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INTRODUCTION

I began studying visual communication as a linguist concerned with the discourses, genres and styles of media texts, 20 years ago. It had become increasingly obvious to me that it was no longer adequate to study just the linguistic aspects of these texts,

and that the paradigms for studying images in media studies concentrated only on the connotative meanings of the people, places and things in images, and neglected the role of composition and layout as structuring devices, as a kind of 'grammar' for both images and many kinds contemporary written texts. This work resulted in *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), a book which I co-wrote with Gunther Kress, and which has now begun to find its place, particularly in areas such as critical discourse analysis and the analysis of educational materials. However, this work did not touch at all on typography, and it is only in the last few years that I have come to realize what a fundamental oversight this was, because clearly, it is above all and in the first place through calligraphy and typography that visual communication and writing form an inseparable unity.

Designers have of course long known this. To take just two recent examples, Bellantoni and Woolman (2000: 6) have written that the printed word has two levels of meaning, the 'word image', the idea represented by the word itself, constructed from a string of letters, and the 'typographic image', the 'holistic visual impression', and Brody Neuschwander (1993: 13, 31) calls typography 'a fully developed medium of expression', possessing 'a complex grammar by which communication is possible', and he quotes Hans-Rudolf Lutz who has said that '*Gestaltung ist auch Information*' – 'design is also information' (p. 73). Linguists and semioticians are lagging behind here, and perhaps the delay in their recognition of the communicative role of typography is due to the fact that it is only recently, through the introduction of the word processor, that the means of typographic expression have become available to everyone, and entered everyone's consciousness.

Beginning to survey the literature, it soon became obvious to me that the 'grammar' Neuschwander calls for has yet to be written. Of course, there are excellent histories, overviews and critical discussions of typography (e.g. Twyman, 1970; Triggs, 2004), manuals of typography (e.g. Evans, 1974; McLean, 2000), and insightful interviews in graphic design journals and edited books (e.g. McLean, 1995). But with few exceptions (Crystal, 1996, 1998; Goodman and Graddol, 1996; Walker, 2000), linguists and semioticians have ignored typography. So, can that 'grammar' be written? Should it be written, and if so why? I will



Figure 1: *Circuit* (Peter Grundy, 1982).

Toadstool adorns, dim bronze snowbirds rambling ice laughs eternal eggshell

Figure 2: *Foundry Fabriek* (The Foundry).

return to this question more fully later. But for me the answer is, yes. Once I realized how little I had to say about this important topic, it was no longer possible for me to go on writing and teaching about visual communication (for students of communication who may not be aspiring designers, but who are nevertheless increasingly aware of, and attuned to, typographic expression) without beginning to learn how to speak about typographic meaning in a principled way. This short paper summarizes what I have come up with so far (see also Van Leeuwen, 2005; in press). I will begin by discussing what I see as two key semiotic principles that can help explain how letter forms can become signifiers in their own right: connotation and metaphor.

CONNOTATION

I use the term connotation in a specific sense, building on Barthes' (1973) concept of 'myth'. Connotations come about through the 'import' of signs into a specific domain where they have hitherto not formed part of the accepted, conventional repertoire. Their meanings are then formed by the associations that exist, within the domain *into* which the signs are imported, with the domain *from* which they are imported. Such a 'domain' can be a particular historical period, a particular culture, a particular group (profession, social group), and so on, and the associations we have with it form the kind of diffuse, integrative concepts that Barthes (1977) described as 'mythical' and glossed with neologistic terms such as 'Italianness' (p. 34). *Circuit* by Peter Grundy (1982) is an example (see Figure 1). Here signs from the domain of electrical circuitry are imported into the domain of letter forms, where hitherto they were not used. As a result they can carry connotations of 'technicality', 'engineering' and so on.

Such connotations do not determine meaning in a narrow sense. They form a meaning *potential* which can be narrowed down when the font is used in a specific context. They are a *resource* for meaning-making. Their understanding rests on cultural knowledge. Designers must therefore assume that users of their typefaces will recognize 'where these signs come from', and users, in turn, will have to assume the same for their readers or viewers.

