

DESIGN

Principles & Practices:
An International Journal

Volume 1, Number 3

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Design: The Process of Interpretation

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DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
<http://www.Design-Journal.com>

First published in 2007 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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ISSN: 1833-1874
Publisher Site: <http://www.Design-Journal.com>

DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL is a peer refereed journal. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by Associate Editors through anonymous referee processes.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.CommonGroundSoftware.com>.

Design Hermeneutic Dialogues with Graphic Design: The Process of Interpretation

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Abstract: The graphic designer, in the professional methodologic process takes important decisions based in the concept of dialogue, also the people that receives the graphic message makes an interpretation. This dialogic implications are condicionated by semiotic situations determinated by prejudgments and contextual conditions. These dialogic events are explained in the base of understanding the visual communication moments like a spiral dinamic movement (going far away from the classical hermeneutic circle) in a sort of sequence of spheres (loading in space, like the Sloterdijk Spheres Theory that means a contemporary way of looking at globalization). It is a new way of thinking and focusing graphic design theory, in the essence of a phylosophical point of view that makes conceptual relations considering the design idea like a particle of the knowledge universe. This is, in this researching line, a way of open the design to humanistic world, as a compromise with the human being and the future of visual culture. The visual language is the visual thinking vehicle, the most important resource of graphic design because it is declared in design expressions and makes the generation of knowledge about visuality phenomenon in which the dialogue is basic as comprehension possibility condition because it allows to be close to the essence of the communication fact and all the acts that compose the proyectual process ans design objects. These is condicionated bay the context, the moment and the interpretation as a link with visual text. Interpretation is a phylosophical action, an hermeneutic action. It is presented first like a problem beside the comprehension needings. Their element are: experience –previous knowledge-, logic –organized thinking-, true pretentious- and method – thinking form-. The comprehension is undertanded like developing, a mode of representation with the language resources of understanding and expresion very close to dialogue completing a basic condition: “to talk from the same but not from the similar”. The cuestion, in dialogue, profundizes in the totality of a nos arbitrary process, something that Heidegger named an “event” with knowing perspectives in the circle of the human-historic existence. Then the authentic sense is the extraordinary asking. Gadamer, in his hermeneutic conception, that is a Heidegger heritage, accepts facts interpretation like understanding with the guide of tradition; this is argumented in the base of language wich possibility is in the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle means the return to the tradition each time that we ask the meaning of something. I apply this principles to the graphic design process in the frame of a communication diagram that changes tha traditional ponit of view. I believe that graphic designers work in spiral thinking (that’s why I make an integration of Sloterdijk Spheres theory), in front of several hermeneutic and semiotic moments (the dialogue moments). Also the perceptor has an interpretation moment, asking and answering to the graphic design object. This paper talks about mi research work with two disciplines: graphic design and phylosophy in specific aspects: the proyectual process and the hermeneutic thinking.

Keywords: Graphic Design, Design Hermeneutics, Design Semiotics, Graphic Design Method, Visual Communication

VISUAL LANGUAGE, A vehicle of visual thought, is the most important resource in graphic design, its importance is declared in the design's expressions and in the creation of knowledge of the phenomenon of visuality, where dialogue is fundamental as a condition of possibility of comprehension, because it allows approaching the essence of a communicative fact and the series of events that constitute the design process and the designed objects, all of these conditioned by the context, the moment and the interpretation as links to the text.

Interpretation, as any philosophical act, is presented first as a problem linked to the need to comprehend, whose elements are: *experience*—which implies

previous knowledge—, *logic*—which supposes organization of the thought—, *pretension of truth*—understood as propositions that are articulated among each other— and *method*—as a fundamental way of thinking.

Comprehension is understood as unconcealment, a manner of representing whose resource of understanding and expression is language, whose essential condition— dialogue— obeys a fundamental condition: “to speak of the same thing through that which is not similar...”¹

The question, in dialogue, searches deeply within the totality of a non-arbitrary process; it is an incident that Heidegger named an event in which perspectives of knowledge influence “the circle of a human-his-

¹ Beda Alleman. *Hölderlin and Heidegger*. Fabril Editora, Argentina, 1965. (Col. Libros del Mirasol), pg. 122



torical existence”², where the authentic meaning is found when the extraordinary is asked about. Gadamer, in his conception of hermeneutics, accepts the interpretation of facticity, understood as comprehension guided by the tradition and the resources of language.

