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Hermeneutics of the Designed Image

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Abstract: Hermeneutics, in their willingness to seek an alternative understanding of the visuality, has covered many trends of thought, creating options whose interpretation schemes or structures are in many cases, sustainable and consistent with the circumstances that gave rise, after all some authors argue that human beings are and have always been interpreters. Image hermeneutics interpretation means expression, clarification, execution, identification and meaning. This semantic diversity of the term is considered the support of the meanings interpretation of designed image and represents the philosophical reflection that allow the compilation of modalities, procedures and characterizations of the design process understanding. To set borders and identify areas and times of designed image interpretation the links between hermeneutics and semiotics display signs relationship systems that emerged from the conceptualizations of graphic design, giving the scale of sense, that is, understanding. Hermeneutics of the designed image is the sum of experiences characterized by a succession of hermeneutical spiral based on the discovery of analogies linking the visual language with reality.

Keywords: Image, Graphic Design, Hermeneutics, Interpretation, Sense

Introduction

VISUAL LANGUAGE, MANIFESTED in a design, is the materialization on surfaces, of contours and volumes, of compositions that imply up and down, inside and outside, yes and no, allowed and prohibited, big and small-that is, the great dichotomies that comprise the sense of the universe.

Hermeneutics, as a means of searching for alternatives to understand visuality, has comprised multiple trends of thought, creating options whose interpretation structures or schemes are, in many cases, sustainable and consistent with the circumstances that originate them. After all, Stuart affirms, “all the human race are, and ever have been, interpreters. It is a law of their rational, intelligent, communicative nature”.¹

Interpretation² is a word that adapts to several acceptations, which Maurizio Ferraris summarizes as follows:

- Interpretation is *expression*, in the Aristotelian sense; it is the linguistic expression of universal symbols that derive from the impressions of the soul.

¹ M.S. Ferraris. *La Hermenéutica*, p. 19

² “From the most ancient times, the interpretation of signs has been linked to knowledge of a practical nature and, quite likely, to the form of intelligence called *metis*... centered on the mythological figure by the same name. Metis, first wife of Zeus, mother of Athena, and who according to Hesiod knew more than all the gods and men combined, held a form of intelligence and knowledge that involves a set of mental attitudes that combine sagacity, foresight, sense of opportunity and experience [...] All these traditions, though through different routes, are connected to discursive arts” Wenceslao Castañares. *La semiótica de C.S. Peirce y la tradición lógica*, p. 1

- Interpretation is *clarification*; it evokes different expressions, universal symbols, thus assuring comprehension.
- Interpretation is also understood as *execution*, in design, drawing, painting, sculpture, music, acting, or written words, to name a few examples.
- Interpretation is the *explanation of a sense* that is obscure or not specific enough; for example, references to a painting, or ellipses in poetry or in films, rhetoric in design.
- Interpretation is *identification*, and the resulting apprehension that is achieved through it is comprehension
- Interpretation is *exposure*³ of the fallacies that are found in nature and in man; they must be demystified and their true intentions accessed.
- Interpretation is *interpretation*; subjects, objects, or facts are not recognized, only interpretations are.⁴

From this semantic diversity of the term interpretation, the acceptations that have been considered for the interpretation of the designed image are those which involve philosophical reflection and allow making a compilation of the methods, procedures, and characterizations of the process of understanding.

Some taxonomies are expressed by way of cautious references, faithful to the words of the authors, considering that according to some of them, interpretation is anthropological, it acquires meaning for the *I* and the *us*, freeing the meaning, decoding and encoding the visual language, particularly the designed, according to the needs of human beings.

[...] language is critical only when mediated, interpreted, verified. The scale of language [...] is not its abstract or rational truth or falseness (in the presence of certain rationalisms), nor is it its goodness or badness, valued based on a blind, irrational praxis [...], but its validity or invalidity as an achieved *logos*, that is, a place (*trope*) of dialectic intersection between theory and *praxis*⁵

In Greek rationalist tradition, true knowledge of existence opposed perception and opinion; nevertheless, this idea became a current, Gnosticism, which in later centuries identified the intuitive knowledge of divine inspiration. Gnostic schools agreed, as did hermetic schools, on interpretations open to infinite interconnections, where language cannot capture the pre-existing meaning.

