

A Semiotic Analysis of Post-World War One Graphic Design:  
An Associational Study of Signs in the De Stijl

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The graphic design world experienced a revolution during the late nineteenth century, shaping and transforming the place of mass communication within the cultural consciousness and relationally to the traditional art movements from which it was birthed. As the graphic arts gained acceptance within the established printing community, defined signs and symbols were developed to more effectively communicate messages to a large and diverse audience. Some of these signs were derived from printing tradition spanning three centuries, but many signs and visual idioms were spawned from progressive art movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, partially responsible for the revolution in traditional art, and possibly the culture at large. Within the context of graphic design in the early twentieth century, traditional artistic symbology affected and allowed a transformation of sign meaning, important in the creation of a new standard of cultural semiotics, leading to the construction of a universal visual vocabulary for mass communication.

The foundation of proper semiosis begins with a basic understanding of terminology and structure within the sign functioning roles. Within the movements of graphic design in the early twentieth century, rooted in technological printing processes, standardized and creatively inspired through the chromolithographic posters of Toulouse-Lautrec and Mucha, and brought into the mainstream of mass communication through the parallel work of Constructivism and De Stijl, mass communication became increasingly standardized, and universal symbols and gestalts became common. The functioning of these basic gestalts, in both form and color, relationally, operate as the sign vehicle in the first phase of a semiosis.

The sign vehicle serves as a starting point in the semiosis, consisting of a sensory phenomenon that has the potential to serve as a sign or referent. The viewers or interpreters inevitably interpret the sensory phenomenon that they encounter, resulting in a signified construct. This construct is established through a correlation of a known and common interaction between the sign vehicle and signified, hereafter the *denotatum*, as well as the mental construct that informs and aids in the creation of a richer understanding of the connection of the sign vehicle to its signified target, hereafter the *designatum*.<sup>1</sup> Through these mental synapses of connection, an interpretation always results, whether it is expressed consciously or unconsciously.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation will then naturally merge into the mental construct, or *designatum*, that will shape future semiotic connections. Within this initial construct of semiosis, the art and design of the De Stijl movement of the early twentieth century exhibited unfamiliar signs and sign usage, affecting cultural and perceptual change by forcing viewers to alter or redefine their mental construct in the context of mass communication. Like many experimental movements of the modernist era, the De Stijl began as a

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<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Morris. *Signs, Language, and Behavior*. New York: George Braziller Inc., 1946. The definitions of Morris' basic semiosis components are paraphrased for situational clarity, and later applicational usage in forming conclusions regarding the confronting of design, whether intentional or not, in the sphere of mass communication. The *designatum* is shaped by an individual interpreter's life experience, personal feelings, cultural norms, habits, and intellectual knowledge; it is within this context of experience that the *denotatum*, a theoretically pure connection of sign to intended meaning, is given background and context (or personal meaning) through the knowledge contained in the mental construct. This semantic relationship cannot be completely duplicated, since the *designata* cannot be completely shared by any two individuals; depending on the universality of the sign, the *denotatum* may not even be shared on a *pure sign* level.

<sup>2</sup> Lecan noted that no empty signifier was possible, since the mental construct was always triggered in the act of interpretation. In this way, even though a seeing but lack of interpretation (or reading) is theoretically possible, pragmatically, it becomes a near impossibility.

conglomerate or community with largely artistic intentions, enunciated through traditional art and architecture, with a minor role in the field of graphic design.<sup>3</sup> As the leader of the movement, Theo van Doesburg, continued to philosophically organize and develop the movement, designed iterations developed, beginning with graphic logo treatments by Vilmos Huszár in 1917, and leading to clearer design efforts in the redesign of *De Stijl*, the serial publication, in 1921 by Van Doesburg.<sup>4</sup> Although immediate efforts of the disjointed movement were based in traditional fine art application and architecture, furthered in theoretical essays in *De Stijl*, aspects of graphic design continued to grow within the movement, including the increasing popularity of expressive typography, often intersecting with the foundational Dada movement.<sup>5</sup> The De Stijl contributed to the evolution of type, as well as general composition forms in the production of *Neue Gestaltung in der Typographie* (The New Form in Typography) in 1925, fueling a new wave of anti-naturalist fine art including diagonal stress and compositional form.<sup>6</sup>

Through the interaction of design elements within the interdisciplinary movement of the De Stijl, it is clear that the development of unique visual

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<sup>3</sup> Michael White. *De Stijl in Dutch Modernism*. (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 3; Paul Overy. *De Stijl*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 12. The De Stijl movement was originally founded with an emphasis on *gemeenschap* (community), communicated through:“  
1. An insistence on the social role of art, design, and architecture  
2. A belief in a balance between the universal and collective and the specific and the individual  
3. A utopian faith in the transforming qualities of mechanization and new technology  
4. A conviction that art and design have the power to change the future (and also the lives and lifestyles of individuals.”

