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Semiotics of Typography

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semiotics

“Human intellectual and social life is based on the production, use, and exchange of signs and representations”¹

These signs are anything that is representative of anything else, ranging from naturally occurring signs such as footprints (representative of the presence of a person or animal), to road signs (representative of a warning or instruction to a driver). We understand our environment through signs, and create signs in order to communicate. This allows us to “make meaning”² of our surroundings. Semiotics (or “semiology”³) is the study of naturally occurring and artificial signs which communicate meaning to the viewer.

A Brief History

In its origins, semiotics is deeply entwined with Structuralism, an “analytical method” which seeks to find “deep structures” underlying systems of signs⁴. However, contemporary semiotics is concerned more with the social dimensions of the use of signs⁵. Contemporary semioticians focus on processes of communication, and how we structure our understanding of our environments⁶.

The study of signs dates back as far as Hippocrates (460-377BC), who noted that symptoms are signs for underlying illness, thereby establishing that a sign “stands for something other than itself”⁷. Outside of medicine, philosophers including Aristotle (384-323BC) established that a sign can be divided into: a.) its physical self; b.) the thing to which it directly refers; and c.) its meaning, which may vary due to social and personal experience⁸.

Much later, these ideas formed the basis for studies of signs and sign systems in language and media, conducted by, among others, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913, a linguist who established many fundamental ideas of structuralist semiotics) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), then later Roland Barthes (1915-1980, concerned largely

¹ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 8.

² Chandler, Daniel, “Signs”, *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

³ The term “semiology” can be used to refer to Saussurean studies of signs, but the term “semiotics” is now more widely used.

⁴ Chandler, Daniel, “Introduction”, *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

⁵ Chandler, Daniel, “Introduction”, *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 4

⁸ Ibid.

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Umberto Eco (1932-). Although Peirce's ideas will be briefly discussed, the focus will be on the Saussurean tradition. Although Saussure himself did not publish writing on the topic of semiotics, his *Course de Linguistique Générale* survives in a text compiled by his students after his death⁹. Focusing on linguistic communication, this text establishes the course that semiotic inquiry was to take during the first half of the twentieth century¹⁰, forming the groundbase on which most contemporary structuralist theory now rests¹¹. From the late 1960s, Barthes applied semiotic theory in the field of cultural studies¹², and paved the way for the understanding of the linguistic sign as a material object¹³, comparable to any other form or object that we may encounter in any media.

The Sign

A sign is anything that communicates meaning beyond itself. The idea of the sign, how it can be broken down, and the systems into which signs are organised, form the basis for the study of semiotics.

For Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is a union¹⁴ of two equivalent¹⁵ parts: the signifier (or signal¹⁶) and signified¹⁷ (or signification¹⁸), where the signifier is the sign's physical presence, and the signified is the concept¹⁹ evoked in the mind of the receiver. He stresses, however, that the material part of the sign (the signifier) and the concept (the signified) are both psychological experiences of the receiver²⁰, so that even the physical parts of a sign are only sensory impressions²¹. In practice, these two parts of the sign are always integrated into each other²², only divisible during the

⁹ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 1.

¹⁰ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 5.

¹¹ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 19.

¹² Chandler, Daniel, *Introduction to Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹³ Chandler, Daniel, *Signs to Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁴ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 50.

¹⁵ Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, p. 121.

¹⁶ Saussure, Ferdinand de, Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 67.

¹⁷ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ Saussure, Ferdinand de, Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 67.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 66.

²⁰ This accounts for signs that may be imagined, such as speech that is thought rather than spoken (Ibid).

²¹ Saussure, Ferdinand de, Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 66.

²² Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, 2nd Ed., Sage, London, 2007, p. 79

perceives the whole sign, and does not consciously

Saussure suggests that the connection between the two parts of the sign are established arbitrarily (as with linguistics)²⁴, although he does concede that "certain signifiers [are] appropriate for their signifieds, as in onomatopoeia"²⁵. More recent theorists note that many signs are in fact "motivated"²⁶. Levi-Strauss, for example, observed that the relationship between a spoken sound and its written equivalent is "conventional"²⁷, or "rational"²⁸. Some conventions are established over time. Though initially arbitrary, they are ultimately adopted as "natural" after the relationship between signifier and signified has been established in society for a long time²⁹.

Where Saussure discusses signifieds, he focuses on denotation³⁰, the initial, literal "referent a sign intends to capture"³¹. Barthes, however, focuses on connotation³². The connotative meaning of a sign involves associations that are established through social convention. The range of connotations that a sign evokes may vary, being specific to culture, and the knowledge and experience of the audience. Connotations are extensions³³ of the denotative meaning. Barthes suggested, therefore, that connotation is a "second-order of signification"³⁴, in a chain of possible meanings. The form of the signifier can contribute to the connotative meaning, so that the same signified can have different meaning when presented in a different manner or style³⁵.

Pierce proposed a slightly different model of the sign, identifying its parts as "representamen", "object" and "interpretant"³⁶. In this model, the "representamen" is the representational object or form, equating to Saussure's signifier, the "object" is the thing

²³ Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, p. 121.

²⁴ Saussure, Ferdinand de, and Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 67.

²⁵ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 55.

²⁶ Chandler, Daniel, "Signs", *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 53.

