



IDC School of Design
अभिकल्प विद्यालय

DEP 403

Design Exploration Seminar

Online lecture on Design Principles: Visual Semiotics

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Guide: Prof. B K. Chakravarthy

Declaration

I declare that this project report is based on my work carried out during the Spring semester of 2021 at IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay. I declare that this written report represents my own ideas, communicated in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources.

I also declare that I have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not falsified, misinterpreted or fabricated any idea, data, facts or source in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will be the cause of disciplinary action by the Institute and penal action from the source in the case the work has not been incorrectly cited or if permissions have not been taken where necessary.



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Approval

The Design Exploration Seminar project titled “Online lecture on Design Principles: Visual Semiotics” by Nidhi Deshmukh, Roll Number 18U130019, is approved, in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor in Design Degree at the IDC School of Design, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Project Guide

Chairperson

External Examiner

Internal Examiner

Acknowledgement

I thank Prof. B K Chakravarthy for his guidance throughout this project. His feedback and guidance helped me fine tune this project and create a engaging and interesting video.

I'm also grateful to Prof. Prasad Bokil for his comments and suggestions on the content of the lecture.

I also thank my friends and classmates, Niharika, Drishti, Rhea, Saumya and Abhijith for their contribution to the discussions included in the final lecture.

Introduction

This project aims to teach the basics of semiotics to an online audience in a manner that's engaging and easy to understand. The task was to structure and conduct an online lecture teaching one basic design principle to students who are just starting out in design. This was to be based on course we took in our first and second year at IDC. It was necessary to keep the content simple and easy to grasp while being effective and easy to apply.

Learning in an online environment takes a toll on the mind and can get boring and exhausting. The project explores creative ways to make online learning interesting and effective by relying on animations, interactive exercises and a dry sense of humour.

Research

I chose to work on a lecture about semiotics and I quite enjoyed the semiotics course conducted in my second year at IDC. I started by going through the course content of the **“Communication Theories, Visual Perception and Semiotics”** course conducted by **Prof. Prasad Bokil** and multiple online lectures and youtube tutorials.

Most online lectures and tutorials were short and focused mainly on theory and definitions. This works well because it's best to know the proper terms and definitions as that makes it easier to discuss, explain the concept and for the student, to convey queries. This also makes it easier for students to google any doubts and learn on their own. However these videos lacked any application based exercises.

Semiotics and gestalt laws are used everywhere. As a designer or any creator, we must very deliberately guide the eye of the viewer– guide their attention across an image, illustration, a scene or an object. We must direct them to perceive it in the required order to best understand it. When it comes to form and products, this is useful to guide the viewer about how to approach the product and where to begin to understand its function. So it's necessary to learn how to apply these laws, principles and theory.

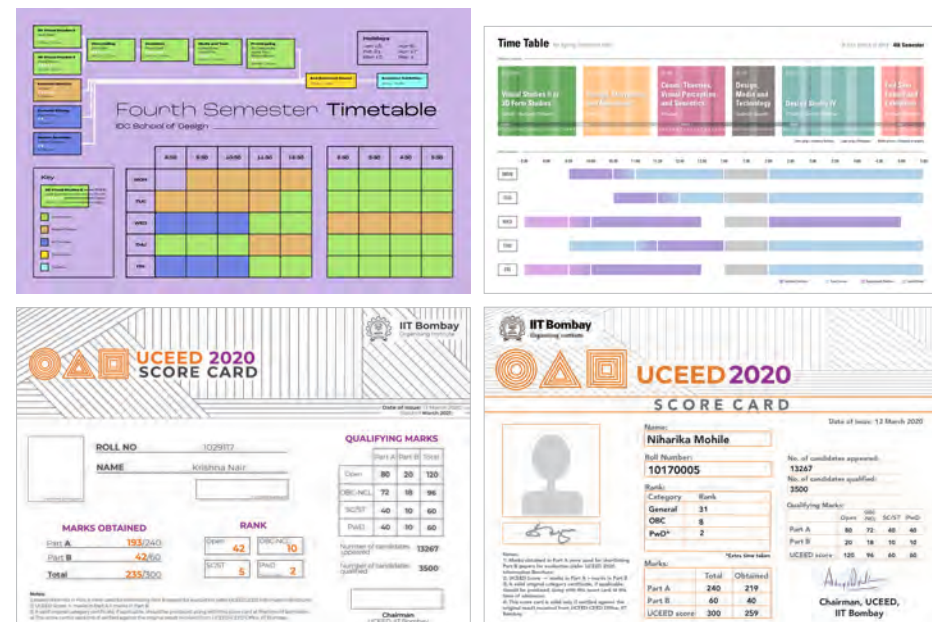
Every day, we would complete 2 or 3 of these exercises—we completed about 40 of these exercises during the course. They took only 10-15 mins to complete and then we would print it. The next day, we would put up the work of the entire class in the classroom and sit around and discuss which ones seemed to fulfil the objectives best and why. We could discuss all these and argue among ourselves a bit. The prof hardly put in any major points in these discussions, he would just get us started with the topic and then let us fight among ourselves for half an hour, it was quite fun.

