Multi-modal meanings: mapping the domain of design

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ABSTRACT
This paper draws upon recent work in the field of social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) in an attempt to theorise the concept of multimodality in the context of consumer product design.

First it is established that commodities (products made available for consumption) may be understood as a system of communication from which social meanings may be negotiated. The concept of multimodality is explained as deriving from the observation that communication always takes place via a combination of semiotic modes. For example, a product carries meaning through the design selections of materials, processes, packaging, distribution, display, and publicity systems. Case studies illustrate how the perceived social meaning of a product may be modulated through such systems of semiotic choices.

INTRODUCTION
Following the work of Jean Baudrillard (1988:10) in which he theorised the realm of consumer goods as a ‘system of objects’, facilitating the generation of social meanings and values from material objects, this paper proposes a direction of inquiry into the concept I shall term reception: how is a commodity (i.e. a product made available for consumption through a range of media and modes) received in social context, and how is its social value negotiated?

The semiotic principles applicable to the analysis of multimodal design derive from Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1916) seminal work theorising the communication process as a series of paradigmatic choices of signs (e.g. visual elements) combined syntagmatically according to the rules of the code shared by sender and receiver. Awareness of the importance of theorising such communication within a social context was raised by Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev. (1928)

Bakhtin and his circle were proposing a reassessment of Saussure, who had chosen to foreground the structure of language (langue) rather than speech (parole), and a synchronic analysis of language rather than a diachronic one. Bakhtin re-engaged the poles of these dichotomies, and treated them dialectically – as oppositions between terms which depend upon each other for their meaning. By doing so, he facilitated the study of communication within a dialogical context. (Holquist, 1990)

Bakhtin and his colleagues effectively resolved the antimony that Saussure’s separation of langue and parole had presented, and thus laid the foundations upon which a social semiotics may be constructed. He and Medvedev asked:
'How, within the unity of the artistic construction, is the direct material presence of the work, its here and now, to be joined with the endless perspectives of its ideological meaning?.. What, in fact, is the element which unites the material presence of the work with its meaning?.. We submit that **social evaluation** is the element.'

(Bakhtin & Medvedev, in Dentith 1995:145-6)

The term **social evaluation** is a crucial one, as we shall see. The application of semiotics to the analysis of designed goods has been addressed recently (Vihma 1995, Riley 1997), but one of the earliest attempts, the international **Symposium on Design Research and Semiotics** organised by the University of Industrial Arts, Helsinki, in 1989, promised to be a breakthrough in terms of the contribution semiotic theory could offer designers. However, as Susann Vihma (1990), editor of the resultant collection of essays lamented: ‘I do not believe that the connections between design theory and semiotics have been fully clarified yet’.

The weakness identified by Vihma may be explained by two reasons. But firstly, it should be made clear that the perceived failure was not to do with the strategy of making design the central issue around which semiotic theory is placed. Rather, it was, as Richard Buchanan (1993:189) observed in his review of Vihma’s collection, ‘an…ambivalence among many contemporary designers and design theorists about the value or relevance of semiotics to their work.’ Such ambivalence is the first reason why design discourse did not benefit fully from the available semiotic theory. The second reason, easier to deduce through ten years of hindsight, is the failure to recognize the importance of Bakhtin’s and Medvedev’s term **social evaluation**.

A **social** semiotics applied to the analysis of design work and its products may well prove effective in explaining how meanings and values of products are negotiated within a social context.

**A SOCIAL SEMIOTICS OF DESIGN**

Social semiotics theorises the relationship between codes of communication (in this case, the **system of objects**) and the context of situation in which they operate.

Products generally operate within a social process, or **discourse**. The form of the product is determined by the nature of its discourse. To use a linguistic example; the form of speech is determined by where and to whom we speak. It would therefore be useful to codify the parameters of the discourse in order to theorise the relationship between product and social context.

Michael Halliday (et al 1964) proposed three parameters of social process, which he termed **field**, **tenor**, and **mode**. Here they are adapted to the discourse of design:

**Field** refers to the institutional settings in which design, and consumption of goods occurs. At its widest, this concept would include studios, factories and retail outlets.