²⁹ Chandler, Daniel, "Signs", *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

³⁰ Chandler, Daniel, "Denotation, Connotation and Myth", *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2008, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

³¹ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 6.

³² Chandler, Daniel, "Denotation, Connotation and Myth", *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2008, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

³³ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 7.

³⁴ Chandler, Daniel, "Denotation, Connotation and Myth", *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2008, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html> (visited 7/07/2009)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 6.

and the *interpretant* is the meaning that is achieved by the audience³⁷. Though Peircian and Saussurean models are both in use today, this text will use the Saussurean model of the sign.

Pierce also suggested that signs represent their subjects in different ways, thereby falling into categories. In the first category of signs, *icons*, representamen resemble their object³⁹ so that not much additional knowledge is required for a correct interpretation of a sign, as in photographs. Indexical signs (*indices*) are directly connected to the object, but do not resemble it. Most *natural signs*, such as footprints, fall into this category⁴⁰. In the third category, *symbols*, the relationship between the representamen and object is established arbitrarily⁴¹, as in *images, diagrams, and metaphors*⁴². Saussure, however, feels that the term *symbol* is misleading when discussing language, since many symbols do display *a* vestige of natural connection between the signifier and signified, and are therefore never entirely arbitrary⁴³.

Context: Paradigms, Syntagms and Anchorage

Saussure noted that, although in semiotic analysis we assess each sign individually, we generally do not encounter signs alone⁴⁴. This illustrates the structuralist view that *the* nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by its relationship to all other elements involved in that situation⁴⁵. Therefore the context, the relationship between signs, must also be analysed. This vein of semiotic analysis investigates the meaning of a sign as developed according to relationships between other signs in a group, alternative signs in the same set, and within culturally established contexts.

Saussure introduced the *systems* within which signs are categorised⁴⁶. The sign is the *basic unit* of any *language*⁴⁷, ranging from words to military signals⁴⁸, and it is

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Chandler, Daniel, *Signs, Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

³⁹ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 50.

⁴⁰ Chandler, Daniel, *Signs, Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 50.

⁴³ Saussure, Ferdinand de, and Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 68.

⁴⁴ Saussure, Ferdinand de, and Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 127.

⁴⁵ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 18.

⁴⁶ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, 2nd Ed., Sage, London, 2007, p. 79

⁴⁸ Saussure, Ferdinand de, and Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 15

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that the sign is understood. This context must be formal system⁴⁹, with rules and conventions⁵⁰ and individual instances of use⁵¹, which Saussure termed *langue* and *parole* respectively⁵². Because language is capable of generating new aspects of itself⁵³, *parole*, or the execution of language⁵⁴, results in unique contexts that are defined by individual speakers⁵⁵.

In any instance of *parole*, the meaning of a sign can be affected by syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations⁵⁶. The *syntagme*⁵⁷ is the part of the text (in linguistics, the sentence) in which the sign is used alongside other signs from the same *langue*. Each sign in such a sequence of signs is understood in terms of its syntagmatic relations with the other signs that appear alongside it. So, for example, the meaning of a word is affected by its particular use in a sentence. Saussure presents this relationship as *horizontal*⁵⁸, since language is received in a linear fashion⁵⁹. As well as by the presence of other signs, meaning is determined by alternative signs, notable in their absence. Saussure identified *associative*⁶⁰ relations (more commonly, *paradigmatic* relations⁶¹) with other signs which could have been used in the same context. These alternative signs are vertically⁶² located within the same *paradigme*⁶³ (set of signs belonging to the same category). For example, the use of the word *-tree* as opposed to *-bush* must signify a plant larger than a bush, otherwise *-bush* would have been used. The same syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses can be applied outside of linguistics⁶⁴, as Barthes demonstrates when discussing clothes. Barthes identifies *items* which cannot be worn at the same time on the same part of the body (such as hats, trousers, shoes) as

⁴⁹ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 44.

⁵⁰ Chandler, Daniel, *Introduction to Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

⁵¹ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 21.

⁵² Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 20.

⁵³ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 31.

⁵⁶ Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, 2nd Ed., Sage, London, 2007, p. 84.

⁵⁷ Chandler, Daniel, *Paradigms and Syntagms to Semiotics for Beginners*, 2002, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem03.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁵⁸ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Holdcroft, David, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 67.

⁶⁰ Saussure, Ferdinand de, and Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 123.

⁶¹ Chandler, Daniel, *Paradigms and Syntagms to Semiotics for Beginners*, 2002, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem03.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁶² Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 26.

⁶³ Chandler, Daniel, *Paradigms and Syntagms to Semiotics for Beginners*, 2002, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem03.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

the syntagmatic dimension is the juxtaposition of
in a complete ensemble⁶⁵.

When there are many possible readings of a sign (that is, many possible denotations, and hence connotations), context can also reduce the number of likely interpretations through a process of anchorage⁶⁶. Barthes identified anchorage in image captions, where the text *directs* the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others⁶⁷. By anchoring a sign, it is possible to establish a preferred meaning⁶⁸.