This method worked really well because syntactics is not so much about learning anything new as it is about understanding and being able to consciously recognise how the human brain perceives image or a group of individual icons with respect to their proximity, similarity, wholeness etc. and then to apply this to your work. The student retains more information with this interactive learning method. Arguing and debating your points and perspective with your peers helps understand how different people can perceive the same visual elements in different manner. This makes it easier to apply this information in your work.

The next assignment we did included using these laws we had learnt to make some infographics and the uceed score card.

The exercises helped us understand how to group information together in terms of relevance and similarity. Then the hierarchy, which information needs to be highlighted, how the groups will be placed on the page to be coherent.

And after a point, this application is completely intuitive. Before I read up on this theory for this project, I would've been able to use these laws to make a poster but I would not be able to explain it to anyone. That is part of the point because we cannot spend time consciously working on these quite basic laws of perception.



Students need to internalise these principles and be able to use them instinctively in their work. I discussed this with Prof. Bokil, who confirmed that interactive exercises are crucial for effectively learning the principles of visual semiotics.

This was the major hurdle for me while creating this lecture. Conducting such interactive exercises and keeping the students engaged in an online environment is difficult. Students also tend to retain less information through theoretical lectures as compared to interactive exercise based lectures. So I found restructuring this course for a video format to be quite difficult.

- Semantics:

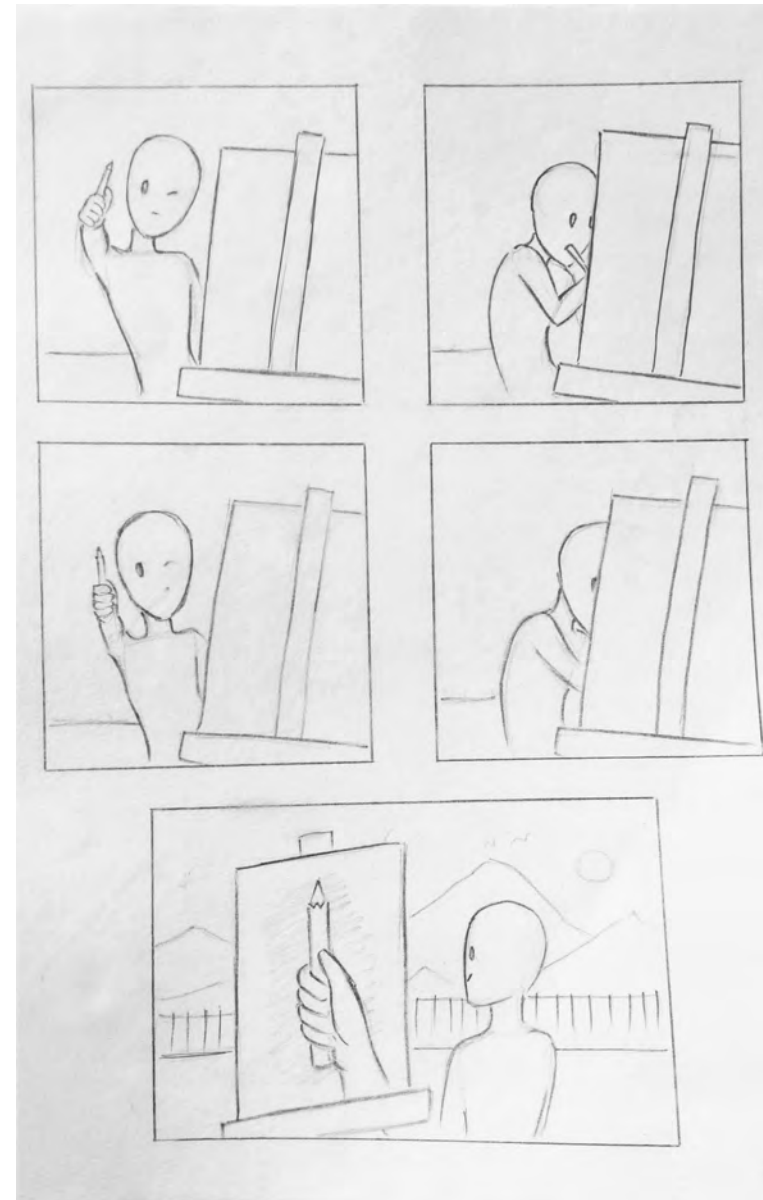
For learning semantics, we did a fun little exercise that was simple and effective.