The commentaries in design journals and richly illustrated books on typography of course recognize the principle of connotation, even if not always in so many words. In an article in *Grafik*¹²⁰ (August 2004: 44), the meaning of the typeface in Figure 2 is signalled as based on connotation both by its name 'Fabriek' (Dutch for 'factory'), and by the comment that it is 'derived from industrial fabrication':

Foundry Fabriek by The Foundry

Foundry Fabriek is the latest release from The Foundry. The concept for Foundry Fabriek derives from industrial fabrication, where the parts of any material structure are united. The systematic grid, formed by stencil shapes, is indicative of the work of Dutch designer Wim Crowel, consultant on Foundry Fabriek.

But even without knowing the name of this typeface, it is likely that most people will understand its connotation of 'industriality', as they will have seen similar 'stencil like' letterforms on crates and other types of industrial packaging. It therefore becomes available for uses in which the idea of 'industriality' is to be conveyed, for instance, as I recently observed, on the packaging of toy machine guns.

METAPHOR

Not all typefaces can be understood on the basis of connotation, because it is not always possible to 'place' typefaces, to understand them on the basis of 'where we have seen them before', 'where they come from'. In that case another semiotic principle can nevertheless provide meaning, the principle of metaphor, or, more precisely, of the metaphoric potential of specific features of letterforms.

Here I apply an idea from phonology, the study of the sounds of language. Until 1956, the phonemes, the vowels and consonants of a given language, were regarded as its 'minimal units', as the basic building blocks from which words are assembled. Jakobson and Halle (1956), however, analysed phonemes into further, even more basic units, the so-called 'distinctive features'. The phoneme [p], for instance, has three distinctive features – it is 'plosive' (involving a sudden release of air), it is 'bilabial', and it is 'voiceless'. With 10 such features Jakobson and Halle could describe all the vowels and consonants of English. They did not, however, regard these features as carriers of meaning. Distinctive features were 'distinctive' because a single feature could distinguish between two phonemes (e.g. the presence or absence of 'voice' distinguishes between the [p] and the [b]) and hence also between two words (e.g. [pet] and [bet]). In other words, distinctive features were regarded as building blocks for meaning, but not as meaningful in themselves. This view of the 'distinctive' role of speech sounds is quite similar to the view that letterforms have no meaning in themselves, and only serve to make word meaning discernible, a view held by many traditional typographers (see Van Leeuwen, 2005). In this view, letterforms can only be more or less readable and more or less aesthetically pleasing, just as, to the traditional linguist, speech sounds may well be more or less clearly and/or beautifully pronounced, but cannot carry meaning on their own.

In my view, however, distinctive features *can* become meaningful – something poets have always known. The [p], for instance, is a small 'explosion', and this characteristic allows for analogies with other concrete or abstract phenomena that have a characteristic of 'minor explosiveness'. The Canadian composer Murray Schafer (1986: 181) described its meaning potential as follows: 'Pip, pop, pout. Combustive, comical. Listen to the soft popping of the pipesmoker.' The same reasoning can be applied to the distinctive features of letterforms. Fonts can, for instance, be angular, as in the case of *Agency FB* or rounded, as in the case of *Century Gothic*, and 'roundness' readily lends itself as a metaphor for 'organicness', 'natural-ness', 'femininity' and other related concepts. Ascenders can be longer than descenders, as in the case of *Poor Richard*, and this can for instance convey a sense of 'aspiring to "higher" things'. And so on. The provisional list of eight such features I have drawn up elsewhere (Van Leeuwen, in press) already allows for many different combinations and gradations, and hence for many different shades of meaning.

