The Tools at Hand: Making Theory More Relevant to Graphic Design

by Richard J. Pratt

Designer Michael Bierut, former president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), recently commented that the 19,000 members of his national organization consistently ranked one priority higher than all others: "proving the value of design to the general public, and specifically, the business community."[1] It is reasonable to assume one likely cause for the devaluing of professional design is the increased accessibility the public has to the tools of the profession. Before digital devices became ubiquitous, the expensive tools for the high-quality production of graphics were only accessible to professionals who had specialized knowledge and training. With the advent of digital layout and design programs the public gained the power to create their own designs that, if nothing else, had the production values of the professionals. This democratizing of the tools causes businesses to ask the question of why they should pay a premium for professional work when amateurs have the technical skills and will work for less.

As is often the case when outsiders evaluate a complicated skill set, it can be difficult to determine the nuances that separate an amateur's work from a professional's. A newcomer to the game of baseball would see little difference between the actions of a minor leaguer and those of an established veteran, possibly leading them to think they should earn the same salary. It takes someone knowledgeable of the game to explain the differences in play. The same is true of graphic design. Professional designers should be able to explain to a client how the choices they make effect and transform the message they are crafting for the intended audience. The ability to explain how visual communication works, how it can be manipulated to the benefit of the message, and how a professional adds value to a product is a key area that separates them from the amateur. It is no longer about having the tools and the

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[1] Michael Bierut, "*The Road to Hell, Part Two: That Elusive Silver Bullet.*" [Available Online] Design Observer [Cited August 2006]. Available from http://www.designobserver.com/archives/016635.html

knowledge to use them, but having the ability to analyze and explain there use. In order to do this designers must be familiar with the theories that relate to their field and have an understanding of which is best equipped for their work. This is what creates the value for professionals.

There are a great number of theories that deal with the area of visual communication. Any study of how humans communicate will touch on issues of the mind, environment and culture. But a discussion of the topic must at some point address the foundation of all communication, which is the sign. The structure of the sign and its definition have been touched on by many intellectuals and philosophers, but two approaches have become definitive foundations for modern examinations of the topic. These foundations were laid by the philosopher Charles S. Peirce and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It is not unusual when confronted with choices to see what solution has proven useful to others, but there are circumstances when the general consensus does not prove useful to the situation at hand. The schools of thought initiated by Peirce and Saussure are both insightful and evocative in their own right. But this does not make them equally suited to the purpose of exploring visual communication.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Of the two main schools of thought on the study of signs and communication, the one most likely known by designers and arguably easier understood is that of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure was a Swiss professor of linguistics at the University of Geneva, where he taught his now-famous course on general linguistics. Through this course he articulated his theory of signs, the study of which he called semiology. Saussure's theories would cause a revolution in the world of linguistics, and because his theories would emphasize culture as the center of thought and the individual, his theories would find a home in humanities departments around the world. This overwhelming popularity goes a long way to explaining why his theories might be taken

up by graphic design educators and professionals alike, even though they are not particularly well suited to explaining visual communication and are in some ways antagonistic to the idea of planned message making altogether.

It is safe to say that Saussure's main focus was language and to a lesser degree, an attempt at an all-encompassing theory of signs. If the contents of his office are any indication, his course on general linguistics received much less of his time than his other research: his posthumously published book, *Course in General Linguistics*, had to be derived from his students' notes, yet he left behind a hundred and fifty notebooks dedicated to the study of Saturnian verse.[2] It is Saussure's strict focus on language and the linguistic sign, rather than signs of all kinds, that limits the usefulness of his theories to designers as opposed to linguists.

For visual communicators the ramifications of Saussure's linguistic focus is two-fold. First, Saussure goes to great lengths to ground his theories in the powerful structures of language. One of his founding principles is that there are no ideas in the mind before language puts them there.

> In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure.[3]

This conception of the mind starting as a formless void, when combined with the observation that linguistic signs are inherently arbitrary, places all ideas and meaning as a byproduct of language and culture. This sets up a dynamic in which meaning becomes purely subjective, having powerful consequences for the act of communication. The correct interpretation of any message becomes dependent on the receiver sharing an identical cultural context as the sender. Because of the inherent difficulty of this, the meaning of any message becomes open to debate. As Roland

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[2] Gérard Deledalle, "Semeiotic and Semiology: Peirce and Saussure," in *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs: Essays in Comparative Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[3] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2006), 110.