<sup>4</sup> White, 38, 89.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-91; Jane Beckett. “Discoursing on Dutch Modernism.” (*Oxford Art Journal* 6, no. 2, 1983) 74-76.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

metaphors, or signs, in the realms of color palette and gestalts, stimulated the growth of the conscious graphic design craft that outlived the production of the De Stijl movement. A further exploration of these signs is necessary, in order to evaluate their specific sign functioning, and the tangential applications to the understanding of gestalts, and their aesthetic role within the field of visual communication. The production of graphic design collateral during the De Stijl movement revolved around the rejection of naturalist obligation or portrayal, avoiding natural forms or compositional patterns in a comprehensively ordered structure. The early work of the De Stijl, demonstrated in initial issues of *De Stijl*, strongly mirrored the paintings of Van Doesburg, Mondrian, Van der Leek, and Huszár.<sup>7</sup> The geometrical constraints, primary colors, and stiff compositional form found direct formal equivalence in the early De Stijl paintings. Because of the intentional anti-naturalism of the paintings, the resulting graphic design derivatives communicated a similar anti-naturalist message, inherently structural, but cold and distant from the naturalist perspective.

The work of the De Stijl centered on a vital set of anti-naturalist gestalts that fueled the fine art, and thus the graphic design by which the movement was characterized. The combinations of type and basic gestalt shapes created a perceptual complex gestalt that was foreign to the uninitiated, further distancing the average viewer through extensive use of sans-serif typography and unfamiliar graphic symbols. The entire vocabulary of the De Stijl, characterized as a new set of gestalts, defines the syntax of the semiosis, helpful in constructing

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<sup>7</sup> Overy, 55.

interpretational flaws in the mass communication of the ideals of De Stijl. The correct apprehension of the syntax of the De Stijl took place through repetition and association, bringing the abstract signs into the realm of familiarity and recognition, allowing them to be understood as natural gestalts. After the anti-naturalist combinations of geometric forms and colors became understood as symbols, the symbols, or gestalts, took on communicative ability as universal signs within that interpreter's mental construct and *denotatum*, connecting the sign perceptually and apprehensively. At the core of the De Stijl system of communication was the dualist concept of *elementarisation* and *integration*, describing the desire to "effect the reduction of practice to its irreducible core...[creating] distinct fields...united into 'a syntactically indivisible, nonhierarchical whole'."<sup>8</sup> This *elementarisation* created a unique end-product in the field of graphic design, in the case of *The Scarecrow Fairytale*, resulting in an explicit reduction of familiar forms, yet the creativity to reuse typical forms in an innovative and avant-garde way, creating a unique *integration* of forms in a new complex gestalt.<sup>9</sup>

A further evaluation of the De Stijl design lexicon reveals the extent to which *elementarisation* guided the process of color selection, sign-creating (or symbol-creating), and the integration of these elements into a recognizable and

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<sup>8</sup> White, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Atzmon. "The Scarecrow Fairytale: A Collaboration of Theo Van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters." *Design Issues* 12, no. 3 (1996), 17,26. This integration of reduced letterforms to replace the typical pictures in a picture book represent the innovation in presentation, while using well-defined gestalt symbols (letterforms) in a symbolic sense, separate from their normal sign association. Doesburg and Schwitters belied their Dada sensibilities fused with their De Stijl reductionistic, or *elementarisation* tendencies in their hierarchy of information contained within a general disorder.

communicating whole. The De Stijl reduced the basic color palette traditionally used in fine art, characterized by naturalism, to a foundation of the three primary colors, and three non-colors, gray, white, and black.<sup>10</sup> The symbols were also ideally irreducibly succinct: because of the generic anti-naturalism of the De Stijl as a movement, a shift away from the classic indexical sign was desirable, since the resulting symbolic sign (or symbol) became more abstract, and theoretically closer to the preferred *elementarisation* of the sign.