Codes

A code is a way of communicating meaning that has been conventionalized by any society or group. All signs depend on the receiver being familiar (consciously or unconsciously⁶⁹) with the language, or code, to which the sign belongs⁷⁰. Spoken English, for example, requires understanding of the sounds that represent words in the English language; even an indexical and iconic sign such as a photograph involves a translation from three dimensions into two⁷¹. Codes, therefore, provide a framework within which signs make sense⁷².

Societies have primary codes (usually the dominant natural language)⁷³, and within any code, sub-codes exist⁷⁴. Language, for example, may be subdivided into spoken and written forms⁷⁵.

Barthes proposed the notion that we encode our experience of the world in order that we may experience it⁷⁶. By a process of encoding, we invent the world we inhabit⁷⁷, representing and understanding it in ways that are specific to our social group. Since codes vary from culture to culture, the same sign or text may have different meaning to different audiences⁷⁸, and interpretations may vary from the message intended by the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p. 40.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Chandler, Daniel, *Paradigms and Syntagms* *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2002,
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem03.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁶⁹ Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, p. 112.

⁷⁰ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p.8.

⁷¹ Chandler, Daniel, *Codes* *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2001,

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, p. 106.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 107.

⁷⁸ Sebok, Thomas A., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd Ed., university of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 8.

Interpretations are described by Umberto Eco as *aberrant* and *errant* decoding is unavoidable, as texts can be made available to diverse, even international, audiences.

Myth

In many contexts, signs can refer to wider systems of meaning⁸¹ which Barthes termed *mythologies*⁸². Myth describes the dominant systems of beliefs⁸³ which societies form through shared histories and culturally established associations.

Myths naturalize values and beliefs to the extent that they appear to become normal and self-evident⁸⁴. In this way, subjective interpretations become common-sense, apparently objective reflections⁸⁵. As it goes un-noticed, audiences are unaware that a message must undergo decipherment in order to be understood in accordance with the myth. The interpretation seems obvious⁸⁶.

Barthes suggested that myth creates an additional language, or *metalanguage* over an ordinary language object⁸⁷. The second *metalanguage* speaks about the first⁸⁸, by adding an additional layer of significance, and by grounding it in a cultural setting. In this way, the commonly-held beliefs that construct a myth allow a text to communicate poetically⁸⁹. They allow us to distance ourselves from the literal, to understand and describe our environments metaphorically⁹⁰. Myth's function is to distort⁹¹, by creating significance where it may not otherwise exist.

⁷⁹ Chandler, Daniel, *Encoding/Decoding*, *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2001, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08c.html> (visited 25/06/2009)

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, 2nd Ed., Sage, London, 2007, p. 94.

⁸² Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973.

⁸³ Chandler, Daniel, *Denotation, Connotation and Myth*, *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2008, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁸⁴ Chandler, Daniel, *Denotation, Connotation and Myth*, *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2008, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem06.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, p. 124.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 15.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Barthes, Roland, and Cape, Jonathan (translator), *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1973, p. 131.

Image

Saussure sees the written word as a second-order sign. Written language, he suggests, exists solely to represent speech⁹². A written word cannot directly signify a concept, only a sound⁹³. By this reasoning, written or typed text is ða substitution for units of language⁹⁴, and its success can be measured by how effectively it signifies the spoken word. As suggested by Beatrice Ward in *'The Crystal Goblet'* (1955)⁹⁵ the function of type should take priority over its appearance. The printed word should be a transparent, empty signifier, directing the receiver as quickly as possible to the verbal signification⁹⁶. An ordinary ðpage is meant to be read⁹⁷ rather than appreciated aesthetically. If words were to ðdraw attention to themselves⁹⁸ by their appearance, their ðcommunicative transparency⁹⁹ would be jeopardized⁹⁷. This idea underlies much typographic design. Humanist era designers sought to standardize type, to eliminate variation⁹⁸, and Herbert Bayer created his *Universal* typeface (1925) in order to communicate verbal meaning as effectively as possible, by eliminating any visual distractions (such as serifs). As Ward's *Crystal Goblet* metaphor suggests, ðprinted words on a page are barely noticeable. As soon as reading begins, our perception of typography ends⁹⁹. This would suggest that variation in typeface is irrelevant. Indeed, Saussure does not regard visual characteristics (or variation in characteristics across different examples) as significant to the meaning of a sign. According to Saussure, the same word in different font, or different handwriting, could be interpreted as the same sign. ðThe actual mode of inscription is irrelevant¹⁰⁰, having ðno importance for the meaning¹⁰⁰ of a sign¹⁰⁰. Although other semioticians acknowledge that all signs have ðmaterial reality¹⁰¹, and that the properties of a material are capable of generating connotations¹⁰¹.

⁹² Saussure, Ferdinand de, Harris, Roy (translator), *Course in General Linguistics*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 24.

⁹³ Chandler, Daniel, *Signs & Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009,

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

⁹⁴ Lapacherie, Jean-G rard, and Lehmann, Anna, 'Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing' *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited 13/05/2009)

⁹⁵ Ward, Beatrice, *The Crystal Goblet*, 1955, <http://glia.ca/conu/digitalPoetics/prehistoric-blog/wp-content/uploads/ward.pdf> (visited 10/07/2009)

⁹⁶ Tsur, Raven, 'Picture Poetry, Mannerism, and Sign Relationships' *Poetic Today*, 21:4 (Winter 2000), 2000, pp. 751-781, p. 751. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/poetics_today/v021/21.4tsur.html (viewed 07/05/2009)

⁹⁷ Chandler, Daniel, *Signs & Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009,

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

⁹⁸ Lapacherie, Jean-G rard, and Lehmann, Anna, 'Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing' *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited 13/05/2009)

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 64.

