The aim of this class is to show you the powerful effects that design can have and why. It is not about how to produce “good design” but to understand what makes good design, not just the aesthetics.

It is about thinking and talking about design rather than just doing it.

“Visual communication offers so much potential to educate, inform, improve and benefit; but these things don’t happen by accident. Knowledge, as they say, is power.”

objectives — 25%

- The ability to **meet stated project objectives**.
- Clearly **exhibiting learning through risk-taking, failure, innovation**
- **Pushing one’s limitations**

So, let’s start with the basics — these are the objects that you have for every class, throughout your time here at KCAI.
presentation — 25%

- The **attention to detail and craft**
- A high level of **quality and refinement** achieved in final presentation design, and clarity of project presentation in final critiques and reviews.
participation — 25%

- The ability to articulate ideas verbally, and in writing, in a peer group setting and with the instructor.
- The ability to interact in a productive and respectful manner, daily and in final critiques.
- Absences will negatively affect your average in this area.
process — 25%

- Maintaining a high level of effort, and the ability to follow a logical and thorough path from concept, through refinement, to completion.
- Maintaining your documentation blog
- Absences will negatively affect your average in this area also.

In this class, your process blog will be particularly important as a “container” for your terminology and examples, which will be utilized and built upon throughout the course.

Since the blog will also demonstrate your ability to meet the objectives it could be worth 50% of your grade.

Document your process, post photos, post each step of every exercise.
course objectives

• Explain at a basic level the theories of semiotics, rhetoric, modes of appeal and communication theory and their relevance to graphic design
• Explain at a basic level the terminology associated with semiotics, rhetoric, modes of appeal and communication theory
• Demonstrate understanding of these theories through appropriate manipulation of text and image
• Articulate research and demonstrate critical analysis, in both visual and verbal formats

These are the specific objectives for this class, applied communication theory.

Be thoughtful in your blog post descriptions, demonstrating a clear understanding of these course objectives.
In this class, we are going to explore the methodologies and building blocks of visual influence, aka “semiotics” the study of signs.

Ultimately, it is the power of persuasion through visual means. Learning the various ways that we, as designers, can empower meaning and motivation by the visual choices we make.

“Design is a form of communication, and communication is the basis of our understanding of the world. It affects and is used by the world of politics, it contributes to environmental issues, but also promises to” education people on them as well.”

And in case you still
Just think about it. Global advertisers are expected to spend around $538 billion this year, operating on the premise that words and images can influence the decisions that people make. That is some serious green.

But in case you are still thinking, “what’s the point of theory?” try asking “what’s the point of design without understanding how works?”

intro to semiotics

Semiotics is the science of signs.

The study of semiotics is important because it is the most scientific study of graphic design that exists.

It is the science of graphic design.
When we understand the concepts behind communication, we can use that understanding to focus our design more appropriately on what the audience’s needs are.

There are 3 main branches of semiotics:

**Syntax** is the hardware aspect of language. It introduces us to structure, how language should be formed and how culture sets up and eventually codifies things, like grammar or rules of proper communication (sentence structures like nouns, verbs, etc.).

**Semantics** talks about the language software. The way we create meaning and the way we create signs and signifiers – icons, indexes and symbols.

And the third area, **pragmatics**, talks about the context in which language is used and the function of language — the everyday way we use words and images to communicate. Basically, how do they function and in what settings do they function properly?

We will talk more about syntax and pragmatics in the next class. Today we are going to focus on semiotics and semantics.
Not only is semiotics the science of graphic design, but it is also how most forms of literary analysis occur. It is the basis for how we understand essays and plays and films scripts and poetry. It’s how we use our words, to say more than what the words mean. If I say the word “dog …”
What do you picture in your head?

A poodle or bull dog? Your family pet? Are you a bit nervous because you were bit by a dog as a child? Remember, I said none of those things.

Really, there is no reason why “dog” has to mean “four-legged animal.” If it did, then why to other languages give it a different word? And the curves and lines that make up the letters that you see here? They are pictures of sounds of what we speak. They actually have no “real” meaning, except the ones that as a society we have agreed upon. (consider the cryllic alphabet, or japanese characters …)

Semiotics started as a way of studying linguistics and attempts to explain how we communicate by attaching meanings arbitrarily to words.