To take an example, the lettering in Figure 3 does not immediately suggest a context of 'origin' and its meaning potential therefore does not seem to rely on connotation. But that does not mean there is no typographic meaning. One of its key features is irregularity, difference in size and thickness, even in shape – different a's, for instance, are drawn differently. The distribution of weight, too, goes against the norms and conventions of typography, in which, for instance, it is usually the upright stem of the 'n', rather than the descending line in the middle which is thick. The irregularity of these letterforms can therefore be used as a metaphor for other kinds of irregularity, other ways of going against the norms, for instance to represent the unconventionality or rebelliousness of youth



Figure 3: Ruth Rowland's letterforms.
Cover artwork for 'Grandpa's Party' by Monie Love
used by permission of EMI Records.



Figure 4: Haberdash (Angela Pelzl).

subcultures and their music. This is picked up in Neuenschwander's (1993) comments on this example:

Ruth Rowland's funky letterforms suggest an underlying rebelliousness as they rise from the head of Monie Love. The distribution of weight is irrational, the forms ungainly. Yet the contending lines balance each other out to produce a stable rectangle. Black subculture is represented as a well-established phenomenon. (p. 57)

Again: I am not saying anything that designers do not already know and practice.

MULTIMODALITY

Until now I have concentrated on the meanings of letterforms. But contemporary typography creates meaning, not just with letter forms, but also with colour, three-dimensionality, material texture, and, in kinetic typography, movement. Increasingly many typefaces also incorporate iconic elements, and deliberately blur the boundaries between image and letterform, thus regaining a connection that has been lost in the course of the development of the alphabet. In other words, typography is no longer a 'separate' semiotic mode. Typographic communication is *multimodal*. It uses a variety of semiotic resources. Much of the meaning of the Haberdash typeface (Angela Pelzl) in Figure 4, for instance, derives from the material texture of the letters, the fact that they are hand-embroidered. This yields characteristics that set it apart from the perfection of machine-made things, and the slickness of corporate logos. As the designer comments (*Grafik*¹²⁰, August 2004):

Creating this typeface with embroidery was a wonderful exercise, very meditative and a welcome alternative to using the mouse as a design tool. The mixing of manual work with digital manipulation is something that interests me – the work gains a surface feel and imperfection adds charm and character. (p. 45)

It follows that a semiotics of typography should therefore not become an isolated specialism, but a form of enquiry that draws on the semiotics of all the various semiotic resources used in contemporary typography.

CONCLUSION

Why do we need an explicit semiotics of typography? Not for designers. Designers already know and practice what I have written about here, and I hope they will recognize it as reflecting what they actually do as they use typography to create meaning. But there are other reasons.

First of all, typography is a wonderful site for studying semiotic change. It has moved rapidly from a craft-based and quite traditional ethos to an ethos of innovation, and at the heart of that innovation is the way it is developing typography into a semiotic resource. Re-drawing the boundaries between word and image, typography is now radically changing the semiotic landscape of our time.

As typography is moving from a relatively humble and marginal role in social communication to a more prominent and important one, it becomes necessary to develop resources for talking and writing about it, and for teaching it, and that is what semiotics can contribute. Beginning to teach the subject in the context of media and communication studies, it quickly became clear to me that my students already have a sophisticated awareness of typographical meaning. But their resources for talking and writing about it are limited, restricted to a handful of adjectives. The still tentative ways of talking and writing about typography I have begun to introduce in my courses quickly fall into place for them and clearly enhance their understanding and appreciation of typographic meaning, in the same way that the conceptual frameworks of film studies did for an earlier generation.

As the means for typographic expression have now become accessible to everyone who uses a word processor, teaching typographic literacy should also become an integral part of teaching writing, at all levels, and this inevitably requires the development of concepts and methods. Some think this will introduce prescriptive rules where previously none existed, and therefore stifle creativity. I do not agree. Just as the 'rules' of spelling and grammar did not destroy the possibility of linguistic creativity, so an explicit semiotics of typography will not destroy typographic creativity. And for those whose writing is not in the first place oriented to creativity, it will provide the typographic literacy necessary for using typographic expression effectively and discerningly in more mundane forms of everyday written communication.

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