

PICTURE MARKS SEMIOTICS BETWEEN ONTWERPEN AND VORMGEVING

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ABSTRACT

This project seeks to implement and operationalize an analytical and schematic tool proposed in the doctoral thesis of Eduardo Aires applied to the first pages of newspapers (FBAUP: 2006), to the study of the symbol within the visual identity – the picture mark – starting with its semiotic analysis.

Our research has the main objective to contribute to providing guidelines to facilitate both the communication and the methodology used by students and professionals of graphic design, translating, in a graphic way, implicit phenomena that is still in the spectrum of intuition, concerning Identity Design (specifically, the design of the graphic mark), and bringing them to the field of scientific definitions. It is our intention to provide the design of a picture mark, a graphic sign which is intended to synthesize, identify and bring positive values about an entity, with an educational tool that would constitute itself as knowledge so far nonexistent.

Keywords: visual literacy, educational tool, graphic structure, design process, synthesis.

INTRODUCTION

Picture marks are emotional symbols. They permeate in our contemporary digital and urban landscape and incite us in our strongly visual society. These symbols can be seen as just the little thing standing in the corner of an advertisement, but as consumers grow more aware and visually educated about advertising, it's the story-telling behind the company that conveys an emotional attachment for consumers. However, if

we focus only on the graphic symbol, its shape and form, its proportions and management of white space also convey an emotion. But there has been little research on that yet.

There have been studies, however, including some from the end of the XIX century from a German psychologist, Gustav Fechner, who found a generalized preference of viewers of rectangles with a golden proportion, and another scientific study in 1908 by Lalo, which had similar results (Elam, 2001). Preference has to do with emotion. Why is the public increasingly aware of visual identities and passionate about them as proves the case, for instance, of the commentaries online by viewers from all around the globe on the Gap rebrand of October 2010? Due to the many negative comments, the brand was forced to withdraw it. Articles and comments on the web about new visual identities or re-designs trigger passionate reactions, such as the Olympics and Paralympics of 2016 visual identity (presented respectively in January and November 2011). This proves interest in this subject, but it also demonstrates a lack of a scientific language that would support the various arguments (and would otherwise bring some guidance to this apparent chaos of opinions). This need for such research is also demonstrated in the article launched in *The Guardian* in March last year, by the editor of *Creative Review*, 'So You Think You Can design a logo?' (Burgoyne, 2011). There is a great complexity in a project of a graphic identity and our ongoing research has the main objective to contribute to an expanded awareness of the process of designing a picture mark, enhancing the communication of designers, scientists interested in communication, brand managers, students and clients.

RESEARCH AIMS

In a saturated market which is, on top of this, in acute

crisis, the purpose of graphic identity – to differentiate, add value and be memorized – becomes increasingly difficult. Our study, even though it is not focused on what emotions are triggered by the basic visual means of the picture mark, as in SusaGroup methodology for instance, it is focused on studying what shapes, number of groups and axes of *pragnanz* are associated with positive picture marks. Therefore, we have been conducting an enquiry based on Charles Osgood Semantic Differential (1957) and Abraham Moles Constellation Attributes (1960) (vide Preliminary Set of Findings). This study aims to contribute to the development of picture marks that are able to follow those parameters, translating appropriate concepts in graphic shapes that turn into positive investment for companies and are adapted to this hectic time of multi-tasking and of mobile information and communication gadgets. We are analysing 50 stylized picture marks (according to the taxonomy of Norberto Chaves and Raúl Bellúcia, (Chaves and Bellúcia, 2003)) unveiling their graphic structure, contributing to the creation of a tool that can provide guidelines to facilitate the communication and methodology used by students and professionals of graphic design.

We have been using a methodology in order to study the graphic structure of picture marks, intertwined with their meanings and effects on viewers. We are examining if the ones perceived as positive by viewers tend to have 5 plus or minus 2 groups of elements, influenced by the research conducted by Georges A. Miller on memory of sounds and graphics (Miller, 1956); test if there are preferable icons for particular sections of industry, which by their shapes and connotations are used more often for certain areas of activity; if the ‘silent designers’ (Gorb, Dumas, 1987) are becoming more evident, with a greater tendency to express the third dimension, shine and flexibility in marks that mimic the potential of tools and media available and if there is a particular ‘dna’ that is common for the picture mark that answers yes to its purposes such as ‘will it work on different media?’, ‘will it fax?’, ‘is it simple and bold?’, ‘is it original and memorable?’, and also ‘will people want to wear it in a t-shirt?’, ‘will it move and react to sound?’, ‘will people be able to customize it?’.

We also intend to confirm our hypothesis that, in our current *glocal* society, these identity symbols are evolving from an impact ideology (impact: from the latin *impactus* or *impingere*, that means to ‘push into’)

that is to say, from a bold, synthetic graphic mark that seeks to be universal and long-lasting, and therefore, with an *ontwerpen* strategy (*ontwerpen*: one of the two dutch words for design; it stands for design as a ‘problem-solving’ activity), to a contact ideology (contact: from the latin *contactus* and *contingere* that means ‘to touch’ – *com*: ‘together’ and *tangere*: ‘to touch’), to an approachable, fluid, open picture mark that seeks to please the eye and therefore, with a *vormgeving* attitude (the second dutch word for design which stands for a more superficial process of making things look nice).