¹⁰⁰ Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, , Duckworth, London, 1916 (translated 1983, Harris, Roy) cited in Chandler, Daniel, *Signs & Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁰¹ Chandler, Daniel, *Signs & Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009,

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

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the materiality of the linguistic signí contemporary
the material form of the sign may generate
connotations of its own. Where variation exists in the appearance of the written or
typed word, form can speed the connection to the verbal, connoting tone of voice. In
other cases, the written or typed word can display visual properties which communicate
pictorially rather than verbally. The numerous forms of typographically designed text,
text which is intended to communicate visually as well as verbally, including
typography, visual poetry, and calligrammes, ðforce the reader to look at the textö¹⁰³.

Poetic Language

Even without conscious typographic design, written and spoken language can prioritize
the signifier, granting it the status of signified¹⁰⁴. As Terrence Hawkes has argued,
öPoetic languageö emphasizes the word itself öover and above the -messageø it containsö,
and in doing so elevates itself from övehicle for thoughtsö to an öobject in [its] own
rightö¹⁰⁵. In normal writing, öour linguistic competence urges us to read the final
referents as fast as possibleö¹⁰⁶, but in poetic language (particularly visual poetry, etc.)
the writer (or typographer) aims to focus attention on the whole sign. Poetry, therefore,
emphasizes the signifier, and less so the signified¹⁰⁷.

Barthes identified two kinds of writing, distinguishing öbetween the -referentialø and the
-aestheticø functions of languageö¹⁰⁸. Although the written word initially had a practical
function, to describe events and ideas beyond itself, in literature, particularly poetry,
words exist for their own sake¹⁰⁹, and the readerø attention is expected to ödwell on the
signifiersö¹¹⁰. There is a distinct difference between the öwriterö, who öuses language as
a means to an endö and the öauthorö, öwho values the word itselfö¹¹¹.

Typographic Design

More so than what might be termed -conventionally printedø writerly text, typography
emphasizes the signifier. By operating visually, the sign draws attention to itself,

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, -Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and
Drawingø *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited
13/05/2009)

¹⁰⁴ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, pp. 63-64.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 63.

¹⁰⁶ Tsur, Raven, -Picture Poetry, Mannerism, and Sign Relationshipsø *Poetic Today*, 21:4 (Winter 2000),
2000, pp. 751-781, p. 751. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/poetics_today/v021/21.4tsur.html
(viewed 07/05/2009)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 757.

¹⁰⁸ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 113.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 112.

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type. Visual characteristics may reinforce or the word *bold* may be written in **bold** or in a light weight, or *italics*). when the linguistic signified is reinforced or illustrated by visual features (as in *bold*'), the visually signified and the linguistically signified correspond (complement one another) in 'parallel signification'¹¹². It is this visual confirmation of verbal meaning that is sought by F.T. Marinetti. Marinetti argues that consistent type is not a true representation of spoken language, with its natural fluctuations in 'intensity, stridency, pitch' and 'rapidity'¹¹³. His distorted and exaggerated type confirms and reinforces the verbal meaning.

The aim of much typography, however, aligns with those of writerly text. In poetry, words have a 'plurality'¹¹⁴. Hawkes argues that poetic, writerly language 'does not separate a word from its meaning, so much as multiply...the range of meanings available to it'¹¹⁵. In this way, poetic language plays at being 'dysfunctional'¹¹⁶. Its aim 'is to defamiliarize that with which we are overly familiar; to disrupt 'stock responses'¹¹⁷. By having visual features which do not apparently align with linguistic meaning, typography can do the same. Linguistic signifieds can appear to contradict the visual properties of the type. In *bold*' (as opposed to **bold**'), the visual properties of the type do not align with verbal meaning. Just as in poetry, the linguistic signified appears strange. This 'defiance of words' is practiced by, among others, Dadaist poet Francis Picabia, whose poetry used typographic symbols as graphic forms¹¹⁸. In such examples, when 'an additional sign function' is assigned 'to the same signifier', the visual and the verbal 'are so consistently developed that one is compelled to be aware of both their identity and incongruity'¹¹⁹.

¹¹² Gross, Sabine, 'The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 128, No. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 15-32, p. 20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773231> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹¹³ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, 'Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing', *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, pp. 68-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 111.

¹¹⁵ Hawkes, Terrence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1977, p. 64.

¹¹⁶ Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, pp. 38-39.

¹¹⁷ Hawkes, Terence, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1977. p.62.

¹¹⁸ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, 'Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing', *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹¹⁹ Tsur, Raven, 'Picture Poetry, Mannerism, and Sign Relationships', *Poetic Today*, 21:4 (Winter 2000), 2000, pp. 751-781, p. 751. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/poetics_today/v021/21.4tsur.html (viewed 07/05/2009)

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typed language should be considered not a single level, but multiple levels¹²⁰, suggesting that, unlike in Saussure's model, each level can be considered separately. Typography has multiple meanings, like poetic language, but also multiple states or modes. It is both ideographic and phonetic simultaneously¹²¹, blurring the boundaries between image and type¹²², so that text generates meaning through both symbolic and iconic signification¹²³. Through the addition of iconic characteristics, letters can acquire additional, unconventional connotations.