**Tenor** refers to the state of the relationships between participants in the design, production and consumption processes: the widest range of possible relationships would include those between designer and client/manufacturer; between manufacturer and publicist; between retailer and consumer; between consumers/users themselves.

**Mode** refers to the manner of expression adopted within the institutional settings. The central tenet of this paper is that there is a multiplicity of modes operating throughout the design, production, distribution and consumption
of goods, and that those modes may all be analysed with a common semiotic tool that reveals the consistencies (and sometimes the inconsistencies) of meanings across all modes.

MEDIUM, MODE AND MULTIMODALITY

For the purposes of this paper, medium is defined as a means of expression or realization (the materials of the product, of its packaging, distribution, advertising and retail display); mode is defined as the manner of expression or realization (aspects of the formal style adopted for communication through those media).

The concept of multimodality derives from the observation that the process of communication inevitably occurs via a combination of semiotic modes. For example, in face-to-face dialogue, the modes of speech, of body-language, the mode of dress as well as the mood generated by the spatial context are all operating simultaneously (and not necessarily in harmony).

Similarly in the case of material products (more precisely, for the purposes of this paper, consumer goods) a range of modalities affects how we negotiate social meaning and how we endow particular products with particular social value. Those modalities extend from the manner in which a design concept is developed visually on paper, on screen, or in model form, through the manner in which materials are manipulated in production and the manner in which representations of the product are treated in packaging and advertising, to ways in which the product is displayed, and the ambience of the retail outlet.

It is argued that all such modalities operate according to common semiotic principles which underpin the design process: the selection of appropriate elements from the available systems of choices, and the combination of those selections in ways which engender appropriate social connotations.

MODEL FOR THE SOCIAL EVALUATION OF PRODUCTS

Four non-hierarchical strata are proposed in a model for the evaluation of consumer goods within a social context:

1. Discourse is defined here as the realm of socially constructed knowledge in which thinking and debate about production takes place. Design discourse involves a wide range of social contexts: A discourse is a culturally-constructed body of knowledge, one which may be articulated in a variety of ways. For example, the discourse of sustainable design may be realised as a magazine article, as the agenda of a designers’ conference, as the strategy of a production company, as a demonstrably recyclable product, or as policy of a political party. However, ‘Discourses may only be realised in semiotic modes which have developed the means for realising them’ (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001:5)

It may be demonstrated that although such discourses afford varying attitudes towards design work, they share in common the semiotic principles upon which all discourse is based: those of selection from the range of registers and modalities through which opinion and debate may be expressed in a variety of media. For example within the discourse of sustainable design, certain material choices to do degradability and remouldability may be fore grounded.

2. Conception, its root the Latin verb capere ‘to take’, is defined as the stage of design engagement at which the designer is ‘taken with’ an initial idea or concept. Such concepts may be explored through a variety of media (from pencils to software packages) in diverse modes (doodling, sketching, modeling). Each of these modes connotes social meanings which may be analysed using semiotic principles common to them all. For example, the semiotic principles articulated through the process of selection from a range
of choices to do with geometry systems, scale, format, weight and density of marks, and the analysis of the social connotations, or values, that each choice carries within a specific context.

3. **Inception**, from the same Latin root, may be understood as the stage at which a concept is ‘taken up’ in production: fully realised in material form or other technological media. The multimodal possibilities of material expression may be analysed through semiotic principles applicable to all media. In product design, for example, the system of choices concerning the textural qualities of the work, (a **system of choices** articulates a full range of possibilities available for selection), systems of choices to do with scale, weight, density, balance, symmetry, stability of materials. All materials and combinations of selections from the available systems have potential to carry connotations of style and social value.

4. **Reception**. This term represents the stage at which the commodity is ‘taken in’, or received within the public domain. The complexities of media (the means of expression) and modes (the manners of expression) may range from the properties of the display (retail) environment and the manner in which its **ambience** is manipulated, to the manner in which the product is publicised and reviewed. Here too, it is argued, there is the possibility of a common means of analysis based upon the recognition that selections have been made from systems of choices.