This all might seem a bit confusing at first or you might be thinking “who cares?” at this stage in the game, but just go with it. It will start to make sense as you continue along on your design path and the way you think about your process of design.
Semiotics is the way we can pull an emotional response out of a word. Because we are graphic designers, it is also how emotion happens with imagery.
Here we have some very evocative images, a nun kissing a priest, a red cross, and a skull and cross bones. What makes them evocative? Does everyone respond the same way to these images?

Often good graphic design can be very simple to say something profound. It is a poetic form. Even the word “graphic. When something is said to be “graphic”, doesn’t mean it is exceptionally violent, it means that it is rendered into very few shapes or signs.

We also have the idea of the photographic, which is 16 million-plus colors that has it’s own depth of meaning. And consider the way a photograph is made. It’s not just looking through a window and pressing a button. It is constructed is through the use of signs and symbols.
Semiotics, or semiology, is the study of signs, symbols and signification.

It is the study of how meaning is created, not what is created.

In other words, it is the rationale behind the artifact.
It isn’t about the logo, it is the symbols, signs, etc. that are used to create meaning for the logo.

Consider the symbol for Russia and how meaning is created. Their belief that industry and agriculture are the main foundations of a progressive society are portrayed in the graphic representation of the hammer and sickle.
Here we have the skull and crossbones. Everywhere in antiquity, this symbol conveyed the same exact meaning. By the Middle Ages, intellectuals in Europe were calling it “Memento Mori,” which is Latin for “Remember you are mortal” and “Remember you must die.” If you were sailing the high seas and saw another ship displaying this flag symbol on a flag, you would know that you were in trouble.
theory of semiotics

So, whose big idea was this, anyway?
These two main people, during the 20th century. (Although the study of signs and symbols goes back to Plato.)

Ferdinand de Saussure (considered the father of modern semiotics) He saw semiotics as structure.

Across the Atlantic, American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced “purse”) was developing a similar philosophy. He saw semiotics as social process.

They almost create the science of signs and symbols at the same time.

Their literary terms might take some time to get used to, but it is important that we adopt them.
Saussure said that signs were something that can be interpreted as having meaning. They can work through any of the senses, sight, sound, touch, smell or taste. Their meaning can be:

- intentional such as a word uttered with a specific meaning
- or unintentional such as a symptom being a sign of a particular medical condition.
The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified.

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as ‘signification’.
signs

A sign is comprised of two parts:
• The signifier
• The signified

The complete sign is a result of the relationship between the two parts.

Remember that the complete sign is a result of the relationship between these two parts, the signified and the signifier.
A sign is comprised of two parts: the signifier & the signified

The complete sign is a result of the relationship between the two parts.

This is represented by the arrows in the Saussurean diagram, also known as the Semiotic Dyad. ("dyad" meaning 2 parts)

- **A sign is comprised of two parts: the signifier & the signified**
- **The complete sign is a result of the relationship between the two parts.**

Signification is the process of the signified working with the signifier.
Wow! That is significant!

“That is significant” is a phrase that we use everyone and again, because it is something total and whole.
Signs are everywhere.

Remember that the complete sign is a result of the relationship between these two parts, the signified and the signifier.
Back to our buddy, Peirce. (pronounced “purse”)

Peirce added another dimension to this relationship. He added a third element called the **interpretant**. It does not mean the interpreter, but the process of **how you interpret things**. It doesn’t mean “us the participant”. Instead it has to do with the **process**, when you get the whole picture.

It’s that part in your brain that goes “oh, I get it, it means this.”
His view of what comprises a sign was:

A = Object; that which is represented (signifier)
- the thing to which the sign refers
- anything that can be thought, (concept or thing) as long as it is able to be encoded as a sign

B = Representamen; that which represents (signified)
- the physical, see, or heard thing

C = Interpretant; the process of interpretation

The interpretant is the trickiest of the lot. It is NOT the interpreter, rather it is the “proper significant effect.” Most often it is thought of as the sign in the mind that is the result of an encounter with a sign. That is a good starting place, although it is more accurate to consider the interpretant as a kind of proper “result.”