In order for dialogue to exist, the events provide the conditions of question and answer. This is where the vehicle of hermeneutics lies, where discursive possibilities – language and tradition – become present for comprehension, “a conversation is truly accomplished, where the other comes out to the encounter, [this serves] for any form of approaching a text”³, which in the case of visibility, is related through perception.

Visual experiences, which are satisfiers of necessities, have intentionality and direction toward a state of things, they specify paradigms, and so their content equals a complete proposition in which visual perception is a relation between the mind and the world. The intentional experience has a conscious sense, unlike the perceptual experience, which is limited to physical conditions.

In graphic design, as an intentional and perceptual experience, hermeneutic action discovers the horizon of visual text, of the interpreters that participate in the dialogic processes of communication and the different contexts of the comprehension process whose dialogic power is generated from intersubjective horizons; Gadamer considers that in the dialogue there is a medial aspect that integrates horizons (the field of vision that includes all that is visible from a specific point) and traditions (resulting from the fusion of history and comprehension).⁴ This is carried out through a process that integrates the estrangement of appearances, the assumption of ignorance, the exercising of memory, the return to categories such as essence, truth and being, and ethical practice, “displacement, trajectory, effort, movement, all these belonging to this idea of a conversation...”⁵

The design process is a conversation that involves reciprocity as a shared knowledge and a sustained saying between issuer-designer, designer-internal issuer, and internal issuer-designer; the result, the visual communication of graphic design, must be based on intentionality and understanding. “The relationships between words and concepts, on the one hand, concepts and things, on the other, are not equivalent. We can call the first relationship (words-

concepts) “*semantic*” and the second relationship (concepts–things) “*representative*” [...] both cases represent an intentional reference...”⁶

Dialogue in design, is the result of visual language knowledge, and this visual language includes technical mastery as well as functional rules combined with the conscience of what is said. The different codes are the resources and the sense is the background of visual communication reflecting intentions, without going around the persuasive arguments⁷ that the dialogue supposes, ineludible basis of interpretations.

The dialogic course in the design process supposes in addition to comprehension, a resulting efficiency of visual communication. The excessive care of the form and the forgetting of sense provoking the lack of dialogue and increasing the loneliness of the individuals, generates subjects that cannot resist advertising trends and accept ephemeral pseudo-myths that devaluate the importance of memory and the critical spirit, and the forgetting of others predominates, falling into what Baudrillard calls “the anorexic culture: a culture of disgust, of expulsion, of anthropoemia, of rejection”⁸. Phenomena such as *marketing, styling, packing* or the *creation of an image* are practices induced by the forms of production, promotion and consumption that reduce or cancel the possibility of communication and the conditions of dialogue, affirms Rubert de Ventós⁹ who, alluding to the visionary viewpoint of Tomás Maldonado, coincides on the progressive hypertrophy of the media due to technical, economic, and political dominants that are imposed according to the needs of some productivist systems. Tomás Maldonado, declared since 1953:

The communicative act is carried out according to rules that the involved parties are familiar with, and so the participant of a dialogue – intentionally performs simultaneously as an interpreter and depends on the language in two perspectives, the syntactic mastery and the understanding of what occurs through the language, this is where the hermeneutic problem that is immersed in the game of language lies.

The materializations of the visual language, whose most important quality is communication, make apparent the following functions: they reproduce cul-

² Martin Heidegger. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Ed. Nova, Buenos Aires, 1980, pg. 45

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *The Hermeneutic Circle*. Cátedra, Madrid, 1995, pg. 37

⁴ Vicente Muñiz Rodríguez. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*. Ed. Anthropos, Barcelona, 1989. (Col. ATT Philosophy, 18), pg. 67 and 68

⁵ Michel Foucault. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Eds. Piqueta, Madrid, 1994, pg. 87

⁶ Alejandro Llano. *The Enigma of Representations*. Ed. Síntesis, Madrid, 1999. (Colección Hermeneia, 5), pg. 125

