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# The Basis of Graphic Design as a Discourse

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*Abstract: This work is about the basic structure of graphic design as a discourse . The beginning of this reflection is a philosophical point of view that defines “the designed”, understanding its issues through the concept of “sense”, where fact is not only the experience expressed but also the subjective and inter-subjective dialogical interchange. The discursive resource is the dialogic resource; therefore, the message has its basis in its meaning structure. In visual culture, semiotic understanding is important. Visual imaginary makes sense because of the multiple meanings and the surplus of meaning. The visual levels show different reading alternatives related to the fields of context, media, configuration and significance, including new and old topics and horizons. By itself, no object or visual sign means more than its essence. However, the same object or sign immersed in an intentional communication, such as graphic design, opens horizons of meaning because of the multiple codes and discourses that are spread. This admits symbolism but is extended towards the concept of semiosis, a deeper and more comprehensive process that requires interpretative readings. That is why “designed” visual images should be considered “visual texts” and “graphic repertoires”. This paper proposes the interpretation of visual discourses, describing basic cultural units, making narrative schemes and formal journeys. All this concludes, in semantic chains: associations, anchorages and analogies.*

Keywords: Graphic Design, Discourse, Sense

*When we recognize something that is designed, it is possible to make a visual reading because it's only an articulation of thought: visual image and mental image. If we only look, the abstraction becomes dogmatic, but if we make the relations between form and content, the abstraction has significance. This integrates the horizons of visual knowledge, the common ideas named collective unconscious that always speak to us about symbolic figures and define human “psyche” representations.*

*This article is theoretic; it is directed toward graphic design professionals who are interested in understanding some of its interdisciplinary conceptual implications. The conceptual framework is sustained by theories that the author has developed based on her philosophical formation since 1998 and which are published in her books “Design Methodology” and “Design. A Universe of Knowledge”, among others.*

## Introduction. Graphic Design, an Intentional Communication

**I**N ORDER TO begin with the fundamentals of design as a discourse, it is necessary, as a philosophical point of departure, to define the designed as a discursive event and to understand its predicates from the concept of sense, where “the event is not only the experience as expressed and communicated, but also the intersubjective exchange itself, the taking place of a dialogue [...] the message has the fundament of its communicability in the structure of its meaning [...] the reciprocity of intentions is the happening of a dialogue”<sup>1</sup>

In visual culture, understanding semiosis based on the idea of sense is as relevant as visual imagery is for multiple significances. This is due to the surplus of meaning in which agent images are recognized, whose visual hierarchy reconstructs reading mottos that depend on the environment in which they are expressed, and on the configuration and the fields of significance that include familiar and new topics.<sup>2</sup>

By itself, no object or visual sign means more than what is in its essence<sup>3</sup>. However, immersed in an intentional communication, such as the graphically designed, it is possible for horizons of sense to open up. I agree therefore with those who point out that

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur. Teoría de la interpretación. Siglo XXI-UIA, Mexico, 1995. pg. 30

<sup>2</sup> Ideas, in philosophical terms, are not expressed in short sentences, but are extensive arguments that require reading and analysis as well as a basic conceptual formation in order to be understood.

<sup>3</sup> This includes symbolism as one of the processes of meaning in graphic design.



images must be considered visual texts because they can be interpreted. The designed must be considered visual text because it is a complex of signs that produces meaning, codifying signs in conceptually defined structures such as posters, comic strips, etc. Meanings do not surge from elements that add up; they are codes that merge in a discursive complex, whose operation, starting from visual language, makes sense and is textual.

The surplus of meaning is the increase of meanings that come from the expressive aspects of the text, the context and the interpreter, sustained in Gadamer's affirmation that "subject and object do not correspond to a different way of being and, therefore, are not completely alien to each other, but co-belong. They are not two completely different realities [...] the interpreting subject understands based on parameters offered by his cultural tradition"<sup>4</sup>. And so, the designed is presented as the manifestation of a phenomenal universe that includes everything from its conception to its materialization, in acts of perception, representation, intentionality, semiosis and communication.

In the process of semiosis, understood here as the complex of meaning through which graphic design creates surpluses of meaning<sup>5</sup>, underlies the consideration that designing is a semiotic behaviour based on signs whose systematization is reconstructed. Beginning with Charles Morris' scheme, defined as a methodology of sense<sup>6</sup>, the levels are: syntax (how the message is formed), semantic (message content, meaning) and pragmatic (what the message wants to convey), where, according to anthropological hermeneutics, sense emerges.