Eco, in a compilation on hermeneutics, refers to similarity criteria for the association of images and words based on mechanisms of analogy, of analogical displacement, and of extrapolation of similarity; in other words, he refers to *semiosis*. The author affirms that the analysis of these notions, particularly of similarity, “can help us to isolate the basic flaws of hermetic semiosis and, through it, the basic flaws of many procedures of overinterpretation”.⁶

In his *Poetics*⁷, Aristotle defines *epiphora*, or the movement of something that designates one thing to a different thing; it is a *trope*, or a figure of speech that consists of replacing.

³ Heidegger refers to *aletheia* as unconcealment, which, he affirms, is the same as the essence of technique, both of which are the basis for all that is brought-forth. Martin Heidegger. *Conferencias y artículos*, p. 14

⁴ Cf. Maurizio Ferraris. *La hermenéutica*, pp. 22–27

⁵ H. Marcuse, K. Popper and M. Horkheimer. *A la búsqueda del sentido*, p. 17

⁶ Cf. Umberto Eco. *Interpretación y sobreinterpretación*, pp. 48–53

⁷ Aristotle. *Poética* (Poetics), pp. 7–32

In the case of visual language, it would be an image that keeps a certain relationship with what it represents. These types of comparisons are the basis for some interpretive techniques, such as analogical models.

Analogy, an Hermeneutic Alternative

The idea of similarity is quite ancient. Since the 16th Century, interpretation was conducted based on similarities among things, under the notions of convenience or adjustment, sympathy or identity with accidents or substances, parallelism of attributes in different beings, identity among the visible properties of an individual, the image of an unperceived property, and the *analogy* that integrates the possible types of similarity.

These notions founded the different aspects of interpretation, awarding each aspect with its own hermeneutic orientation: in *intransitive interpretation*, understanding was a goal on its own, it was applied mostly to philology and to history; in *reproductive or representative transitive interpretation*, the aim was to facilitate understanding, arts would be included here; and last, through juridical or theological *dogmatic or normative interpretation*, human actions were regulated. All of these consist of successive moments: understanding or intellection, explanation, and application, identifying the latter with the contextual and pragmatic sense of comprehension. These hermeneutic doctrines or interpretation rules are scarce and have remained valid since the time of Hellenistic philologists and up to the 20th Century.⁸

The courses of interpretation were brief, and thus, the idea of subjectivity, the presupposition that *comprehension requires expression*, and the principle that compels us to not be against the author or ascribe improbable manifestations to him/her, are important.⁹

Undoubtedly, one of the most important ideas of the concept of interpretation is subjectivity. Subject, defines Gadamer, means “self-reference, reflexivity, ‘I-ness’”¹⁰. This concept originated in John Locke’s¹¹ expressions regarding the simultaneously objective and subjective nature of color. Later, Kant developed the concept by characterizing subjectivity as the “transcendental synthesis of apperception, which must be able to accompany all our representations.”¹²

Thus, the hermeneutics of designed images, as Ernesto Sábato affirms, “will always be the result of *a reality seen by a subject*”. There are undoubtedly objective elements in a poster, a book, or a comic strip, such as form, movement, and rhythm, among others; however, the interpretive experience, insists Sábato, “dyes these objective elements with an inevitable subjective colour”¹³.

Within the designed image, there is an objective core linked to subjective elements that are added to the percipient’s historical subjectivity, which has to do with his/her sensitivity, taste, age, era, and dominant ideas. Thus emerges intersubjectivity, which ensures the relativity of a hermeneutic judgement, even though the objective core guarantees the universality of any judgement.

⁸ Maurizio Ferraris. *Op. cit.*, p. 29

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–32

¹⁰ H. G. Gadamer. *El giro hermenéutico* (The Hermeneutic Circle), p. 13

¹¹ “For Descartes, as for Leibniz and John Locke, the concept of person is defined through the reflective concept of self-consciousness”. *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ernesto Sábato. *Hombres y engranajes*, pp. 151–153

Some authors supposed that in order to understand a plastic representation or a design, it was necessary to become involved with the author;¹⁴ they proposed getting inside the author's mind or repeating his experience completely. This way, for example, the sense of a design or of the action of designing would be understood based on the designer's intention and not on the message.