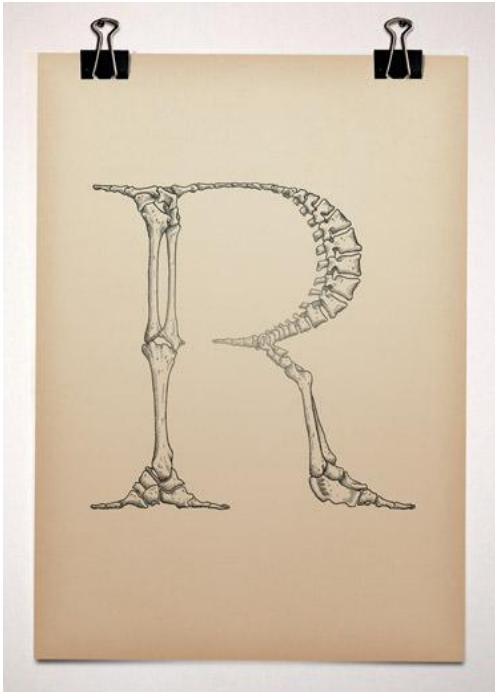


Figure 1. Björn Johansson, *Typeface Anatomy*, 2008¹.

Pictorial features may be borrowed from any visual paradigm, and imported into the domain of letter forms¹²⁴, bringing with them a range of connotations. In Björn Johansson's *Typeface Anatomy* (2008), letterforms are imagined as having skeletal structures (fig. 1). Johansson's letterforms are laden with anatomical connotations, made more overt by the stylistic similarity to illustrations in *Gray's Anatomy* (1918). In other artefacts, type is integrated into an image, thus acquiring connotations through anchorage as well as through its own visual characteristics. In the example below (fig. 2), by Alex Trochut, the juxtaposition of type and condiment bottles tells the reader that the type is both lettering and condiments. It has a dual function, as lettering and as food.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 752

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² van Leeuwen, Theo, 'Typographic Meaning', *Visual Communication*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2005, pp. 137-142, p. 141. <http://vcj.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/4/2/137> (viewed 14/02/2007)

¹²³ Gross, Sabine, 'The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 128, No. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 15-32, p. 17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773231> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹²⁴ van Leeuwen, Theo, 'Typographic Meaning', *Visual Communication*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2005, pp. 137-142, p. 139. <http://vcj.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/4/2/137> (viewed 14/02/2007)



Figure 2. Alex Trochut, untitled typography, 2008¹²⁵.

Picture Poetry

Apart from typography, there are other visual forms of writing and type which operate similarly. Forms of picture poetry present both pictorial and linguistic meaning simultaneously. They communicate two messages: iconic and linguistic. They have "parallel signification": a "double signification of image and word"¹²⁶, thus forming a "super-sign"¹²⁷. Although these messages are presented simultaneously, "the iconic message is perceived all at once, whereas the linguistic message requires a more deliberate and analytical reading"¹²⁸. Although the two messages are transmitted simultaneously, Clara Elizabeth Orban argues that they are not received simultaneously in works such as Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914). "They are at once images and texts, and when they are being 'decoded' in one code, we must freeze reception of the other"¹²⁹. Likewise, Sabine Gross suggests that "as soon as letters and words are perceived as images and thus decoded as iconic signs they disappear as symbolic signifiers, at least while they are being 'processed as images'". "Symbolic and iconic

¹²⁵ Image from Trochut, Alex, "Typography" *Behance*, 2008,

<http://www.behance.net/Gallery/Typography/53832> (visited 10/07/2009).

¹²⁶ Gross, Sabine, "The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems" *Poetics Today*, 18, 1997, pp. 15-32. p. 20, cited in *Ibid*.

¹²⁷ Gross, Sabine, "The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems" *Poetics Today*, Vol. 128, No. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 15-32, p. 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773231> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹²⁸ Longrée, Georges, "The Rhetoric of the Picture Poem" *PLT* 1(1), 1976, pp. 63-84, cited in Tsur, Raven, "Picture Poetry, Mannerism, and Sign Relationships" *Poetic Today*, 21:4 (Winter 2000), 2000, pp. 751-781, p. 751. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/poetics_today/v021/21.4tsur.html (viewed 07/05/2009)

¹²⁹ Orban, Clara Elizabeth, *The Culture of Fragments: Words and Images in Futurism and Surrealism*, Rodopi, PLACE?, 1997, p. 48.

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ally exclusive¹³⁰. It is impossible to read a text in a
me look at the printed characters¹³¹. There is,
therefore, a conflict between characters considered as signs representing units of
language and the additional pictorial signs contained within the same characters¹³².
However, In his taxonomy of word-and-image relations, A. Kibédi Varga argues that, in
some cases, when there is complete union of verbal and visual elements, we cannot
switch from one way of perceiving to another; we in fact perceive in to different ways at
the same time¹³³.