I might point at the sky, for instance, and rather than simply registering the signification of the sky, you will look in the direction of the pointing finger. Thus an interpretant is produced.

Let’s say we are all outside, and I say “look at that!” Some will look up and see my finger (first), some of you will look up and see the sky (second), and some of you will see the big dipper (and that is the third, deepest level.)
What would be another word for “object”? (signifier).

Yes, it is kind of confusing. You probably want an “object” to be the “thing,” but in this case the “object” is the “word” that is the signifier of the thing (signified/representamen).

Representamen” (signified)
Peirce's semiotic triad

**Sign**
- Interpretant: how the sign is understood
- Object: signified
- Representamen: signifier

Example:
- "glass of wine" (object)
- "celebration" "chardonnay" "happy hour" (representamen)
- "interpretant" (signified)
peirce’s semiotic triad

representamen
signified
object
signifier
interpretant

"family pet"
"golden lab"
"buddy"

SIGN

"dog"

representamen
"signified"
object
"signifier"
interpretant
how the sign is understood
Back to what we were first talking about. Signs.

So what is a sign?
signs

- Signs take the form of words, images, smells, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning.
- They become only signs when we invest them with meaning.

A sign is the smallest unit of meaning.

Anything that can be used to communicate (or tell a lie.)

If there are other ways to communicate before you get to the ultimate truth, it would knock down to it’s absolute sign value. (In other words, think adjectives)
Signs are simply a representation of communication. They take the form of words, images, smells, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning (having absolute value, click = like fire we know intrinsically is hot) and they only become signs when we invest them with meaning.

Even the way a person walks is a sign. You have to have the societal agreement as to what “mopey” is, before we can hunch our shoulders and stare at our feet and walk really slowly.
Think about some of really strong signs in our world, like the stop sign.

It’s got 8 sides, it is red, bold typeface and it says “stop”. Even if we couldn’t actually read the word, we would still recognize it and know to stop.
Here we have 3 signs. The first one is the word “banana” (or a bunch of marks that we read as letters). What’s the second one? A silhouette of a dog. What about the third one? Does it have any cultural significance to you? We’ll get to that in a bit.

You can have combinations of signs, but to get right down to the nitty gritty of what a sign means, there is no other way to break it down. Getting down to the essence.

So, if I was to say “white persian kitten” there are still ways to break it down. White could mean cool, pristine, clean. Persian could mean coming from the middle east. …
Signs take the form of words, images, smells, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning. They become only signs when we invest them with meaning.

(yep, your daily dose of super cute.) “White, Persian kitten” is a combination of signs. We need to distill it down to “kitten” as the sign being the smallest unit.
Remember, a sign means something. If I showed you this banana and you said “umm, hamster” or “saturday” or “catfish,” you would not get the significance of the sign. In other words, the process of signification would not be complete.

Imagine if you did a drawing and someone says, “That’s a nice landscape.” You might say, “Uh no, that’s the Mona Lisa.” Instead of saying you are a lousy illustrator, it could be said that your sign-making process has failed.

Basically, you did not communicated what you want to communicate.

Semiotics is the science of communication.
Boom. Now, here is the famous painting “Treachery of Images” by Rene Magritte. He is well known for his recurrent iconography in his work such as the apple, the bowler-hatted man, and the pipe.

But the signifier (“this is not a pipe”) contradicts as a sign with the signified (the pipe).

What? “The text beneath the painting is neither true or false. It is not the physical reality of a pipe; it is a representative of a pipe, a painting of a pipe, a signifier for ‘pipe’ but not a pipe itself.

The pipe for instance makes such numerous appearances in Magritte’s work that it leads the viewer to ponder what the pipe means, or what it stands for, in the Saussurean model. Welcome to surrealism.
The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it!
And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it’s just a representation, is it not?
So if I had written on my picture “This is a pipe,” I’d have been lying!

– René Magritte
Now that we know the most basic parts of semiotics, the signifier and the signified, we can start to build upon them.
Remember this chart from before? We are going to expand on the semantics portion.