⁷ Francisco García Olvera. *Inter Alia Hermeneutics*. UNAM, México, 1995, pg. 14

⁸ Gianni Vattimo. *Around Postmodernity*. Ed. Anthropos, Barcelona, 1989. (Col. ATT Hermeneusis, 4), pg. 27 and 28

⁹ Xavier Rubert de Ventós. *Las metopías*. Montesinos editor, Barcelona, 1984. pg. 83–90

turally or update traditions, they socially integrate the individuals, and they interpret the social necessities of visual communication. What the interpreter looks for is to understand. Among the most important implications are the object's distance, the context's influence, the suppositions, and the comprehension prior to a communication. Habermas affirms that the interpreter function cannot be dodged, because a deliberate dialogue and the sense that results of it can only be understood in a process of communication, which can turn into a dependence of the context and a non-neutral interpretation.¹⁰

The visual text is a form of hermeneutic dialogue, and is presented in different discursive forms of intersubjectivity, which are always, in the form of unveiling, answers to questions. This hermeneutic and dialogic relationship, with its character of theory of comprehension, allows understanding that the visual language is a necessary mediation for approaching reality, always expressing a surplus of meaning in the different graphic design media.

Hermeneutics, and therefore interpretation, is manifested in theories and *praxis*, like the actions of a tolerant philosophy whose links with rhetoric and persuasion presume that *in every comprehension there is self-criticism, this is how the hermeneutic paradigm* has displaced the traditional model of the theory of knowledge by the dialogic model, pointing out to two trajectories in visual communication: a vertical one that refers to identity and tradition and a horizontal one that involves the mediation of intentionality, the message and the means. Therefore, the graphic design is interpretable, and if the process in which it is immersed were ignored, the clear understanding of the concept that it expresses would be obstructed.

The communicative function of the graphic design as an intentional object widens its transforming capacity, it belongs to the field of comprehension – of both *verbal and visual languages*, it is worth mentioning, because both form part of design codes– and *is expressed in the dialogic relationship between the issuer of the message and the receiver; the receiver and the communicator of the message; the communicator and the one who visualizes it*, as in any dialogue, its occurrence “is analogous to a game [...] to converse, dialogue, is to enter a game with another [...] a genuine dialogue is not directed, it is not manipulated beforehand”¹¹, the dialogue in graphic design is considered an event without previous agreement.

My studies on the phenomena that appertain to graphic design and regarding how designers in different periods have seen and represented messages,

led me to affirm that every relationship with the graphic designed object transmits an intentional communication that is not exclusively perceptual, it is descriptive because the interpreter defines boundaries and relates its characteristics, and it is explicative because it fathoms its significant structures. Thus, design is understood as a carrier of form, of symbolic contents and elements of social validation.

Each designed object must be comprehended under the most adequate perspective: interpretation has to do here with the hidden sense that must be revealed, where each graphic design object represents a comprehensible sense that needs interpretation.

The graphic design objects, whose intentionality is focused on visual communication and which are understood as visual texts, integrate dialogic links because they present semantic spectra that require being differentiated, that is, being thought, whose possible reading is subject to the considerations of comprehension. It is therefore worth speaking, coinciding with Mauricio Beuchot, of the hermeneutic question in graphic design in which the main objective is the validation of contexting.

Every question inquires an interpretative answer accompanied by interpretative argumentation always looking for comprehension, what does this design mean? What is it trying to say? Whom is it directed to? What does it tell me? Or, what does it tell me now? And other questions that have specific borders: the limits of a finished design, a design that does not allow physical nor structural modifications.

Jauss¹², in an attempt to analyze the horizon as an interpretation hermeneutic resource, sends interpreters to the semiotic dimension, encoded in the object, and to the receptor dimension, linked to *praxis*. This way, within the frame of the reception theory, infinite interpretations are not possible, because the horizon forms part of the object. Jauss coincides with Gadamer in the *synchronic* and *diachronic* forms of fusion of horizons, whose experience is reflected in the communicative behaviour expressed in specific contexts. From this perspective, the structure of the comprehension of the creation in graphic design is not assimilated as a mere projection of contemporaneity, but is manifested in the fusion of horizons where the external issuer, the designer, the internal issuer and the design, subjects and objects of comprehension, co-belong to one another.