Iconic representation does not accelerate visual-cognitive processing. On the contrary,
the doubling of signification breaks the speed of reading¹³⁴. Typographer David Carson
relies upon this difficulty in reading¹³⁵ when creating purposefully illegible type¹³⁶. He
feels that, by creating type that communicates visually, distracting the reader from the
linguistic interpretation, the reader is forced to invest more time and effort into
deciphering content, and is more likely to remember the text, and to focus on its
linguistic signification. Here, the conflict¹³⁷ between the verbal and visual aids
linguistic intent.

Words Within Images

When text appears within an image, it can serve to function as a caption. In captions,
words helps to indicate what Barthes terms the preferred meaning of the image, often
by identifying the important parts of the image¹³⁸. The text constitutes a parasitic
message designed to connote the image, to quicken it with one or more second-order
signifieds¹³⁹. Barthes suggests that captions can serve two different functions. In some
instances, the text may duplicate certain of the informations given in the text... or ...add
fresh information¹⁴⁰. David Lewis offers a more extensive list of functions. In

¹³⁰ Gross, Sabine, "The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems" *Poetics Today*, Vol. 128, No. 1
(Spring 1997), pp. 15-32, p. 17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773231> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹³¹ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, "Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and
Drawing" *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited
13/05/2009)

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Varga, A. Kibedi. "Criteria for Describing Word and Image Relations" *Poetics Today*, Vol. 10, No. 1,
1989, pp. 31-53, p. 37 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772554> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹³⁴ Gross, Sabine, "The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems" *Poetics Today*, Vol. 128, No. 1
(Spring 1997), pp. 15-32, p.24.

¹³⁵ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, "Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and
Drawing" *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited
13/05/2009)

¹³⁶ Poynor, Rick, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*, Laurence King Publishing, China,
2003, p. 63.

¹³⁷ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, "Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and
Drawing" *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited
13/05/2009)

¹³⁸ Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p. 39.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

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Figure 3. Adolfo Correa, *A Tribute to Yulia Brodskaya*, 2009.

metryö, the words and image duplicate one another, forcing an agreed meaning, in enhancementö the overall aims of the words and image are the same, but one enhances the other by being more detailed or elaborate¹⁴¹, in counterpointö or deviationö, the words and image provide slightly different meaning, and in contradictionö the meaning of the words and image are binary opposites¹⁴².

When words appear within image, they can serve the same function as captions. The image may add detail to the words, or vice versa, as in enhancementö. In Adolfo Correa's *A Tribute to Yulia Brodskaya* the words *I love you* appear within a heart shape (fig. 3). The words enhance the meaning of the heart, and anchor a preferred meaning of romantic love, shared intimately between two people. In Alex Trochut's untitled typography (see fig. 2 above) the meaning of the words and the image refer to apparent unrelated topics, words and food, in an example of deviationö.

Photographed Letter-objects

Since the introduction of the printed word, letters have been reproduced. In conventional printing, including Gutenberg's moveable type, the printing block differs significantly from the resultant text (not least in that it is a reversed, mirror-image). More recent methods of reproduction create texts that are more visually similar to the original documents. In photographic representation a scene is encoded (requiring the translation from two to three dimensions)¹⁴³, but the resemblance is so effective that the decoding process can go unnoticed.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's use of the photographed letter demonstrates how type can be reproduced unambiguous[ly]¹⁴⁴. Moholy-Nagy proposes that the *typophoto* is the truest, most objective representation of type¹⁴⁵. Moholy-Nagy's proposal suggests a belief in type as fundamentally a physical object. Type must first be produced by other means, then replicated photographically. It is the typographic object, the result of a previous act of typography, that becomes the subject of the photo; the photo itself is not considered typographic. A photograph of type could therefore be viewed as a second-

¹⁴¹ Lewis, David, *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*, Routledge, London, 2001. p. 38.

¹⁴² Ibid. p. 34.

¹⁴³ Chandler, Daniel, *Codes, Semiotics for Beginners*, 2001, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08.html> (visited 16/06/2009)

¹⁴⁴ Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo, *Typophoto* 1925, in Armstrong, Helen (ed.), *Graphic Design Theory*, Princeton Architectural Press, NY, 2009, pp. 33-34, p. 34.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid..

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assurance of belief that the written word is itself a second-order sign, a sign that type is "removed one step further"¹⁴⁶. A photographed letter-object could therefore be considered a forth-order sign. The photograph signifies the original type-object, which in turn represents writing, which in turn represents spoken sound.

Although Saussure argued that the medium does not affect the meaning of a sign (a chess piece has the same significance if molded in wood, ivory or plastic), many contemporary media allow a sign to behave differently, and for the transfer of connotations from media to sign. Different media have different "meaning potential"¹⁴⁷. Type is "anchored in a medium"¹⁴⁸, appearing to have different significance on a page, on a screen, or on an object. Print, for example, is static, and therefore "less personal" than television, in which "movement and action" allow audiences to feel more involved¹⁴⁹. "Photographic and audio-visual media are almost invariably regarded as more 'real' than other forms of representation"¹⁵⁰. They are viewed as records or reproductions of reality, rather than representations¹⁵¹. In photographic representation, the medium signifies reliability and reality. In Barthes' terms, it is a "perfect *analogon*"¹⁵².