This *hermeneutics of the author* has been critiqued with reductionism of purpose and risk of minimalism and maximalism by the extreme ranges of conjecture, and even though it is true that, as been previously affirmed, the author is present in his work, "the objectivation of the author's experience in the work is incomplete and imperfect. A vicarious experience is obtained from the work's mediation."¹⁵

Designed Image Hermeneutics

It is possible to understand the designed image through generic comparisons or stylistic transformations. However, comprehension must always assume a point of view conditioned by the individual's previous knowledge. Here, we are referring to the hermeneutic concept of *horizon*, understood as "the totality of what is perceived [...] every experience has its own horizon structure [...] accompanied by previous knowledge of contents and determinations".¹⁶ The horizon has been described as "a totality pre-understood or grasped in a thematized fashion, which enters knowledge of individual content, conditioning or determining it".¹⁷

In the interpretation of designed images, the *horizon* may be of either practical or theoretical nature, and it may refer to a particular discourse or genre. It is always related to experience, and it forms a spectrum that continuously expands and diversified due to the inevitable dynamics of design. In fact, designers constantly work based on the fusion or bringing together of horizons; that is, they review previous designs, influences, and solutions to similar problems. Not to do so will cause the design to be superficial, reductionist, and conventional, and to repeat common places in the so-called ingenuous vision of visual language. Comprehension alone is not enough; one must reach the stage called "*appropriation*" [...] an adjustment of horizons is required, a fusion of horizons of experience regarding expression¹⁸

The actions required to achieve a designed image that will respond to the needs of the external senders, the message, and the receiver, may be defined methodologically:

- Designing based on ideographic knowledge; that is, symbolic knowledge, of which objective is the study of syntactic and semantic individualities, unlike the design that searches for regularity or for a sequence that will guarantee the designed.
- Visually exposing open arguments; that is, under the guidance of humanistic concepts such as culture, common sense, judgement, and taste, which allow regulating practical behaviour and understanding the phenomena of designed images.

¹⁴ Schleiermacher, Gunkel and Dilthey, among others.

¹⁵ Luis Alonso Schökel. *Apuntes de hermenéutica*, p. 52

¹⁶ Introduced to the theory of interpretation by Husserl. *Ibid.*, p. 72

¹⁷ This is a description adjudged to Coreth. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–84

- Applying resources such as the hermeneutic spiral, based on the hermeneutic circle, which resolves in the form of questions and answers, rights and wrongs, the link between the interpreted and the interpreter, the middle ground between otherness and affinity, the call to authority and tradition, conditions and prejudices with which an approach to design is achieved with objective, subjective and intersubjective requirements.
- Remaining immersed in the language of the discipline, in this case, visual language¹⁹

The previous argument agrees with the idea that nothing exists outside the designed image. It comes from a previous mental image, but in order for it to be perceived, it must be fixed, that is, printed in some sort of support or medium...²⁰

There are hermeneutic proposals that accept an incomplete interpretation of the language²¹. They are defined as fragmented, suspended; visual signs are interpretations on their own. Therefore, they are lost as signifiers and must interpret themselves. The risk is that the interpreter himself becomes an object of the interpretation, and so he will never be able to create distance with the designed, regardless of the point of view. Hermeneutics becomes dominated by languages that self-implicate, expanding the interpretation of the designed until infinity, since there is no horizon of judgement and decision. This experience is common in multimedia design interpretations. The fragmentation, randomness, and rhetoric of interactivity and browsing conditions are the main causes of partial hermeneutics.

Therefore, the philosophical basis of *explaining and understanding* is pertinent for the process of interpretation of the designed image; that is, a continuous effort of contextualization and decontextualization in which the recognition of signs-as either indexes, icons, or symbols, in their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions, and based on visual language integrated by literacy, visual grammar, its genres and discourses-, is relevant for the review of the hierarchies of active and passive synthesis and the search for the ultimate fundament of the designed.

The only moment in the design process that does not require interpretation is the moment of perception, *because it comes before thought*, and knowing what the thought is about, opens up the scope of speculation and the infinity or universality of interpretation, which would make everything be in the interpreter's mind, creating the paradox: either everything is interpretation or nothing is.²²

In order to establish boundaries and define the spheres and moments of interpretation of the designed, the links between hermeneutics and semiotics display systems of sign relationships which, emerging from the conceptualizations of graphic design, link the action to an event, giving rise to the *dimension of sense*, that is, comprehension. This trajectory between

¹⁹ Cf. Principles resulting from the proposals of Wilhelm Windelband, quotes by Maurizio Ferraris. *Op. cit.*, pp. 33–39