The designed, in the form of communication that is herein defined – in which an external issuer and an internal issuer are integrated<sup>7</sup>–, combines relationships that are organized in structures determined syntactically by visual text, discourse, environment, and context. It is recognized as a communication process, and so "meaning is produced when a thing that is materially present before the perception of a receiver represents another thing by underlying rules."<sup>8</sup> Thus, he who builds sense, that is, the designer, derives moments of interpretation, either from

the external issuer or the mediation, or the one who chooses, ratifies or perceives it.

### The Idea of Sense in Graphic Design

Sense is the evidence that fundamentals the intentional task, which is shown as a multiple and complex meaning of graphic design. To interpret sense, it is proposed to identify and describe basic cultural units of visual text, as well as units that, in different levels of relationships, establish graphic repertoires. These graphic repertoires are understood through the concept of visual imagery which, in the framework of visual language and visual text, carries sense because it materializes narrative schemes - regulators of the relationships between different codes, either in formal paths or semantic connections, based on possible associations and anchors, which belong to fragments of the cultural visual universe.<sup>9</sup>

Based on a dialectic vision of semantic dynamics, sense is understandable: all meaning creates sense and all sense creates meaning. Both expand culturally as sign chains or meaning relationships, for which the image of sign plotting is preferred - networks or cobwebs of semiosis that remit to the sense of infinitude and to the infinitude of sense, possible only in terms of anticipation.

When what is perceived is recognized by the percipient of the designed, the conditions are presented for a visual lecture, because what we are dealing with, specifically, is a form of articulation of thought, which is once again argued in the Gadamerian idea that "thoroughly watching and perceiving is by itself a meaning of that something [...] only when we recognize what is represented, are we able to read an image [...] to see it is to articulate it"<sup>10</sup>. If one only sees - which is an action of isolating from what is observed -, then the abstraction is dogmatic. If one perceives, that is, if connections between form and content are established, then the abstraction is meaningful and is not really comprehended until one enters the "spirit" of the whole of a structure<sup>11</sup>, that is, its sense, which is understood as an intellection, "fundamental event of the spirit's vision". A designed image is never isolated, but immersed in a context, bound to other codes and other images that

<sup>4</sup> Mayos Solsona, Gonzalo et al. *Los sentidos de la hermenéutica*. Anthropos, Barcelona, 1991 (Col. Los trabajos de Sísifo) pg. 24

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L.C. Vilchis Esquivel. *Diseño*. Op cit.

<sup>6</sup> Andrés Ortiz-Osés. *Metafísica del sentido. Una filosofía de la implicación*. Universidad de Deusto, Bilbao, 1989 (Col. Filosofía, 12), pg. 92

<sup>7</sup> The external issuer is the client, a physical person who is usually unknown to the receiving audience, and the internal issuer is the one who actually addresses the receiver, for example, Mafalda, the Marlboro cowboy, etc. Cf. L.C. Vilchis Esquivel. Op cit

<sup>8</sup> Santos Zunzunegui. *Pensar la imagen*, Cátedra. Madrid, 1998, pg. 59

<sup>9</sup> The visual universe is the set of representations associated with the forming of ideas, cultural practices and forms of socialization. Based on this imagery, narrative modalities are constructed, that teach how to look and how to look at oneself. The visual universe helps construct representations of oneself and of the world. Fernando Hernández. *La necesidad de repensar la educación de las artes visuales y su fundamentación en los estudios de cultura visual*. Congreso Ibérico de Arte-Educación. Porto, Portugal, November 2001

<sup>10</sup> "[...] pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena. Perception always includes meaning". Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Verdad y método I*, 6ª ed. Eds. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1994. (Col. Hermeneia, 34), pgs. 132 and 133

<sup>11</sup> Guillermo Michel. Cf. *Una introducción a la hermenéutica*, Castellanos Editores, Mexico, 1996, pgs. 35 and 36

allow the recognition of belonging or identity with discursive aspects.

The designed is always a fragment, a singular thing that moves in a totality of self-understanding and of man's understanding of the world. From this totality, each designed message is separated in a spatiotemporal sequence, an ambit or a partial aspect, in order to carry it, according to design's own methodology and to visual communication, to a specific development where the designed is conceived as a horizon of understanding.

Therefore, the designed builds its sense relationally; it is a complex of codes whose dynamic network, which I have allowed myself to identify with the image and the idea of hermeneutic spiral, in permanent movement, is implicative. This implies that the meanings are constantly linked in undefined dynamics that rotate around the sense.