The plotting of memory is what joins and links the threads of previous experiences with what is perceived, and semantic universality – understood as the capacity to transmit knowledge regarding characteristics, properties, places or events, present, past or future – is only possible when displacement

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 1996, pg. 40–42

¹¹ V. Muñoz R. *Op cit*, pg. 72

¹² Wenceslao Castañares. *From Interpretation to Reading*. Iberoediciones, Madrid, 1994. (Col. Parteluz), pg. 73–80

is surpassed, “a message is displaced when there is no direct or immediate contact with the conditions or events that are being referred to”¹³. The relationship between intention, representation, and the conditions of the actions is a part of this hermeneutic path, and in it, intention must be self-referential, that is, intention is not enough, it must represent the content, “the self-referentiality of every intention... is that which is formed in the definition of the intention”¹⁴.

The social and intentional character of the design is revealed through the composition of codes of the visual language, materialized in a complex that must signify something to the person who sees it, perceives it, and receives it. Intentionality is thus projected in the graphic designed object, which integrates the designer’s previous experience, a logical and methodical organization of thought as well as visual propositions that are articulated among each other.

The act of designing is the surpassing of the creative *praxis* because it does not look for a mere different perception of a designed object, it is a way of representing criticism and projectivity, based on the expressive resources of visual language, whose essence is bound to specific dialogue moments that search for the foundation of a non-arbitrary process.

The process of design is, therefore, an occurrence sustained by knowledge perspectives intentionally and discursively integrated, directed toward specific states of conduct in individuals. *The designed objects are visual experiences* that include *complete propositions* and indicate *paradigms for the thought* and knowledge of the world; *they implicate knowledge and appreciation of objects, people, facts, and contexts from specific nuclei of sense*.

The graphic design complies with communication conditions because it expresses a message intention, it establishes through mediations of the formed image intersubjective relationships in which senders and receivers participate. These moments can be considered as spheres of signification that are flowing in a spiral and interacting in human dimensions, some of them physical and others strictly ontological, and so the interdisciplinary relationship with philosophy is essential “for pointing at the confusing heterogeneous and desperate origin of ideas and works that are nor attributed to the mere application of norms nor to the technical repetition of familiar models of searching and finding.”¹⁵

Visual language finds in hermeneutics philosophical foundations that make possible the comprehension of its links, it begins with a grammar that exhib-

its syntagmatic and paradigmatic conditions with which I refer to its margins of univocity and equivocality and to the possibilities of analogical interpretation. Likewise, its media diversity propitiates horizons that delimitate its communicative conditions expressed in specific contexts.

More than three decades ago, Christian Metz¹⁶ referred to the iconicity of the image as its analogical status, indicating its perceptual similarities with the represented objects, understanding that the image never constituted an autonomous and self-referring ambit, with no communication with the environment. Studying design in those times meant establishing the system concepts of the image, unique and total, which constituted an inventory based on logical formalizations, which is impossible because visual analogy cannot be based on logical iconography, nor can its variables be quantitative, on the contrary, *it accepts qualitative variants such as the chromatic schemes of iconicity that depend on cultural aspects and on the fixation of memories respectively*, and most importantly, it is not possible to speak generically of visual images, because different materializations can be distinguished that suppose mixed texts: photography, film or design, among others.

In the same way, there are images that have their own codes and others that refer to compositions conditioned by an explicit manifestation and which possess codes that specify and explain them. Thus, at some point, the courses of image comprehension diversified: those that alluded to the iconography issue (Panofsky), those that presented superimposed codes in a single image (Eco) and those that could be classified according to socio-cultural stratifications (Francastel, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, etc).

These have been the conceptual determinants to approach image, and surely, in some cases, these determinants have been correct in regards to their assessment of it. However, nowadays, graphic design has been established as a field of knowledge dependent on the concepts of visual communication, from which one can argue the intertextual nature of the design and its definition as a visual text, a complex of signs whose sense depends on their interpretation context.