Barthes pointed out in his essay "The Death of the Author," such a system makes it futile to divine the author's intent and instead makes the case for the open interpretation of all works.[4] A theory that posits such a radical view of communication would seem to make a flimsy foundation for a profession whose purpose is the controlling of a message. Beyond this inherent contradiction in purpose, it is also worth noting that recent discoveries tend point to a mind that is not an empty vessel, as Saussure assumes, but one that has inherent mechanisms for creating meaning.[5]

     The second issue for a graphic designer resulting from Saussure's focus on language is the simplicity of the resulting sign structure. By limiting the range of interactions between signs to those found in language, Saussure limits the need for a complex structure in the sign itself. Thus, his structures are easier to understand but are less representative of actual sign interactions. Saussure envisioned a sign made up two inseparable parts, which he termed the signifier and the signified. The signifier is what Saussure called a sound-image. Sound-images have no definitive form but are a loose collection of attributes that the individual uses to determine where an experience (like a word) fits into a preexisting linguistic structure. The signified, on the other hand, is the corresponding concept that is also delineated by this structure and paired with the signifier. This pairing is seemingly straightforward and tends to reinforce our intuition about the nature of signs; that words are paired with their meanings. But, this simplicity sacrifices a more nuanced understanding of how signs interact. It is not clear what happens when a word has multiple definitions as in the case of the word "glasses,"or how the form of the word, **glasses** and *glasses* influences their meanings. When Saussure does addresses the is-

SIGNIFIED
(concept)

glasses
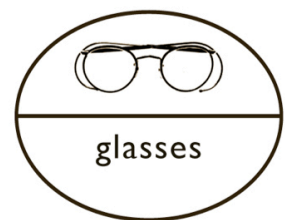
SIGNIFIER
(sound-image)

glasses

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[4] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author." in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

[5] Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate* (New York: Viking, 2002).

sue of form he states that "The actual mode of inscription is irrelevant, because it does not affect the system. Whether I write in black or white, in incised or in relief, with pen or chisel—none of that is of any importance for the meaning,"[6] implying that designers should not believe that typeface choices effect message. On another level, Saussure chooses to brush over linguistic nuances such as onomatopoeic words, like buzz and sizzle, that are not arbitrarily related to their meaning but are derived from it, because of their relative rarity.[7] Saussure's focus on language prevents him from taking into account how the images, colors and textures that graphic designers use interact and communicate to their audiences. As a result his theories can only be of limited use to design professionals and may indirectly sour individuals on theory in general.

In order to better articulate and explore their work, professionals need a theory of communication that more accurately reflects the complexity and nuances of sign interaction. The leading alternative to Saussure's linguistic-based theories are those proposed by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce. Peirce's theories explore signs in greater detail than Saussure's, but because much of his work was written for philosophers, and because it evolved significantly over his lifetime, it can be rather difficult to follow.

Charles S. Peirce

Peirce's vision of a sign is very broad and is reflected in his notion that a sign is anything that causes someone to think of something else. By this description not only are words and objects possible signs, but so are thoughts themselves. Because of this definition Peirce's sign requires three parts. The first part of the sign is what

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[6] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2006), 118.

[7] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2006), 69.

Peirce calls the representamen.[8] It acts as the initiator of the signification process and is the "thing" that refers to something else, in this case the written word "glasses". What the representamen refers to Peirce calls the object. The object can be loosely considered the meaning of the sign before it is processed by the individual. The final part of Peirce's sign is the interpretant. It is the amalgamation of the other two parts that forms in the individuals thoughts. It is a merging of the "thing" and what it stands for. As a result of this structure it is possible to see how representamen like "**glasses**" and "*glasses*" can have the same object, but form different interpretants in the mind.