**CASE STUDIES**

In order to illustrate the model let us compare two products with similar general functions: an iMac computer and a Dell computer.

**Discourse**

The discourse, or culturally-constructed body of knowledge within which computers are located, is driven by a general acceptance of their usefulness in a wide range of social applications. However, within this general discourse, the iMac is specifically presented as a product of flexibility for design applications, by means of the selection and combination of appropriate material and textual choices made from the common systems of choices. The Dell product is positioned within the discourse as fulfilling both commercial and domestic functions of word-processing, web access and multi-media entertainment.

**Conception**

It is at this stratum that the modes of communication within the case-studies are at their most disparate. In the case of the iMac, the role of the product designer Jonathan Ive is aggressively fore grounded, and his creative individuality related directly to the mode of conception. (Figure 1: Jonathan Ive video) Dell products, on the other hand, appear to be anonymously conceived as systems of interchangeable elements. Their individuality is suppressed.

**Inception**

Similarly, at this stratum of activity, the production values of the two computers illustrate widely-differing modes of communication. From the common systems of choices to do with the scale, shape, weight, colour, texture and volume of both products’ materials, it is clear that in the iMac is embodied selections consistent with the modes of expression and their subsequent social connotations discussed at the levels of Discourse and Conception. Specifically, the flexibility of the physical articulation between screen, computer and keyboard demonstrates balance and symmetry; the emphasis upon lightness (both in the sense of weight and colour); surface
textures are smooth, volumes are rounded. Further, the metaphor of iMac as fashion accessory (make-up mirror?) is available for consumers. (Figure 2: iMac computer)

In the case of Dell, from the same, common systems of choices are made selections which carry social connotations unlike those of the iMac: The inflexibility of rectilinear volumes; dark colours, bulk indicating heaviness; surface treatments of cowlings, apertures and sub-assembly connection joints deny any connotation of smooth articulacy, balance or symmetry. (Figure 3: Dell computer)

**Reception**

This term encompasses modes of address through the media of packaging, advertising and retail display ambience. It will be shown that, as in the other three strata, the various modes employed in the two case-studies may be analysed with reference to the systems of choices available.

For example, even though the functions of packaging (identity and protection of the product) are common to both, each selects different choices from the systems of choices to do with packaging graphics: treatment of packaging surface; choices of typography; choices of illustration.

As we’d expect by now, the iMac is packaged in a white-coated box, with coloured graphic illustration of the product and typography consistent with the Apple Macintosh style. (Figure 4: iMac packaging) The Dell product is shipped in brown cardboard box with single-colour flat typography. (Figure 5: Dell packaging)

The modes of address adopted by the two advertising campaigns are as disparate as those deployed in the packaging, but both the iMac adverts. (Figure 6) And the Dell adverts. (Figure 7) may be analysed through the same semiotic systems of choices appropriate to the medium of advertising and an assessment of the social connotations of those choices. Notice how the iMac ad. foregrounds the product, and the Dell ad. foregrounds the customer and the price.
In terms of retail display mode, or ambience, the most fundamental system of choices is evident: to display, or to not display. Through display, the iMac is positioned as a high-status, desirable object. Through not displaying, and choosing instead mail-shots coupled with remote ordering, the Dell product connotes a lower social value but economy saving.

To sum up:

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<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Function subservient to form</td>
<td>Form subservient to function</td>
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<td>Conception</td>
<td>Organic shape, articulated.</td>
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<td>= Fashion statement</td>
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<td>High social value</td>
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WEBSITES

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Biographical Note

Howard Riley is Coordinator for Postgraduate Research in the School of Art and Design, Swansea Institute, University of Wales, U.K.
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Dr Riley’s research interests include the relationships between perception theories, communication theories and the practice and teaching of drawing, and the application of systemic-functional semiotics to design practice. His publications are in the fields of drawing pedagogy, visual semiotics and generative art.

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