The design is studied, in the form of visual text, in terms of the network of signification to which it belongs, mediated by conditions and moments of interpretation, that is, *moments of defined dialogues*: first by the expression of the message and *the dialogue that the designer establishes from his own experience*, individual expectations and personal visual

¹³ Francisco Conesa and Jaime Nubiola. *The Philosophy of Language*. Ed. Herder, Barcelona, 1999. (Col. Filosofía del lenguaje), pg. 23

¹⁴ Marcelo Dascal (ed.). *The Philosophy of Language II. Pragmática*. Ed. Trotta, Madrid, 1999. (Col. EIAF, 18), pg. 41

¹⁵ Peter Sloterdijk. *Spheres I. Bubbles. Microesferología*. 2ª ed. Siruela, Madrid, 2003. (Biblioteca de Ensayo, 24), pg. 37

¹⁶ Christian Metz, « Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image » en *Communications*. École de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Paris, 1970. (Col. SEUIL, 15), pg. 1-10

memory, in which hierarchy is given to the nature of the main text and its subtexts, this way initiating the message semiotization; second, by the generic determinants, where *the designer once again fuses his own horizons with the horizon of media* determinants that condition the syntactic relations and their possible rhetoric dimensions in the materialization of the design; last, *the effects that the structure of the visual text, through the internal issuer of the communication, produces on the preceptor*, where contextual elements such as external and symbolic anchorages or the cultural memory of individuals, open interpretation parameters.

Each of these moments is dialogic because, in addition to involving the subject, *the subject conducts a reflection about the object*; in this hermeneutic context, the analogical character of the dialogue is expressed in the visual rhetoric which, in its quality of analogical argumentation, shapes the sense of the discourse and maintains the dialogicity, without forgetting that every dialogue involves psychological and ethical assumptions, to avoid sophism. This is the challenge of the future horizon of design and an object of studies to come.

Graphic design in Mexico is considered in many corners of Europe and the United States as a fragment to which its own current cultural identity, other than that of pre-Columbian civilization, which is extinct or turned into intellectual or commercial folklore, is denied.

Suffice it to say that Mexican design has not been an object of researchers' attention, because there is certainly a Mexican design quite distinguishable from the North American or European, if that means something.

In our country, except for the author's design, which is reduced to a minimal horizon, and some monographic researches in the late 20th century, Mexican design has remained ignored, except for published studies in which it is not clear whether the design is Mexican, or European or North American made by Mexicans, because the work of some Mexican designers is always under suspicion of being nothing but a reproduction, diffusion or vulgarization of the dominant trends in other geographic spaces.

If, as some philosophers affirm, *only cultures that are myth-rich generate their own forms of visual*

thought, then in the destruction of myths in which our world-view as consequence of the conquest is manifested, lies the first explanation of the inexistence of a Mexican design. Our public and private spheres are imposed and alien, adapted to a world that we do not know, and which prevents us from visualizing ourselves in a world, condemned to surviving in the silence of resistance. The new myths are from spheres that are foreign, transplanted, unlinked to our own roots, which prevent a national imagery from flourishing.

Only an observing eye, with universal design criteria, like Ikko Tanaka's, was able to comprehend and explain interpreting elements of Mexican graphic design: first, the colour, distinguishing red, green and orange, followed by the syncretic and eclectic form, whose syntax leads to a carefree and joyful communication that does not lose its human warmth. Tanaka, *conceding space to hermeneutics*, recommended that the new generations not cease to interpret their own culture in a world that tends to being more and more the same, "*without a personal culture, -affirms the designer – there is no personal identity*".

Interpretation must help the graphic designer to see himself immersed in globalization from its context, and conceive the design, promoting an approach to analogical hermeneutic proposals whose conception of man understands that there is something universal, common and general in him which he shares with the rest of the men and the rest of the cultures, in permanent dynamic with what is differential, that which every culture and every individual has as his own, because "*among the effects of globalizations, the fact that stands out is that globalization has raised to new norm what is anthropologically most improbable: the unceasing counting on those who are far, those who are strangers to one's receptacle.*"¹⁷ This way, it is possible to express a specific language that would emerge by itself from the deep dialogue with the origins, history, and complexities of one's geographic sphere, with the mediation of the material, technical and technological sphere, and the expressive sphere of the internal issuer of the design.

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¹⁷ Peter Sloterdijk. *Spheres II. Globes. Macroesferología*. Siruela, Madrid, 2004. (Biblioteca de ensayo, 34), pg 854

dactic 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 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, Russia, Spain, France, Greece, Palestine and Frankfurt.

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