The understanding of sense, identified by arrows in multiple mental images and western graphs that belong to the phenomenal world, is referred to as a deliberate direction. Now, the sense of the designed is the graphic mediation from which repertoires of signs acquire meaning, merged in implication structures like those of archetypes<sup>12</sup> in whose points of relation "sense is threaded like a configuration, gestalt or nodule-module [...] This way, archetypes are emerging structures, correlations of the being, matrices of matter, tracks of sense [...] Archetypes are conditions of reality and realization..."<sup>13</sup> Here, the sense of the designed is purported as the background that visually formalizes the representation of contents of common ideas called collective unconscious. These are archetypal, mythic and legendary symbolic figures whose significant strength imposes itself because they compile complexes of experiences that build wisdoms and define the sense of individuation. To exemplify, models of recognizable archetypes are mentioned:<sup>14</sup> the hero, the father and the mother, the wizard (Merlin) and the witch, the fairy and the sage, Cain and Abel, God and the devil, Faust and Mephisto, Eros, Dionysius, Hermes-Mercury, etcetera. All these typify a part of the human psyche (love, passion, rationality, relationship with the origins), as universally valid situations, even though they are temporally, spatially and representationally differentiated.

These archetypes are constantly represented in graphic design. As an example, we could mention the Benetton campaigns, which are clear models of dichotomies such as good and evil, or divine and diabolical.

Nevertheless, when the archetypal image and its insertion in the designed have such a magnitude that their enunciation comprises fruitless situations that are condemned, as Guy Gauthier<sup>15</sup> affirms, to repeat themselves ad nauseam losing the original sense, instead of archetype, we have a stereotype<sup>16</sup>, which is a condensation that has served as basis for the development of mass communication. A stereotype can be both of form and of depth, "the condensation" that Metz defines, compiles conventions and possible deformations of sense.

### Graphic Design as Visual Text and Visual Discourse

When building the sense of the designed in relation to visual codes, we turn to the sciences of language for its comprehension. Among these sciences are semiotics, which agree with the philosophical supposition that all designs involve a message materialized sign-wise with morphological, chromatic, typographic and photographic codes, systemized and organized according to the hierarchy of implications of the message's contents. The composite structure of these codes answers to the semiosis process, integrating sense in the syntactic level (which involves the interpretation of formal relationships), the semantic level (which involves everything from the interpretation of meaningful links) and the pragmatic level (in which the determinants of interpretation are expressed starting with the reception).

Thus intention transcends and comprehension occurs within a space of significance determined by the visual text - the designed -, whose moments of design delimit the designer, conditioned by the message and not by conjectures, this way establishing the supposition that the designed is always presented as mediation based on implications.

The designed emerges from experiences and is expressed in articulate visual elements. It is a synchronic or diachronic plotting - depending on the discourse - whose story always defines a direction-

<sup>12</sup> "Archetype: configuration of the cosmobiopsychic energy of primordial images according to Jung and eidetic prototype according to Plato". A. Ortiz-Osés. Op cit..., pg. 149

<sup>13</sup> Here is a reflection on things that are not and have a meaning, in truth that does not have it, even though a meaning always involves a certain truth. One can be right and lack sense at the same time, the author affirms, and all sense entails the counter reference of nonsense, "sense, symbolon, is a reunion between being and not being, between positive and negative, between right and wrong, a human mesocosm ruled by the law of a coming-and-going interlanguage" Ibid., pg. 32 and 35

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Andrés Ortiz-Osés. C.G. Jung. Arquetipos y sentido. Universidad de Deusto, Bilbao, 1988 (Col. Psicología), pg. 52

<sup>15</sup> Guy Gauthier. Veinte lecciones sobre la imagen y el sentido, 2ª ed. Cátedra, Madrid, 1992. (Col. Signo e imagen, 2), pg. 166

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes referred to stereotype as an expression that causes tiredness because it lacks body, it is empty, and it has lost its sense and referent because it only repeats preconceived ideas. Ruth Amossy referred to them as "petrified" ideas, which determine forms of thinking, of feeling and of acting, in representations whose visual indexes we recognize and rebuild. Cf. Martine Joly. La interpretación de las imágenes, Paidós, Barcelona, 2003, pgs. 223-226

ality. Designed visual texts are expressed in several main discourses: political, advertising, information, educational, indicative, ornamental, recreational and evil.