REPRESENTAMEN
(a word, anything)

OBJECT
(what it stands for)

glasses

INTERPRETANT
(what forms in the mind)
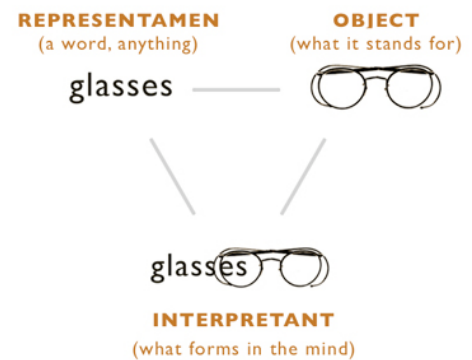
Peirce's open definition of a sign also greatly increases the likely interaction between signs. The context a sign is found is made up of many other signs, all of which interact to determine any given meaning. So here the representamen "glasses" has one meaning in relation to a visit to the optometrist and another in relation to the dinner table. Beyond these contextual interactions, signs can also be taken as groups to form larger more complicated signs and they can be linked together to create chains of thought. This happens when the interpretant of one sign becomes the representamen of the next, repeating ad infinitum. Peirce would say the connecting of signs in this way forms the stream of our consciousness.

glasses + = glasses

glasses + = glasses

Peirce's goal, much like Sausure's, was not strictly to dissect signs but to examine the way individuals conceive and interact with the world. Peirce devised a com-

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[8] All information on Peirce is from: Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 2: Elements of Logic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932):134-173

plicated system in which he categorizes the relationships and interactions signs have both externally with other signs and internally among their own parts. A complete analysis of his system could be a career unto itself but an appropriate example of his thoughts can be found in the relationships that take place between the representamen and the object.

Icons, Indexes and Symbols

Peirce's examination of the representamen and object produced three relationships that he referred to as iconic, indexical, and symbolic. For an iconic relationship the representamen shares some of its qualities and characteristics with the object it points to. Examples of this include a picture of something, a snapshot on an ID card, and a caricature of a politician. In each case the representamen has attributes that are also found in what they are referring to. Other iconic examples include onomato-poeic words like "buzz" which are pronounced to sound like what they represent.

The second kind of the relationship formed between the representamen and object is called indexical. This typically occurs when the representamen has some form of direct connection with what it refers to, but does not share any of its qualities. Seeing a shoe print can call to mind thoughts of a foot even though the the two do not look alike. It is the causal relationship that the foot and the print share that units the two in the mind. Other examples of indexical signs include weathervanes and the idea of the wind, a knock on the door and thoughts of visitors, or the sighting of smoke and the idea of fire. In every case there is a direct link between the two.

Because both icons and indexes rely on connections that are established through experience, they communicate regardless of language or culture (though secondary interpretations and connotations may differ from one society to the next). The picture on a driver's license will represent the idea of that person regardless of the language understood by the viewer and smoke will bring to mind the idea of fire regardless of the society. These are examples of the kind of nonlinguistic signs and

relationships that Saussure's theories overlook. Where Saussure's and Peirce's theories do mesh, however, is with the relationship that Peirce defines as symbolic.

A symbolic relationship is one where the representamen and object are connected through strictly arbitrary rules, often established through language and culture. The viewer of the representamen is what establishes the link between it and the object. A linguistic example of a symbolic relationship is the word "dog." It does not share any actual characteristics with the idea dog and it is in no way physically linked to it. Though almost all language is of a symbolic nature, other forms of symbolic signs exist. Examples include the dollar sign, some though not all national flags, and other cultural byproducts like religious and organizational symbols.

These three classifications examine the different ways in which the representamen can be connected to its object. They are fairly esoteric in a fashion, but address an important aspect of how communication works. The first two relationships are generally established outside of culture—a picture looks like its object regardless of the society you belong to and smoke comes from fire in every part of the world. Knowing this can help designers craft a variety of messages for different audiences. An

iconic
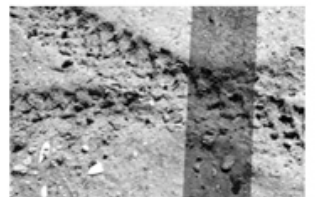"looks" like object

indexical
directly related to object

symbolic
arbitrarily related to object

foot

iconic
"looks" like object

indexical
directly related to object

symbolic
arbitrarily related to object

Bicycle Race

example can be seen in these possible directions for a bicycle race poster. A more in-depth look at Peirce's classifications and theories will provide many more possibilities for their use, but being able to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a message being iconic, indexical, or symbolic has strengths of its own. Granted, few clients are going to want to hear about representamen and interpretants, but designers should be expected to have the rhetorical tools needed to analyze and communicate what they do regardless of the terms used. Because of this, the role of theory in design is an increasingly significant one, and it is important to remember not all theories are equal to the tasks of the visual communicator. As our tools become more available to the public it will become increasingly important for designers to be able to explain what they do.

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