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39

²¹ Called *hermeneutics of suspicion*, of which main representatives are Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Marx interprets, based on political economics, relationships such as production, which occur as interpretations. Likewise, Nietzsche, who believes there is no original meaning, considers words as prescribed interpretations—the word, before becoming a sign, has a meaning because it is already an interpretation—, and according to Freud, the phenomenon of transference will not allow for an interpretation to be concluded, it remains open and exposed. Michel Foucault. *Crítica a las técnicas de interpretación de Nietzsche, Freud y Marx*, pp. 15–30

²² Cf. Maurizio Ferraris. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–84

the designed and the designer's world *is an experience mediated by three moments that can be applied to the act of designing*:

- *Prefiguration*, or time past, constituted by the elements that provide attention, anticipation, and memory.
- *Configuration*, or present time, understood as a sequence of instances that integrate the act of planning, from the moment of perception to the materialization of alternatives.
- *Figuration*, or time of execution, in this case, the act of designing an image.

This interpretation strategy includes two interventions: a *persuasive* one, which is the designer's, and a *recreational* one, which involves the appropriation that the professional makes of the design.

In each of these fields, the moment of comprehension is characterized by an intuitive and global understanding of what is in question [...] by an anticipation of sense that touches on divination, by a commitment on behalf of the subject who knows the moment of explanation, and as a counterpart, it is marked by the predominance of analysis, the subordination of cases specific to rules, laws, or structures, by the isolation of the object of study in relation to a non-implicated subject, [without] separating comprehension from explanation...²³

In this same line of significance, the *interpretation of meaning*²⁴ can be mentioned, which moves along the levels of:

- *Perception of the phenomenon*; that is, of necessity, the problem that it implicates, the perceiver to whom it is directed, and the satisfiers that it demands.
- *Perception of content*, which involves an analysis of the message and the consequent development of the conceptualization and its content.
- *Ethical perception*, which includes the development of formal, semantic and pragmatic values.
- *Perception of meaning*, which sustains the design project development up to its final execution.

And so, from the development of the planning process, interpretation criteria are formed; the description of each of the stages, based on aprioristic structures and the essence of the design object, defends the palpability of both perception and knowledge.

Objects are not something that is inside knowledge as in a bag, as if knowledge were an identical form, an empty bag, ever the same, in which sometimes you place one thing and other times you place another. In what is given, we see that the object is constituted inside knowledge [...] that it carries the world's origin and turns it into an explicit object of a possible knowledge [...]²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 35

²⁴ Described as Jung's *hermeneutic methodology of meaning*. Andrés Ortiz-Osés. *C.G. Jung. Arquetipos y sentido*, p. 35

²⁵ Javier Bengoa Ruiz de Azúa. *De Heidegger a Habermas*, pp. 55 and 56

Designers must have flexible thoughts about knowledge and its variables; otherwise, their interpretations might be dogmatic²⁶ and their designs would correspond to mimetic actions during the design process. The project sequence in design is unavoidable; however, the imperative of analyzing the spiral structure of comprehension, according to which all interpretation must define what should be interpreted in every alternative (of composition, formal, chromatic, typographic, etc.), is reiterated.

Every designer defines, based on the process itself, the horizons of interpretation of the designed image, based on visual language and its corresponding epistemological structure. This way, interpretation, in its own sense, contains everything that is not in the design, even though it is represented²⁷.

The previous is a structure composed of *reference, execution, and content*, in which the design depends on actions, and these are the meaning of behaviours such as perception, or its final evidence, the designed image. The complete meaning equals the phenomenon whose common thread is intentionality; moving towards something through perception and the sequence that it creates, and so:

Every interpretation is an interpretation according to something. That previous deed that must be interpreted should be searched for in the scheme of objects. One must withdraw from what is closest in the topic in order to get to the bottom of it.²⁸

Conclusions

The hermeneutics of the designed image is a sum of experiences characterized by a succession of hermeneutic spirals²⁹ based on the discovery of analogies that link the visual language to other realities, like: the development of dialogic experience, the remoteness of simple perception, the merger of horizons in order to rebuild the world and visual imagery in a continuous process, and the condition of a piece of knowledge based on assumptions under the certainty that objective knowledge is not being sought.

Umberto Eco warns about the risks of two extreme interpretation alternatives: a *rationalist* one, which comes with the development of science, and an *irrationalist* one, which involves the continuous slipping of sense. These are the *univocality and equivocality* that Mauricio Beuchot mentions as *comprehension extremes* in view of which the choice of analogical hermeneutics is presented, under which one searches for affinity between the concerning elements and their representation, the interpreters and their continuous image, in the constant becoming between interpretation, correlativity, approximation, criticism, and once again, interpretation.

