

Crow, David. *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts*. 2nd edition. Singapore: Ava Publishing, 2010 (pp 192). ISBN 9782940411429.

The broad field of Visual Communication encourages interdisciplinary thinking that not only expands the boundaries of research and practice in the field, but also inspires and provokes thought, exploring new modes of creative communication as well as questioning critique and evaluation of visual work. From Saussure to structuralism and post-structuralism, aspects of semiotics, as defined by linguists, have always been strongly present, investigated and applied in Visual Communication.

Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts investigates the role of semiotic thinking in the construction of visual messages, by juxtaposing linguistic theories with art and design examples. In doing so, the book provides a basic infrastructure in visual semiotics, not only for students of art and design, but also for anyone interested in understanding how denotative or connotative meaning is constructed using image and text/typography. A fluent, organised and structured book, it builds up methodically from basic sign definitions and investigates various semiotic theories through examples in the context of popular, visual and everyday culture. The visible signs of each chapter are simplified as well as accompanied by relevant self-directed exercises that facilitate the understanding and implementation of theory into visual practices. The task that David Crow has taken on is not only an introduction to semiotics in the visual arts. He has provided theoretical frameworks and examples that would enable readers to reconsider and monitor the ways they construct, as well as deconstruct, their messages in visual communication. As Walker suggests, “No description of visual organisation, or indeed effective designing, can take place without knowing something about the intended readers, circumstances of use, means of productions, and the content of the information, as each of these parameters offers its own constraints and opportunities” (3). Crow interestingly takes these parameters into consideration and examines their interrelationships. The format, size and paper of the book are creatively selected and the overall design and layout are very attractive, at both macro and micro typographic level, offering a pleasant reading experience.

After a brief informative introduction, Crow begins his book with a description of basic models of sign definitions; he refers to Saussure and Peirce, and looks at ways that signifieds are manipulated to form meanings in different contexts. Using specific visual material, he compares and explains the dyadic, as well as the triadic formation of the sign and expands clearly on the process of semiosis. As he correlates linguistic theories with visual examples, he succeeds in describing the concepts of paradigm, syntagm, code, metaphor and metonym in visual communication. He also portrays very well how meaning is produced

when signs are organised into systems of communication. These concepts are widely spread and useful in art and design practice, especially when there is a need for visual solutions to be authentic, effective and out of the box. As Hall observes, “devices employed to produce meanings of a non-literal kind... produce new insights into the meanings of objects, images and texts. And all of these things, if used judiciously, can be used to create more resonant meanings in such disciplines as painting, design, advertising, illustration, film-making, fashion and journalism” (34).

Roland Barthes has always been a source of semiotic inspiration in visual communication. Crow articulates effectively Barthes’s views on the concepts of denotation and connotation, convention and motivation, language and speech, and myth, as well as explaining how viewers interpret the ways that signs are conveyed. In exploring the relationships between image and text, Crow describes how digital and analogue codes are constructed. He applies Barthes’s model of semiotic analysis of breaking an advertisement (Panzani ad) into three messages and explains it very well. As always he incorporates graphic examples to show the implementation of theory into practice, however, considering also traditional examples of commercial or social advertisements might enhance understanding of how these semiotic systems work to control the way that visual arrangements are read.

Crow also develops issues based on Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on cultural structures, and investigates language as a tool for ruling, controlling and forming cultural hierarchies. Through various graphic interventions, he shows how legitimate language can have political power to influence culture and shape visual genres. He then looks at “unofficial language” and interestingly examines the ways that sub-cultures of disagreement and rebellion find means to develop their own visual dialects and communicate their messages in everyday life. In search for an identity, Crow moves on contrasting the idea of symbolic creativity, as introduced by Paul Willis, with young people’s behavior and external appearance as signifieds of individuality. He also attempts to identify a system that will allow artists and designers to broaden their thinking, by looking for and creating meaning through rubbish and junk. He explains and demonstrates effectively how signs are taken out of their expected context and treated alternatively to communicate messages. This changing and swapping of signifieds, values, forms, contents and contexts is a productive practice for visual communication as long as it is done with a predetermined concept and successful execution. Crow also provides information on how practitioners could consider and embed the sociological, political and cultural factors that matter in communication design. As Kress and van Leeuwen observe, “The place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public communication available in that society and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations” (34). Finally, still simply and clearly explained, Crow ends his book with Eco’s theory on the importance of allowing viewers to participate in various possible and creative interpretations of a work,

and of understanding how information can differ from meaning or message. This emphasis on the viewers also alludes to Barthes's suggestion that "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination... we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

Indisputably this book is an asset not only for undergraduate students of graphic communication and visual arts, but also for anyone who wants to get a basic idea of how Visual Semiotics can work as a tool for effective communication of messages, in pioneering ways. As Crow proceeds through the book, he constructively interrelates theories from all chapters and supports his theoretical arguments with appropriate visual material very well. Since the book's subject matter is of international interest, it would have been advisable to occasionally include visual references from different cultures, not just mainly UK examples, and expand on them using the same approaches. The book definitely works as an educational platform which a series of additional and similar thematic publications could build upon to include advanced research methodologies and modes of thinking from the perspective of Semiotics and Visual Communication.

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