Saussure would treat an instance of film (or photography) as an example of *parole* of a "cinema language", whereby anything contained within the film (or photograph) would be part of the same system of signs¹⁵³. This suggests that a photographed object, whether typographic or a live subject, would belong to the same language of signs. However, Victor Burgin would argue that not all photographed objects belong to the same language, and therefore cannot be treated alike. Burgin argues that "there is no single signifying system" within photography, "rather, a heterogeneous complex of codes upon which photography may draw"¹⁵⁴. Mahholy-Nagy's typophotos, and, by extension, type

¹⁴⁶ Miller, J. Abbott, and Lupton, Ellen, "A Natural History of Typography" in Bierut, Michael, Drenttel, William, Heller, Steven, and Holland, D.K. (eds), *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, Allworth Press, NY, 1994, pp. 19-25, p. 20.

¹⁴⁷ Chandler, Daniel, "Introduction" *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁴⁸ Bolter, Jay David, "Electronic Signs" *Aura Digital*, <http://www.auradigital.net/web/Escriptures-hiptertextuals/Documents/electronic-signs-jay-david-bolter.html> (visited 10/07/2009), originally published in *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, Laurence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey, 1991, pp. 85-106.

¹⁴⁹ Chandler, Daniel, "Introduction" *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁵⁰ Chandler, Daniel, "Signs" *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2009, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁵¹ Chandler, Daniel, "Modality and Representation" *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2001, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁵² Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p. 17.

¹⁵³ Langholz Leymore, Varda, *Hidden Myth: Structure and Symbolism in Advertising*, Basic Books, New York, 1975, cited in Chandler, Daniel, "Introduction" *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

¹⁵⁴ Burgin, Victor, 'Looking at Photographs', in Burgin, Victor (Ed.) (1982): *Thinking Photograph*, Macmillan, London, 1982, pp. 142-153, cited in Chandler, Daniel, "Introduction" *Semiotics for Beginners*, 2005, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem01.html> (visited 11/06/2009)

eated as part of the same language as other

A distinction must be made between the two messages that a photograph may communicate: the denoted and connoted messages¹⁵⁵. A photograph should not be viewed only as a reliable representation of reality, but also as a "treatment"¹⁵⁶ of reality, since it represents only one of many possible representations of a scene. At a simple level, the photography selects one of many possible framings¹⁵⁷. Pablo Alfieri's *Playful* (2007-2008), depicts three-dimensional letter objects arranged in an orderly array of designer's tools (fig. 4). The letters themselves are plain, with no pictorial characteristics, but their location alongside other tools asserts their role as a designer's tool, and a physical object. *Playful* is not experienced directly. The typographic arrangement is photographed, then disassembled so that the letters may be used in other projects. The artefact is preserved only as a photograph, having the effect of making "the past present"¹⁵⁸. The photograph is the permanent evidence that the temporary arrangement existed.



Figure 4. Pablo Alfieri, *Playful*, 2007-8.¹⁵⁹

At a more complex level, the photographer may interfere further, choosing and positioning objects to create additional significance. Photographed, functional objects are given new typographic meaning in works such as Lee Stokes's *Pipe Font* (2008), an alphabet constructed entirely from PVC pipes (fig. 5). Pipes are rearranged to apparently present letterforms, and to add linguistic meaning. New signification is constructed when the *Pipe Font* is applied in the production of the word "flood" while the pipes appear to

¹⁵⁵ Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p. 17.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁸ Christie, Edward, "The Image of the Letter: From the Anglo-Saxons to the Electronic Beowulf" *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 44:2, pp. 129-150, p. 143. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1473578032000151058> (visited 20/05/2009)

¹⁵⁹ Image from Alfieri, Pablo, "Playful" *Behance*, 2008, <http://www.behance.net/Gallery/Playful/105021> (visited 10/07/2009)

in their original context and meaning. These objects
as type.



Figure 5. Lee Stokes, *PVC Pipe Poster*, 2008.¹⁶⁰

It is worth noting that audiences encounter many other kinds of typographic objects through second-hand representations such as scans or photographs, even those not originally intended by the designer as photographic subjects. Sculptures, initially intended for direct viewing, are frequently photographic subjects. Ivan Chermayeff's *9 West 57th Street* (1972) is a six-tonne steel sculpture which stands on the pavement in New York city¹⁶¹. Chermayeff's imposing letter sculpture asserts itself as an architectural object. It occupies public space, and requires the payment of ground rent¹⁶². It may signify linguistically when viewed from the front, but from other directions, it appears abstract. When 9 is photographed from one of these directions, the permanent photographic record records not a letter but an apparently abstract object. A photograph has the power to preserve or to eliminate the verbal signification that would be lost and revealed in the real environment were a viewer to move around the object.

¹⁶⁰ Stokes, Lee, "PVC Pipe Font and Poster", *Behance Network*, 2008
[http://www.behance.net/Gallery/PVC-Pipe-font-amp-poster-\(pure-typography\)/109508](http://www.behance.net/Gallery/PVC-Pipe-font-amp-poster-(pure-typography)/109508) (visited 28/05/2009)

¹⁶¹ Schneider, Daniel B., "F.Y.I.", *The New York Times* (online), June 18, 2000.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/18/nyregion/fyi-761672.html?n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/C/Comedy%20and%20Humor> (visited 29/05/2009)

¹⁶² Ibid.