Thus, Eco³⁰ defines interpretation as a strategy whose objective is to achieve an interpreter who will respect his own design or somebody else's, because an interpretation of the designed must be constructed in a spiral effort to validate it. For this purpose, *isotopies* or similar

²⁶ One must beware of the possibility of the dogmatic visions pointed out by Heidegger. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31

²⁷ Martin Heidegger. *Introducción a la metafísica*, p. 198

²⁸ Martin Heidegger. *Ontología. Hermenéutica de la facticidad*, p. 101

²⁹ Emerging from Gadamer's concepts of *hermeneutics of experience* and hermeneutic circle. Gianni Vattimo. *Las aventuras de la diferencia*, pp. 26–33

³⁰ Eco admits that he validates the concept of hermeneutic circle, agreeing with authors like Heidegger and Gadamer. Cf. Umberto Eco. *Op. cit.*, p. 69

categories are interpretive resources in design, as long as they are not too general, common, or ordinary, a principle valid particularly for metaphors, similarities and analogies.

It is important to mention the designer's role as an interpreter in the production of sense, thus assuming the idea of over-interpretation, which we recognize "without being able to prove that an interpretation is correct, nor having to hang on to the belief that there must be a correct reading..."³¹; therefore, Eco affirms that the *sense is in the design itself*, in its intention, and the designer's pretextual intention must not be considered, even if he/she understands the sense and recognizes the possibility of other interpretations.

The conditions of interpretation proposed by Umberto Eco include the designer working based on interactions, assuming their intentionality, and associations of sense that result from unconscious mechanisms or fantasies, in such a way that the *designed image will create its own history of interpretations*. The interpretations depend on three intentions: the one planned by the designer and manifested in the design, the one ignored by the designer, and the one decided by the perceiver, which in fact includes the three dialogic moments of hermeneutics of the designed image: dialogue between the designer and the message, dialogue between the designer, the medium and the internal sender, and dialogue between the design and the receiver.

Every designed image is multivocal, it carries several meaning, and it will never carry all the meanings. A coherent interpretation includes selecting the relevant or pertinent aspects, marginal or impertinent elements, and impossible pertinences. In this case, *it is only feasible to interpret the moment of design, and then, the design itself, without reaching a conclusion, but an adequate interpretation*³² that is always based on a previous interpretation—beginning of the hermeneutic spiral—, guided by criteria that are applicable to each case, and accepting the possibility of different assumption, making evident diverse relationships between meaning and context.

Interpreting a design is synonymous with understanding it both critically and methodologically. The fundamental question is: what significance and meaning does it have? Based on this question, the hermeneutic thought compels us to go beyond fields or languages. *Interpreting a design* is learning to live on the horizon of its own circumstance, agreeing with what the anthropological theory of interpretation enunciates.³³ Interpretation is a process that confronts the comprehension of the sense of reality and emerges in the symbolic world that integrates the convergences of meaning.

Reconstructing the sense of the designed image involves reconstructing its material significance, that is, its mediation or execution. This is a relevant model to explain the phenomenon of graphic design, in that it bases the construction of sense on the development of formal relationships, based on the visuality that they are poured into diverse dimensions. In fact, this is one of the basic horizons of the designed.

Thus, hermeneutics is considered to be one of the *conditions for comprehending the designed image*, understanding it as a coherent whole whose intention is manifested in the interpretation of its meaning.

³¹ Cf. Umberto Eco. *Tratado de semiótica general*, p. 243

³² Raúl Alcalá Campos. "Implicaciones epistémicas de la hermenéutica" in Samuel Arriarán and J. R. Sanabria (comps). *Hermenéutica, educación y ética discursiva*, pp. 73–75

³³ Andrés Ortiz-Osés. *La nueva filosofía hermenéutica*, p. 57

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The Image Community enables members to publish through three media. First by participating in The Image Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. [The International Journal of the Image](#) provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series [The Image](#), publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposal and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from The Image Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of the image. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and Twitter or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

Common Ground Publishing Journals

AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	MANAGEMENT The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	SOCIAL SCIENCES The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	SPORT AND SOCIETY The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
SUSTAINABILITY The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability Website: www.Sustainability-Journal.com	TECHNOLOGY The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society Website: www.Technology-Journal.com
UBIQUITOUS LEARNING Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal Website: www.ubi-learn.com/journal/	UNIVERSITIES Journal of the World Universities Forum Website: www.Universities-Journal.com

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