We have been using our experience as teachers and designers to access experts in identity design, groups of students and clients and continue to conduct interviews and tests, creating a pedagogic tool that allows to evaluate and validate a picture mark (without intending it to be a standard method but a guiding tool).

Will fluid, flexible picture marks be able to be explained by our schematic tool? This project seeks to establish some order to the apparent chaos of multitude of picture marks.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

We are semiotically analysing the visual structure, meaning and their effect on its viewers – of 50 stylized picture marks of reference in the present. The sample consists of stylized picture marks published in Marks of Excellence (Mollerup, 1997) and their current versions. (This work published in 1997, was chosen as the vessel of our corpus of analysis, because it represents the development of marks for over 5000 years, and still is an international benchmark in this area.) From the 257 picture marks present in Per Mollerup’s Marks of Excellence, we found that more than half of them were still looking the same. From the ones that changed, more than half of those changes incorporated a third dimension and a gradient: 147 (57%) of them today remain the same, 52 (20%) changed significantly and more than half of those changes (29 of them, 11,3%) evolved into a 3D visual approach.

Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1972) states that myth, or meaning, flows better with what he calls ‘poor images’, incomplete images that are more open to being filled with ideas: images relieved from anything that is not essential:

'(...) myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc.' (Barthes, 1972). We can therefore conclude, that the more condensed these pictures are, the more succinct they are, the more lessened in form and simplified they are, the more compressed with ideas they will be and the better myth will work through them. Consequently, we can integrate picture marks in this concept of 'incomplete images', relieved from excess, left with the essential, without superfluous elements, being, therefore, permeated with metaphorical, allegorical connotations. Certain of these 'poor images', we have seen, are getting fatter and richer. With gradients, shades, light and a third dimension, one can wonder now if there is enough space for myth to work in. Also with a third dimension and movement, they are now trying to be quicker to assimilate and comprehend, require less time to absorb and are becoming 'cooler' if we see it from a McLuhan-esque perspective (McLuhan, 1994). Cool seems to be this tendency and visual *zeitgeist* towards 3D.

References also include Charles Morris (Morris, 1946), Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1989) and Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1967), Jacques Bertin (Bertin, 1983), Donis A. Dondis (Dondis, 1974), Edward Tufte (Tufte, 1990), Gyorgy Kepes (Kepes, 1951), Rudolf Arnheim (Arnheim, 1974) and Norberto Chaves (Chaves, 2005) from a contemporary media perspective (vide some of the ongoing results in the final section: Preliminary Set of Findings). Donis A. Dondis suggests 10 categories to analyse visual materials (Dondis, 1974): dot; line; shape; direction; tone; color; texture; scale; dimension; movement. Jacques Bertin suggests 8 categories to analyse the semiology of graphics (Bertin, 1983): the two dimensions of the plane, x and y; size; value; texture; color; direction; shape. Kimberly Elam suggests two to analyse design (Elam, 2001): proportion and regulating lines. Rudolf Arnheim, in *Art and Visual Perception* suggests (Arnheim, 1974): balance; configuration; shape; development; space; light; color; movement; dynamics; expression. Christian Leborg in *Visual Grammar* (Leborg, 2004) suggests these categories: structure (visible or invisible, whether formal or informal); shape (geometric, organic or

random); repetition (regular or irregular rhythm); mirroring; rotation; proportion; movement; direction / dominant orientation; displacement / deformation; balance; symmetry / asymmetry; groups; weight of the composition; neutrality / contrast; coordination; distance between elements; parallelism / diagonality; negative space / positive space; the point; the line; the plane; color and texture. From these and the *gestaltheorie*, we decided to focus on the symbol when viewed from pure black and white and have synthesized the categories of the visual structure into the following: number of groups of basic shapes, number of *pragnanz* axes and points, and percentage of relation of figure and ground.

According to Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign is something that through its knowledge, we know something else (Peirce, 1931). We can say the same for picture marks: through their study, we know something that even surpasses them. This graphic sign is a concentration of graphic information about an entity and is presented as a rhetorical tool to persuade an audience that the product or the entity possesses certain desirable qualities, being a condensed representation of semantic dimension and emotion into a graphic shape. Through its analysis, we can learn more about our role as designers and our role as audience. Therefore, we have been also conducting tests on viewers based on Charles Osgood Semantic Differential (1957) to find the meanings and effects on them, structured in binomials such as visible /invisible; identifiable/non identifiable; easy to understand/difficult to understand; versatile/rigid; original/not original; memorable/forgettable; appropriate/inappropriate; timeless/dated; sufficient/ insufficient; emotional/non emotional.

This research has been drawn closely to the semiotic theory of the semiotician and pragmatic philosopher Charles Morris (Morris, 1964), who drew his inspiration on Charles Peirce, to base our study in the visual structure and meaning of the picture marks on the viewer.

