

Signs, symbols, and subjectivity: An alternative view of the visual

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Abstract

Though generally in agreement with Gunther Kress and his views favoring the multimodal workings of contemporary communication, the authors take issue with his construction of a binary opposition between words and images. This paper argues against the notion that images are inherently specific and full of meaning. Symbolic imagery and mood board examples are used to counter this view of visual communication workings.

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Keywords: Design; Emotional; Image; Literacy; Media; Visual; Technology

1. Introduction

In “Gains and Losses,” [Gunther Kress \(2005\)](#) makes strong and convincing arguments in favor of a multimodal understanding of communication. We agree with his assessment that the communication landscape is in the midst of a revolutionary change characterized by a shift “from the centrality of writing to the increasing significance of image.” An important outcome of Kress’ work is that his arguments expand the opportunity for other voices to enter the discourse about writing studies. Our field of expertise is not the written but the visual; the team of authors is comprised of an industrial designer (McDonagh), a graphic designer/fine artist (Goggin), and a photographer (Squier). As designers and visual communicators, our work takes multiple forms—manufactured objects, the printed page, screen-based experiences—and is constructed for a multitude of venues and audiences: popular culture, consumer culture, network culture, and museums. As such, we bring highly developed sensibilities and experiences to the sphere of communication but with a decidedly visual bias. Kress’ comparison of written and visual communication, and the polarity that he sets up between them, affords us an opportunity to express our own perspective on how these two modes function—their similarities and differences.

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Our comments focus on the two paragraphs below, in which Kress establishes a dichotomy between words and images:

Because words rely on convention and on conventional acceptance, words are always general, and therefore vague. Words being nearly empty of meaning need filling with the hearer/reader's meaning.

We treat that as the act of interpretation. With 'depiction' and with images the situation is different: that which I wish to depict, I can depict—at the moment at any rate. I can draw whatever I like whenever I like to draw it. Unlike words, depictions are full of meaning; they are always specific. So on the one hand there is a finite stock of words—vague, general, nearly empty of meaning; on the other hand there is an infinitely large potential of depictions—precise, specific, and full of meaning.

Although there certainly are instances when words and images behave exactly according to Kress' above description—vague words and precise images—to categorize them so broadly tends to oversimplify reality. This binary, under inspection, simply does not hold up.

2. The three categories of signs

Peirce (Crow, 2003) defined three categories of signs: icon, index, and symbol. Only in the case of iconic imagery, the most literal category defined by Peirce, is depiction clear in the way that Kress argues. The ice cream cone in Figure 1 physically resembles the object that it represents; one immediately knows that ice cream cones are sold here. But there are few

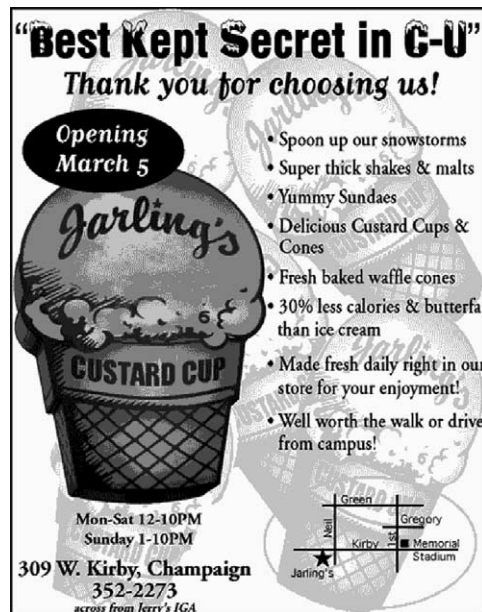


Fig. 1. Advertising flyer for Jarling's, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

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