Every discourse in graphic design expresses a surplus of meaning that forms part of its signification (for example, in an ad for a car, the meanings that are inherent to the means of transportation are understood: mobility, speed, comfort; however, there are always surpluses like the meanings of prestige, masculinity, socioeconomic level, among others), incorporating determinants of the context in which the necessity is created, where a design is made and where the design is inserted. Among these determinants, Jacques Aumont<sup>17</sup> mentions the temporal sense of the image, of which representation is made with references to the categories of duration, the present, the event and the succession, the sense of the future, the sense of synchrony and asynchrony. These factors allow organizing the design contents in the episodic memory, conditioning them to the same spatiotemporal parameters of the message. However, the meaning, consequential with the conceptual guidelines that underlay it, is integrated into the semantic memory, this way developing the inferential capacity of mental images and of the constructions that evoke collective imagery.

Therefore, graphic design discourses (for example, a political campaign) are remembered better than texts (for example, the motives of that same campaign expressed verbally). This is due to their rhetorical conditions that make possible the sedimentation and permanence of the representations in the receptors' memory and the power of the images over their behaviour, which dynamically impacts the construction and activation of their memories because it is manifested in concrete actions: acquiring a product or service, expressing a political preference, contributing to a cause, following an example (a model), agreeing with an idea, copying a model, or other mediations of different characters.

The imagination that structures a graphic design discourse –which belongs to the designer - and the imagination that interprets that graphic design discourse –which belongs to the receiver- are the essence of the open environment of the sense in parallel explicative and implicative actions whose instrumentality is the design, that is, the concrete object that moulds the message which, added to others of the same condition, forms the fundamental substance of collective imagery, that is to say, contemporary

conditions of social evocations, such as conditions of life, fulfilment of needs, etc.

The instrumentality of graphic design discourses is comprehended through the analogical view which, just like any polysemantic cultural production<sup>18</sup>, links the visual text to the context. Here, beyond repetition and standardization, communication nuclei –messages- are established. Their essence is similar to the “representative images of the old ones” that acted on the memory for its capacity of association with mental images, with synthetic aspects of the discourse that require arbitration between the equivocality of the surplus of meaning and the univocity of the literal meaning, equivalent to denotation.

The meaning, in graphic design, is built upon a process of semiosis that weaves a plotting of signification resulting of the action of symbols, conceiving reality as something relational in which, coinciding with Ortiz–Osés<sup>19</sup>, what is important is the pertinent knowledge: understanding the symbol and its contents in a specific concatenation of meaning whose expression is always the everything of a designed object. This process is not very different from the scientific practice, of which Bronowski affirms that an incomplete part of nature is always decoded, producing an approximate metaphoric representation similar to the formations of language: in virtue of purely imaginative actions.

## Conclusions

Visual imagery is a repertoire of basic and intermediate graphic design discourses<sup>20</sup> with multiple signification fields that constitute the surplus of meaning. The possible reading of the visual structure of this expressive repertoire, and its hierarchy of signification, depend on the context, which adds known topics or new ones to the surplus of meaning. The phenomenal universe is the objective world, part of the environment that is selected through the senses constituting the individual's private sphere. The phenomena that comprise it are terms of a mixture of relations that are dependent of the mind, objectified through sensation and perception, and placed at the disposal of comprehension.

According to the philosophical assumption, no object or symbol means more than what is in its essence. However, immersed in an intentional communication (like what is graphically designed), it is possible for horizons of sense and imagination to open, nourishing the different levels of the memory's archives. Although it is true that this also happens

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Aumont. *La imagen*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1992. (Col. Paidós Comunicación, 48) pg. 112 and 113

<sup>18</sup> Because it presents more than one sense. Cf. L.C. Vilchis Esquivel. *Diseño. Universo de conocimiento*. Op. cit, pg. 40

<sup>19</sup> Andrés Ortiz–Osés. *Visiones del mundo. Interpretaciones del sentido*, Universidad de Deusto, Bilbao, 1998. (Serie Filosofía, 23), pg. 79 and 80

<sup>20</sup> Among these, are the following discourses: advertising, propagandistic, formal and informal, educational, recreational, ornamental, plastic, perverse and, of course, hybrid discourses. Cf. L.C. Vilchis Esquivel. *Diseño. Universo de conocimiento*. Op cit, pg. 46-53

with other languages, the case that concerns us here is visual text.

Eco states that images must be considered as visual texts.<sup>21</sup> Broadening this affirmation, what is designed must be considered visual text and also a discourse, because it is a complex of symbols that create, evoke, or expand meaning, and this meaning “is not produced by the sum of the partial significations of the symbols that compose it, but through their textual performance”<sup>22</sup>.

