know that we are observing students making work and interacting in a typical classroom.

Contrary to Kress' claims, symbolic depictions are generally vague and offer the possibility of multiple readings. Figure 3 offers such an example. Although the facts of the image are specific—a woman stands in a bedroom looking into a mirror—what this depiction might mean remains open to interpretation. Readers of this image might choose to emphasize any number of symbolic elements: the use of a mirror image, the clothes draped over the footboard of the bed, the point of view from which the photograph was shot. In the absence of other information—text, other images, organizational cues—individual readers are likely to construct different narratives from the same photograph.

This image, by itself, presents facts but contains no inherent meaning. What meaning readers might gain is interpretive and highly subjective. David Crow (2003) stated that “the meaning



Fig. 3. Still photograph.

of any sign is affected by who is reading that sign” (p. 54), and symbolic imagery, in particular, adheres to this.

Although this might be bad news from Kress’ vantage point, for most artists and designers this plasticity is exactly what draws us to images rather than words. The imprecision inherent in symbolic imagery is seen as an advantage in the visual world. The challenge and the excitement, of working with images reside with the possibility of fusing the public with the private. The most effective artists and designers understand the social side of communication—visual literacy and visual conventions—but also recognize that subjectivity is what frequently gives visual communication its emotional impact. Images are visceral and immediate. They are deeply attached to shared understandings and one’s inner voice.

3. Mood boards

For many designers, embracing subjectivity extends into their designing process. Mood boards are a visual tool that enables the designer to visualize ideas or emotions that do not lend themselves to words. This tool can inspire designers to further articulate and refine their design solutions (McDonagh and Denton, 2005).

Mood boards, Figures 4 and 5, are usually a collection of images compiled with the intention of communicating or provoking a mood or ambience during the product designing process. They are often used both in establishing and agreeing on a product’s initial ambience with a client and, during the design process, as a dynamic resource. Mood boards offer a visual and sensorial channel of communication, which could be considered to be more logical and empathic within a design context than traditional verbo-centric approaches (McDonagh and Storer, 2005).

Diverse members of the design community (interior, fashion, architecture and product design) use both abstract and literal images throughout the designing process to support communication between client, designer, and target user. They provide an opportunity for the designer



Fig. 4. A social and earthy mood board.

to “check” whether they are interpreting and understanding the needs of the client or target user. The way we communicate and express ourselves is influenced by our background, education, age and gender. Therefore, as designers, we cannot afford to assume or guess that we are correctly interpreting even everyday concepts and gestures.

When designers receive a design project, it is usually in written form. From this starting point, they begin to develop a profile of the target, the task and the environment. Figure 6 presents a designer’s visual response to an overtly masculine product. The designer has carefully selected color, texture, and form and presented it within a framework to convey strength, energy and power. We can compare this to Figure 7, which focused on an overtly feminine product, and which conveys strength, energy and power in a complementary way to the masculine mood board. As with most forms of symbolic visual communication, mood boards are open to interpretation; they are subjective and aim to



Fig. 5. Fresh and active mood board.

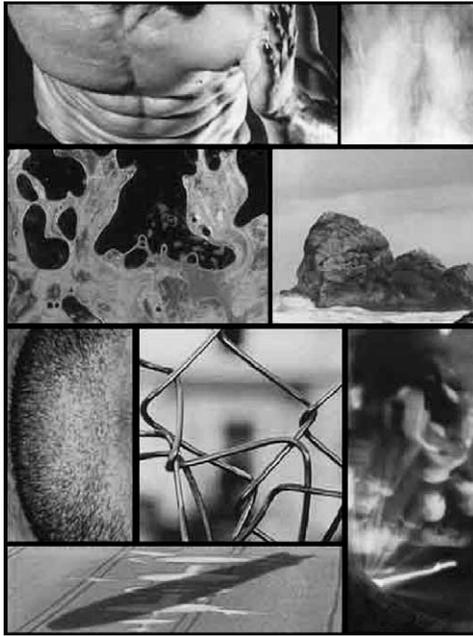


Fig. 6. Overtly masculine mood board.

gain a shared understanding and language between individuals engaged within the visual dialogue.

Mood boards have complex and multiple functions. Their primary function is one of inspiration, both for an individual designer and a design team. [Claudia Eckert and Martin Stacey \(2000\)](#) pointed out that sources of inspiration play a number of important roles



Fig. 7. Overtly feminine mood board.

in design thinking: as definitions of context, triggers for idea generation and providing anchors for structuring mental representations. Their secondary function is one of communication. This may support the internal dialogue for the individual designer, and, in addition, dialogue between a team of designers and broader stakeholders in the product development process. This may involve communicating in an abstract visual way with non-designers, thus opening up a new channel of communication beyond the written and spoken word.

These two functions are, to some extent, brought together in the process of gathering and collating sensorial data for a mood board. This can be a valuable step in helping a new design team to “gel”—agree on a common direction and build a shared visual language.

Mood boards are employed precisely because images have the capacity to construct meaning in an abstracted and ambiguous manner. Images, rather than precisely pinning down meaning, frequently only suggest certain meanings, leaving significant room for subjective interpretation.

4. Discussion

Only in the most literal of images does visual communication afford the semiotic precision that Kress claims. And his binary model tends to overlook a significant element of fundamental human communication: the emotional. Designers and artists are immersed in a visual language that is primarily emotional.

In most cases, what we see in an image is determined by what we bring to the act of looking. Paul Martin Lester (1995) listed six perspectives from which images can be analyzed: personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, and critical. He went on to state, “applying this entire analytical process to an image reveals as much about the reader as it does about the image being read.” Images provide, for author and audience, access to a subjective, emotional, personal, and individualistic site of information exchange.

In fact, to accept Kress’ argument that images are inherently filled with precise meaning would require that we ignore most practice in visual arts and design, nearly all of which is grounded firmly in the realm of the symbolic.

5. Conclusion

Rather than accept the binary model that Kress proposes, particularly the notion of visual precision, we propose a third way. We believe that images simultaneously occupy both nodes, and that this is, in fact, their great power. Symbolic images have the capacity to simultaneously be precise and ambiguous. What is represented may be specific, but meaning requires interpretation. Images merge visual conventions with individual vocabularies; they fuse public discourse with personal subjectivities.

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