This study will continue to use literature review – gathering of information regarding identity design in general and picture marks in particular, visual methodologies and semiotics.

We will proceed with the data collection, interviews and questionnaires that we have designed, complementing the literature review with oral testimonials by experts, design firms, students and users. We are applying action research to build a tool that can validate and evaluate picture marks and bring into the scientific realm of definitions the implied phenomena within the picture marks.

At this point, we are collecting the data and designing the tool, making the schemes that explain the picture marks (see figures 1 and 2), comparing the marks, between each other in order to have a direct and realistic analysis instead of an abstract one (Yin 2009), and seeing what has changed in the digital era.

PRELIMINARY SET OF FINDINGS AND PROJECTED OUTCOMES

When viewed from pure black and white version, from our ongoing results, we found that minus is more; the shape that is identifiable – close to pure geometric forms like the square, circle and triangle or figurative, iconic and easy to be drawn by anyone – are preferred by viewers: forms that are not openly complicated, even though they might be complex. These results have come across from our interviews with experts in institutional or corporate design and from our tests and surveys to 42 individuals. There is also a preference for certain icons within each industry sector, however, viewers also prefer that the symbols are original. Showing the importance of the management of the thin line between recognition and originality: on one hand the picture mark has to relate to the sector, so it has to have common ground with the rest of picture marks of other entities, but it has to be different.

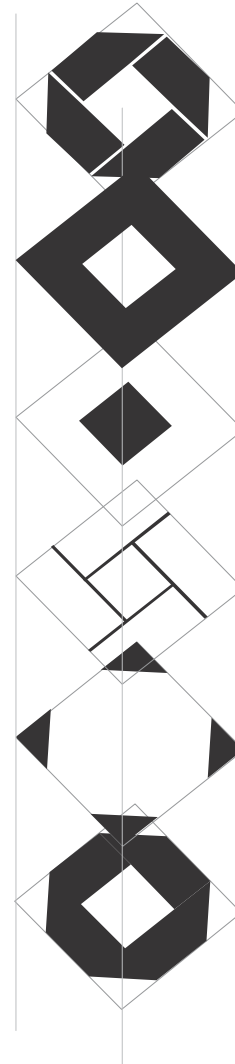


Figure 1. Chase Manhattan Bank designed by Chermayeff & Geismar. Our ongoing graphic scheme to explain it in terms of its different layers of visual reading

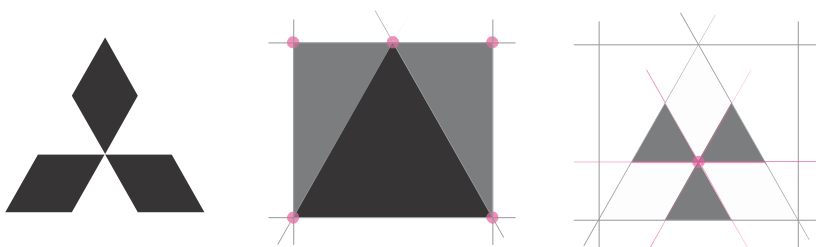
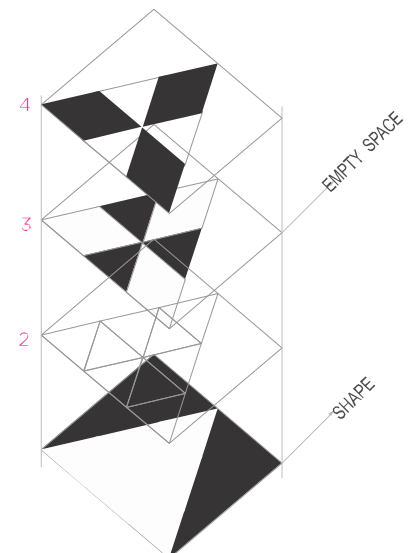


Figure 2. Our graphic scheme for Mitsubishi. Stress points and composition lines are highlighted, as well as the white space.



The majority of the respondents use Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, but other applications like Freehand are also used. An interesting result was whether or not the mark should be bold in terms of concept and/or form: there was a clear difference in result showing a preference for the mark to be bold in terms of form, but not so much in terms of concept (for 43% of respondents the form was important, and only 33% say concept is important with other 33% saying it's indifferent).

A clearly high result in terms of being very important was the mark being memorable (64%), easy to read (69%) and function in different scales and media (74%).

Concerning picture marks from the banking sector, the ones with fewer points, straight lines, basic shapes and more stylized have the highest scores of preference. From our ongoing set of results, picture marks that are more expressive and organic and therefore have more points are not having the same acceptance that picture marks like WWF, CBS, Apple or Android are having. Also the ones where the form is equivalent to the ground in terms of strength and the ones that use the plane rather than a linear drawing are preferred.

With this development of outcomes we project:
- Visual evidence that substantiate the hypothesis of a common denominator in the picture marks.

- Enhancements to the theoretical and practical perspectives of identity design: these guidelines will facilitate communication, and methodology used by students and professionals of Identity Design.

- Contribute to a validating and evaluative tool consisting of graphical analytical schemes for

increasing awareness of the identity design process between designers, students and the general public.

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