The surplus of meaning – the increase in significations that transcends what is said by the graphic design discourse – comes from the expressive aspects of the text, the context and the interpreter. These are not different realities, because the percipient, who interprets, understands based on his prejudices and traditions, that is, from his memories, which resolve associations of his phenomenal world with that which is designed, during the moments of imagination, conceptualization, materialization, perception, representation, intentionality, semantization and communication.

Representation, in the form of imagination, is manifested in the expression of graphic design discourses, which is present in concept as well as intentionality. It implicates signification and designates reference, “what is real, signified by the corresponding expression [alludes to three components of meaning]: sense, tone and strength, [relating] the idea of sense with that of knowledge, to which representation is also linked.”<sup>23</sup>

That which is designed represents or re-presents something, without the involvement of the mimetic corporation of features of the reality that is represented. A graphic design discourse fixes a message in a

temporary support that must be decoded. And so, the reading of graphic design objects, the integration of their contents into mnemonic repertoires, and their impact on behaviour, actions, and thoughts, evoke particularities and functions that correspond with encoded and not encoded symbolic modes, and already known allegoric representations.

In the design, in its set of organized relations and structures determined by the visual text, discourse, and context<sup>24</sup>, “signification is known as a process underlying every communication [...]; according to this point of departure, signification is produced as long as a thing which is materially present before the perception of a receiver represents another thing based on underlying rules.”<sup>25</sup> Here, moments of interpretation are derived by the person who is imagining, evoking and constructing a sense. Even though the previous could be understood as an individualized phenomenon, it actually exemplifies the collective imagery and the so-called social communication.

The meaning of what is imagined and represented is the evidence that founds the intentional target that is exhibited as multiple and complex signification in graphic design. In order to interpret meaning, one must identify the basic cultural units of discourse and those that, in different levels of relationships, establish graphic repertoires, including them through the concept of visual imagery which, within the frame of visual language and visual text, holds meaning as it materializes narrative schemes that regulate some of the relations between the different codes, whether it is in formal trails<sup>26</sup> or semantic confinements that are based on possible associations and anchorages of fragments<sup>27</sup> of the cultural visual universe.

## About the Author

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Professor in Posgraduate Program of National School of Visual Arts in National Autonomous University of Mexico. Pioneer in Mexico using digital resources in arts and design. First woman director of National School of Visual Arts at UNAM (2002-2006), has published four books about Graphic Design Theory, Graphic Design Metodology, Non-linear languages semiotics and Graphic Design Hermeneutics, 32 research papers and 18 didactic manuals. Manager from two different firms: a technologic center and a graphic design place. Teacher during 30 years, is official tutor from postgraduate program in the lines of researching projects, semiotic and hermeneutic studies; participating in academic events in Mexico, Dominican Republic, USA, Canada, Greece, Spain, Cuba, Peru, Holland, Uruguay, Argentina, Germany and Portugal and presenting conferences in Mexico, Panama, Cuba, Spain, USA, Lisbon and other countries; also, being advisor thesis from more than 120 researching

<sup>21</sup> While it is true that texts implicate words, the designed, through its morphological, typographic, chromatic and photographic codes, can be interpreted in conditions of visual reading.

<sup>22</sup> Santos Zunzunegui. *Op cit*, pg. 78

<sup>23</sup> Alejandro Llano. *El enigma de la representación*, Editorial Síntesis, Madrid, 1999. (Col. Hermeneia, 5), pgs. 244 and 251

<sup>24</sup> The context refers to all the reality that surrounds a sign, an act of visual perception or graphic discourse, either as knowledge of the issuers, experience of the receivers, physical space, a group of objects, environmental conditions or as an activity. Cf. L.C. Vilchis Esquivel. *Diseño. Universo de conocimiento*. *Op cit*, pgs. 42 and 43

<sup>25</sup> S. Zunzunegui. *Op cit*, pg. 59

<sup>26</sup> Synchronic narrative networks, like posters and billboards, or diachronic narrative networks, like books, magazines, and comic strips.

<sup>27</sup> Which, as any philosophical knowledge, does not include totality unless it is expressed as a world-view, like the case of Peirce's semiotics.

student thesis works in different universities. Professional graphic designer, working in Mexico, USA and Canada in firms like BMG Entertainment, Environmental Law Institute or UNESCO in traditional and digital way. Visual artist, has exposed digital art, collage and visual poetry in more than 30 exhibitions in Mexico, Panama, USA, Rusia, Spain, France, Greece, Palestine and Frankfurt.



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