First, **icon**. It is a physical resemblance to the object or concept. Very realistic – photographs, realistic statues, maps, diagrams, etc. Easily understood and recognized.

Then we have **index**. There is a direct link between the sign and the object or concept. It is an indicator. Think of hand gestures, symptoms, clues. Your audience can figure out the cause and effect relationship.

Finally we will look at **symbol**. It is a learned and agreed upon code. An arbitrary connection between the sign and the object or concept. Language, numbers, alphabets are all symbols, as are abstract trademarks. The audience must learn the associations.
Icon - Signs where the signifier resembles the signified, e.g., a picture.
Icon is the physical resemblance to the object / concept.

- examples: photos, maps
- can be recognized, the audience understands by resemblance
index

the direct link between the sign and the object / concept
(signs where the signifier is caused by the signified)

Representation of a signified concept with relatable connection without direct replication. Signs where the signifier is caused by the signified, e.g., smoke signifies fire.
Index is the **direct link** between the sign and the object / concept.

- hand gestures, symptoms, clues
- the audience can figure out cause and effect relationships
Symbol

A learned and agreed upon, but arbitrary, connection between the sign and object / concept.

Symbol - Non-logical representation of signified concept learnt through cultural assimilation. Signs where the relation between signifier and signified is purely conventional and culturally specific, e.g., most words.
A symbol is a learned and agreed upon, but arbitrary, connection between the sign and object / concept.

- languages, alphabets, trademarks
- the audience must learn the associations

YIN YANG: A Chinese Tao picture of universal harmony and the unity between complimentary opposites: light/dark, male/female, etc.
**Icon.** It is a physical resemblance to the object or concept. Very realistic – photographs, realistic statues, maps, diagrams, etc. Easily understood and recognized.

**Index.** There is a direct link between the sign and the object or concept. It is an indicator. Your audience can figure out the cause and effect relationship.

**Symbol.** It is a learned and agreed upon code. An arbitrary connection between the sign and the object or concept. The audience must learn the associations.
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**Symbol.** It is a learned and agreed upon code. An arbitrary connection between the sign and the object or concept. The audience must learn the associations.
Sometimes one object can take on multiple means as an icon, index and symbol.

The color read “means” nothing. It is just reflected light on a particular wave length. But we can apply social meaning to the color, like a stop sign. And right now, the dot shape means nothing, either.
But when placed in context, it can take on meaning. This red dot is now the icon of a balloon.

Icon is the physical resemblance to the object / concept.

• examples: photos, maps
• can be recognized, the audience understands by resemblance
A sunset.

Icon is the physical resemblance to the object / concept.

- examples: photos, maps
- can be recognized, the audience understands by resemblance
In the Indian culture, the bindi is a forehead decoration representing the 6th chakra (concealed wisdom) Red represents honor, love and prosperity.

This is an index, because it makes a direct link between the sign and the object / concept.

• hand gestures, symptoms, clues
• the audience can figure out cause and effect relationships
When the dot is used within this rectangle, it becomes a symbol of the Japanese flag.

A symbol is a learned and agreed upon, but arbitrary, connection between the sign and object / concept.

- languages, alphabets, trademarks
- the audience must learn the associations
Or the Target logo.

A symbol is a learned and agreed upon, but arbitrary, connection between the sign and object / concept.

- languages, alphabets, trademarks
- the audience must learn the associations
Now that we know the most basic parts of semiotics, the signifier and the signified, we can start to build upon them.
Codes are a combination of semiotic systems, a super system, if you will, that functions as general maps of meaning, belief systems about oneself and others which imply views and attitudes on how the world is or ought to be.

Codes are where semiotics and social structure and values connect.
Gothic cathedrals are really good examples of code. You have on the outside the filigree, gargoyles and demons (symbols of this physical world)
When you go inside, you enter the world of eternity, which is a different scene and set of symbology.
Digital codes are paradigms where each unit of a set are **clearly different** from each other.

The alphabet is the most obvious, as is musical notation.

(paradigm = model or set)
An open model or set (paradigm) with unlimited choices, with unclear divisions between units.

Music (sound) and dance (movement) can be described this way, although musical notation reduces the analog qualities of sound to distinct notes with individual marks, making it digital.
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