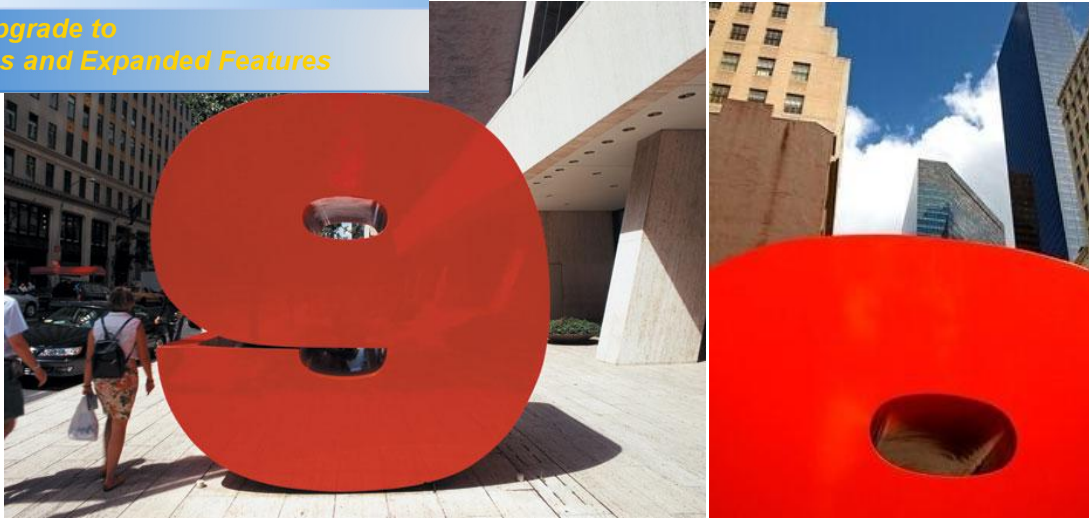


Figure 6. Two views of Ivan Chermayeff's 9, 1972.^{163, 164}

There is a fine line between an arrangement of typographic objects in a photographed scene, and the photograph (or scan) of found letters. Following Duchamp's rules of the ready-made, André Breton used found type to create his poem, *Memoires d'un Extract des Actions de Chemins* (1923). Removed from their original context, the type in *Memoirs...* loses its original signification. Indeed, Lapacherie and Lehman argue that the words in Breton's work are no longer signs of anything. In this new context, the type is devoid of any signification, since it is unconnected with a text or its contents¹⁶⁵. It becomes an object or substance¹⁶⁶. Found type is often the choice of material for typographers such as Tibor Kalman¹⁶⁷.

The Computer-Generated Letter-Object

Trick photography¹⁶⁸ and computer-generated images are increasingly rendering photography unreliable, yet the connotations of reliability remain. Photography is still fundamentally structured by the sense that it is a realist medium¹⁶⁹. With better technology, photos are more able to masquerade as true representations of reality, when

¹⁶³ Image from Sherwood, Will, "Ivan Chermayeff", *Success Secrets of the Graphic Design Superstars*, 2008, <http://willsherwood.com/?p=42> (visited 10/07/2009)

¹⁶⁴ Image from author not named, "Ivan Chermayeff's 'Red 9' sculpture", *Inmagine*, date not given, <http://www.inmagine.com/dp008/dp1815226-photo> (viewed 10/07/2009)

¹⁶⁵ Lapacherie, Jean-Gérard, and Lehmann, Anna, "Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing", *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, 1994, pp. 63-77, p. 74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930180> (visited 13/05/2009)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ In Kalman's design, the use of found type is used in appropriation of the vernacular. Kalman's work was designed in imitation of the work of amateurs.

¹⁶⁸ Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p. 21.

¹⁶⁹ Slater, Don, "Photography and Modern Vision: The Spectacle of 'Natural Magic' in Jenks, Chris (ed.), *Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 1995. pp. 218-237, p. 220.

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even entirely artificial¹⁷⁰. In trick photography, objects are placed in the plane of denotation; they utilize the special credibility of the photograph in order to pass off as merely denoted a message which is in reality heavily connoted¹⁷¹. In computer-generated imagery, therefore, the denotation of the reality effect may be the final connotation¹⁷².



Figure 7. Petar Pavlov, *Type as Image*, 2008.¹

In their creation, computer-generated letterforms (like those in fig. 7) have more in common with typed text than with photographed objects. In many instances, the initial step in their creation is the pressing of a keyboard key. The trickery which disguises them as photographic objects is comparable to a typeface. This disguise - the application of the shading and surface textures expected in reality - allows the type to masquerade as a real object, ultimately concealing the method of creation.

This text forms part of a work in progress, *Gestalt Perception of Fluid Typography*.
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¹⁷⁰ Barthes, Roland, Heath, Stephen (translator), *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, p. 46.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 21

¹⁷² Slater, Don, "Photography and Modern Vision: The Spectacle of 'Natural Magic'" in Jenks, Chris (ed.), *Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 1995. pp. 218-237, p. 232.