We were asked to make a short, 5 panel story. The following image is the story that my 19yr old brain could manage at that time.

Then, we had to substitute the drawing in the panel with images that had

1. The same syntax, no need for any deep meaning
2. The same meaning, even if the visual structure changes

This exercise helped us understand the difference between the different areas of semiotics and their interrelation much more clearly.



Conversely, analysing what a certain infographic, product, website or even a film scene conveys through semiotic analysis can really help internalise these principles and apply them easily. A few youtube videos that I watched about this topic would often gave examples of a famous illustration or pick a scene from a film and dissect it to understand what meaning they convey. For example, in film, what the setting, every object on the set, the lighting, the audio is supposed to convey in itself, and then what it conveys as a whole. This could count as semantic and pragmatic analysis.

I considered including an assignment in the lecture to pick an illustration, scene or product the students like and analyse it. The task would be to recognise different elements, derive meaning and explain how the meaning is derived. This would be best evaluated in a peer group though. So evaluation is another hurdle with online lectures.

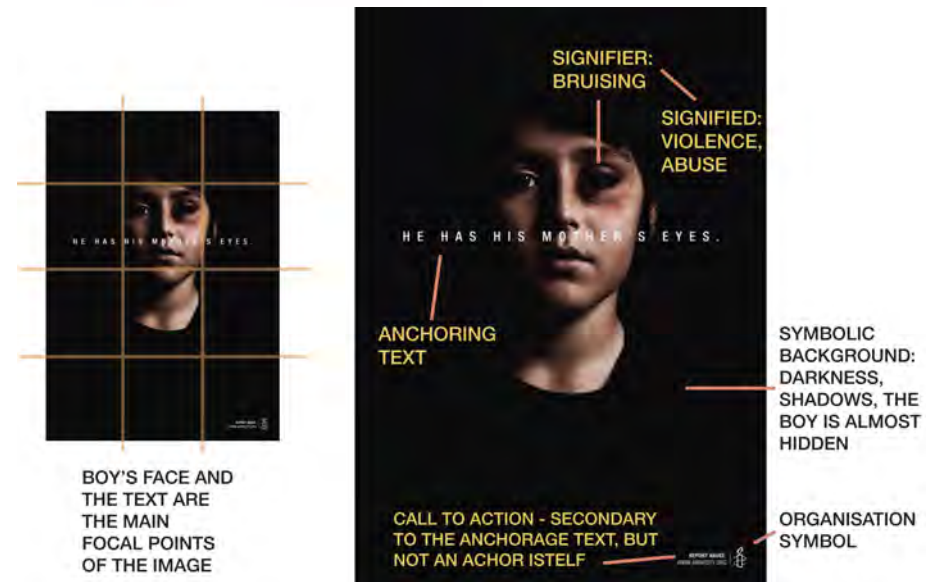
Analyse the magazine cover.

