

INTRODUCTION

Design as Semiosis

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Ever since Roland Barthes, back in the mid-1950s, commented on the ideological myths infusing the design of the new Citroen DS or of the cover of *Paris Match*, the fates of design and semiotics have been inextricably entwined. From 'les trente glorieuses' of expanding mass production and mass consumption, however, to the current trend for customization, sustainable design, collaborative and participatory design, parametric design combined with 3D printing, we discern a reorientation from a use-centered, scientific design to a user-centered design driven by post-materialism and intuitive 'design thinking'. At the same time, semioticians moved from unraveling the mystifying effects of design upon a beguiled mass-consumer to championing a more expanded understanding of design as a fundamental dimension of the human activity of meaning-making, world-making and identity-making.

This shift of semiotic emphasis from ideological critique to an encompassing, anthropological concept of design may be seen as a reflection of a society that becomes all the more design-centered and 'design conscious', with the ceaseless invention of new media, artifacts, environments and man-machine interfaces constantly opening up novel fields for design activity; an activity, moreover, which has widely adopted semiotics in order to develop more meaningful and effective designs, as well as enhance its self-reflexivity as semiotic work.

This special issue of *Punctum* aims to explore the shifts and turns marking the decades-long relationship between semiotics and design, and to foreground the role and significance of semiotics in the contemporary transdisciplinary engagement with and research in design. Is it possible, finally, to sustain the critical project of semiotics, beyond both the wholesale reduction of the artifact to a fetish or an ideologeme, and the abstract notion of design as semiotic work underlying all human activity?

The issue brings together contributions that address one or more of the above concerns,

drawing their research material from diverse areas of contemporary design. Sonia Andreou explores the meanings of postage stamp design as part of a country's official repertoire, the ideologies behind them, and how they are perceived by the citizens of the state, focusing on the Republic of Cyprus, a relatively newly-founded, post-colonial state, independent since 1960. The author presents findings of a survey, according to which the official state repertoire favored topics pointing to Cyprus' ancient past and religion, while citizens sought renewed ways for the official representation of their country through stamps depicting local folklore culture, suggesting more 'subversive' forms of self-representation. After discussing specific examples, she concludes that postage stamp imagery not only offers historical evidence regarding the country and time period studied, but also provides insights as to the negotiated character of official culture and its ongoing interaction with the citizens.

John Reid Perkins Buzo discusses the development of 'maker' communities that usually originate from designers who employ technology in their own work, but then tend to embrace a larger vision of community empowerment, as they diffuse technological skills to the non-technical and non-academic public. Following John Deely's reading of the concept of *Umwelt*, the author investigates the semiotic environment in which these efforts take shape, focusing on the staged process of the development of two specific examples in Southern Illinois. This process is likened to a passage from the *Innenwelt* of private concern to the *Umwelt* of public space leading to an expansion of the *Lebenswelt* of human community forms, bringing together more people within the semiotic network.

Parthena Charalambidou presents a comparative semiotic analysis of university website design in the US, the UK and Greece. Using concepts derived from Greimas, Barthes and Lotman, and focusing on the image/text relationship, the author examines the field of University website design and highlights points of convergence or divergence regarding education ideology in university websites. Looking into the different approaches to University marketing adopted by US, UK and Greek Universities, the author demonstrates that University online identity-making bears many similarities in Britain and the USA but ideological conceptions of education in Greece seem to form a rather separate semiosphere.

Robin Fuller investigates the work of Rick Griffin, one of the leading figures of the psychedelic design movement in late 1960s San Francisco. Fuller argues that, although not an overt theorist, Griffin reveals aspects of the visual semiotics of writing that provide insights for the semiotic study of graphically-embodied language. Suggesting that it is only in recent years that semioticians and sociolinguists have begun to pay more attention to how language functions in its graphic manifestation, Fuller explores Griffin's experimental and innovative work discussing aspects of the visual semiotics of alphabetic writing, and, more specifically, the relationship of embodied tokens to alphabetical symbols, the socio-semiotic function of styles of letter, and lettering as aesthetic signification.

Bianca Hottschke studies a selection of twenty maps of the metro network of Madrid,

pointing to their remarkable diversity in terms of visual form, while seeking the common elements they share in terms of the basic features that constitute them as depictions of reality, or their 'semantic core'. As 'graphics offer an unlimited choice of constructions for any given information' (Bertin), the author examines the various maps, arguing that, since no map offers a naturalistic representation, the transcription of the object 'city' into the medium 'map' must be treated as a new constitution, based on the interplay between denotation and connotation, and the comparative efficiency of schema vs detailed image.

Massimo Leone articulates a typology of visual communication imperfections and argues that each of them appeals to a different semiotic ideology that produces specific pragmatic responses. Within this framework, he examines pixels as semiotic signs that elicit a wide spectrum of different significations in digital and physical culture. While a centrifugal aesthetic view on the pixel turns it into the origin of a possible 'visual expansion' toward a horizon of autonomous signification, the trend of aesthetic reflection that has developed from the adoption of parameters in digital art tends to turn the pixel into a pure numeric expression, whose semantic potential is completely predetermined by a series of set parameters.

Mohammad Shahid and Dharmalingam Udaya Kumar examine the visual attributes of Bollywood movie titles' design and discuss its role in the overall meaning-making process. By implementing a syntactic and semantic semiotic approach, their study reveals that significant visual characteristics of letterforms are used to design influential movie titles. In so doing, they examine a range of visual techniques used by designers or lettering artists for producing more persuasive typography/lettering.

From a socio-semiotic perspective, Dimitar Trendafilov explores IKEA's practices regarding the use of design as the main basis on which it creates, delivers and maintains value for its global audience. While the company implements a multimodal approach towards a wide spectrum of design applications and gains a unique profile to its customers, it also develops its own unique semiosphere. Cleverly organized mass production of products is combined with aesthetic taste education, home decisions and solutions, creativity, variety, entertainment and sustainability, all provided and stimulated under the framework of customer-centered design.

Jonathan Ventura and Galit Shvo introduce a hermeneutic framework out of three dimensions, *classic semiotics*, *semioclastics* and *design situation*, in order to investigate healthcare design and specifically the band-aid. While taking under consideration that, in general, design deals with questions of usability, they portray the changes in attitude towards the product and its sign, and examine it through a 'semioclastics filter'. In so doing, they suggest an alternative approach for integrating hermeneutic knowledge in the design of the band-aid and focus on the very design situation of the product instead of its style.

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