Semiotic Analysis



Design and layout	Typography
Rule of thirds Negative/positive space juxtaposition	Font style Size of text
Non-verbal codes	Verbal codes
Mis-en-scene Costume Images Body position (visual aspects of the image)	Titles Slogans Anchorage text Other words
Colour palette	Photographic codes
Use of colour Connotations associated with colour	Cropping Shot selection Angle of shot

<https://d1uvxqvmcz8f11.cloudfront.net/tes/resources/11899624/0f642b6c-90ce-4ed9-a265-3712af9d0157/image?width=500&height=500&version=1526230078913>



https://dxb402groupssjr.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/bruises_boy.png

Structuring the lecture

Any lecture about semiotics would need to include definitions of these basic terms at the very beginning. I listed what theory and definitions I must include in my lecture:

Semiotics or semiology: the study of signs and symbols, this applies to many things, primarily language, that's where the study started from and by extension, visual language and we can apply it almost all means of communication.

Then the three areas or parts of semiotics

Syntactics: that is the syntax or structure, visual grammar of an image or form of an object

Semantics: that is basically the compositional meaning that said image or form conveys in itself

Pragmatics: which is the context, or interactional meaning that the image or form conveys

Some general theory that's important to be included:

The **Saussure dyadic model** of the composition of a sign: the signifier and signified

Pierce's semiotic triad which includes the sign (representamen), object (semiotic object) and interpretant.

Theory of chunking

The types of signifiers

Iconic: which has physical resembles the signified

Indexical: that represents a part of the signified

Symbolic: that may not resemble it at all and mostly can be a learnt sign, that is, its learnt over time by reinforced visuals around us.

Gestalt laws:

Similarity

Proximity

Continuity

Closure

Figure and ground

After listing down the theory part of the lecture, I considered various ways to engage the viewer, including short quizzes, online polls, or simple assignments like watching a short film and conducting semiotic analysis.

I tried to structure the online lecture such that it does not get tedious by starting with basic definitions and theories with simple, quirky animations and many examples that the learner can relate to and see around them.

To increase engagement of the student with the subject, I considered using the assignments from my class. The process was planning like this:

Explain briefly and show examples of assignments

This exercise can be presented in two ways

1. A prerecorded discussion between a small group of people discussing which image best uses the specified gestalt law and why
2. Student is shown the assignments and given a question asking which image best uses the gestalt law and why. After the student clicks on their answer, a poll shows up representing in bar graphs how many people voted for each image and why.

The first option seemed interesting but I was concerned if it would not be engaging enough. The second option would need the interface where this lecture is uploaded to allow polls or quizzes in between lectures.

In the final lecture, I merged both these ideas. The exercises used in my final lecture are derived from the ones my class had done. I conducted these exercises with some students and recorded their discussions. The viewer is posed a question in the lecture and given time to think about their answer. Then, they can listen to these discussions and understand how different people answer the same question. Then these exercises and discussions are used to point out and explain the gestalt laws.

I also recorded a discussion conducting semantic analysis of some posters and advertisements. We discussed everything including colour theory, symbolism, cultural context and composition to try to derive meaning from the poster. However this discussion couldn't be included in the final video due to time constraints. In an online video lecture longer than 10-11mins, students tend to lose interest. So it was important to keep the lecture short and concise.

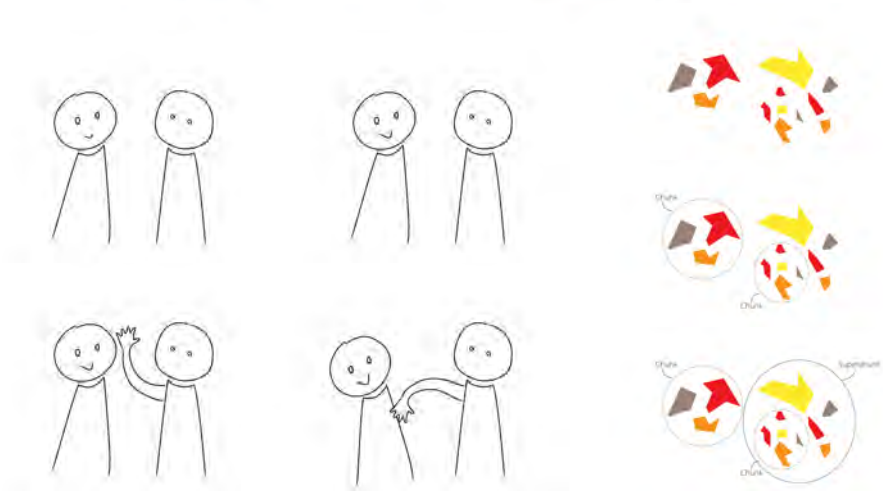
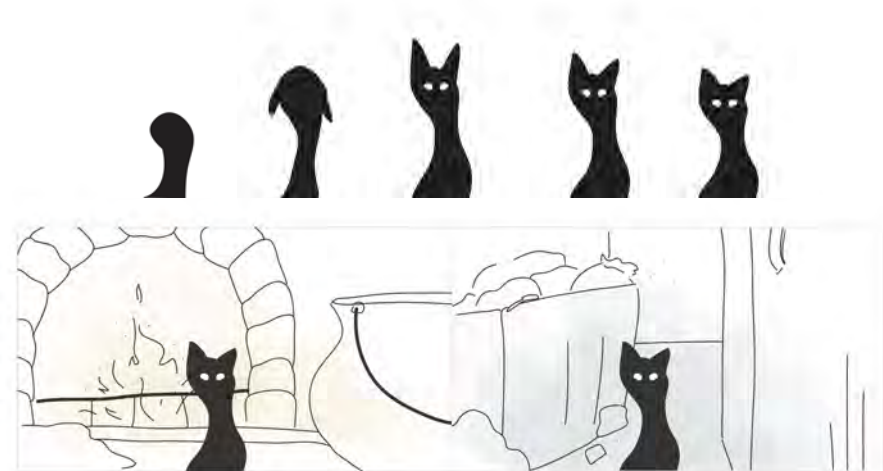
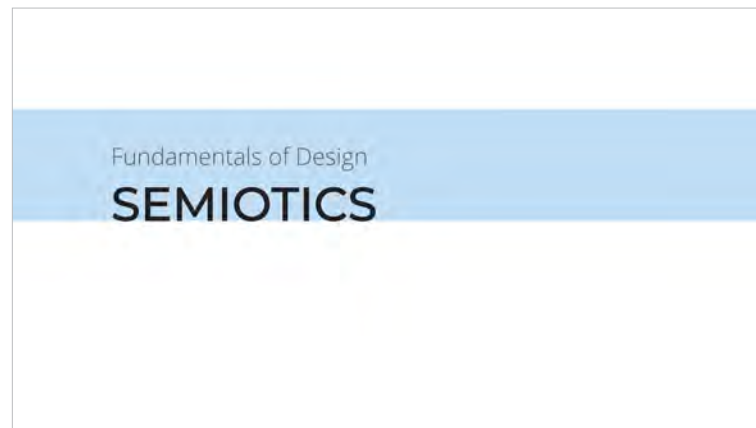
Final Outcome

The final outcome is a lecture with short animations and voiceover explaining the content. All examples used to explain points are animated to make it easier for the viewer to understand the content. This also helps to keep the viewer interested and focused.

I have included some stills from the final video in this report. The complete video can be viewed on the following two links:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/16CxCsil7IDapNNjVqbVPWC4qXpc8y6C3/view?usp=sharing>

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1477J7yAOTbFjPv0SCHG7M6Xt_LOmRaIn/view?usp=sharing



Bibliography

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlpOaY_HMk
Semiotics analysis for beginners! | How to read signs in film | Roland Barthes Media Theory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwhXg-Bbm5g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=escH8qNiFUU>
Semiotics 1 - Index, Icon, symbol, codes of visual representation (CH-05)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqhFztnwt4w>
Semiology and Popular Culture

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrm_Lokllcg
Semiotic Theory and Art History

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic_theory_of_Charles_Sanders_Peirce#:~:text=Peirce%20held%20that%20there%20are,as%20saying%20something%20about%20something.

<https://www.cs.princeton.edu/~chazelle/courses/BIB/semio2.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7VA95JdbMQ>
What is Semiotics?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l84UQqrOtMg>
Icon, Symbol, Index: C.S. Peirce's Three Signs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpdJgDf7V6E>
The grammar of visual design: Gestalt & Semiotics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JtJu9HdQVM>
Semiotics: WTF? Introduction to Saussure, the Signifier and Signified

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/>