The De Stijl established their systematized vision of visual communication through an array of pragmatics, including collectively published writings through *De Stijl* and increasingly effective advertisements and commercial ventures. The serial publication *De Stijl* communicated the ideals of the loosely organized movement, promoting specific writings by Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Huszár, and the Dada poetry and expressive typography of El Lissitzky. The publication also included ideas and articles from competing movements, including Dadaism, Russian Constructivism, and Berlin abstraction.<sup>11</sup> Members of the De Stijl, including Huszár, Van Doesburg, and Piet Zwart, also furthered the movement through commercial ventures.<sup>12</sup> These designers produced work for a variety of clients within the Dutch sphere, communicating their subject with precise, clean style that defined all other iterations of the De Stijl style.

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<sup>10</sup> Overy, 55, 67-68. This color palette evolved and changed as the movement progressed, with Mondrian sometimes mixing his “pure” primary colors with gray, even as Van Doesburg noted that this mixing of gray “muddied” the resulting colors.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 86-87. Van Doesburg’s reconciliation of the competing movements of “geometric abstraction and Dadaism was one of the formative achievements of the twenties.”

<sup>12</sup> White, 90-99.

The De Stijl movement becomes difficult to quantify or objectively evaluate in the realm of aesthetics and value. From a singular perspective of *truth*, or the value that may be assigned to a sensory object, explored in visual constructs and natural phenomena, found to be true or false, two diversions may be discussed. First, the De Stijl clearly believed in the communication of some truth about the object or message to be portrayed. In their *Scarecrow Fairytale*, Doesburg and Schwitters communicated a story through distorted letterforms; although their typographic constructions may have been revolutionary, their avant-garde presentation still communicated some sense of objective truth.<sup>13</sup> Second, the very nature of De Stijl philosophy, and its emphasis on balance between the collective and individual, and more substantially, the desire to break every visual element into the *elementarisation* of itself, potentially leads the final visual communication with a stronger subjective emphasis. Although visual communication cannot establish absolute truth, it may establish truth upon a continuum, *approaching* the attribute of truthfulness. The De Stijl methodology of reduction and integration has the potential to deceive or mislead the interpreter, allowing a faulty sign or symbol to lead to an incorrect *designatum* and *denotatum*. The *Scarecrow Fairytale* illustrates the potential of such collusion: the scarecrow figure is imbued with meaning beyond what is indicated in the text or visual elements alone, allowing a simple picture book to become a sinister allegory decrying natural society.<sup>14</sup> Although this example illustrates the potential

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<sup>13</sup> Atzmon, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

danger of misinterpretation, even when intended by the author, the creator and practitioner of symbols can only limit the misinterpretation of truth, not eliminate it completely.

The evaluation of beauty in the De Stijl presents similar problems to the former scenario, resolved somewhat if the concepts of beauty and truth are considered to describe, or denote the same ultimate characteristic of value.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, a standard to judge the efficacy of the truth presented is required, and interpreters pragmatically, instinctively, or religiously choose their praxis of truth in evaluating any given content. From a purely ethical basis, the De Stijl generally chose a utilitarian approach, willing to accept deviation in interpretation in favor of artistic expression and practice of avant-garde design.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, this focus on artistic license is irreconcilable with the theoretical premise of the De Stijl, the irreducibility of the final form; if artistic expression can be interpretatively divorced from the content, either in the process of creation, or in the evaluation of the final form, the visual communication ceases to be truly *elementarisation*.

The intrinsic openness and breadth of acceptability allowed the De Stijl movement to flourish in ideological form far beyond its specified historical lifetime. The unlikely intellectual acceptance of the rigid *elementarisation* and *integration* of the De Stijl, and the openness and relative chaos of the Dada allowed the writings and production of the movement to gain relevance in modern and post-modern contexts. In a design context, the maxim of irreducibility created

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<sup>15</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz. *A History of Six Ideas: an Essay in Aesthetics*. (The Hague: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980), 199, 215-219

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-260; Claire Colbrook. *Gilles Deleuze*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25-27.

the framework for modern abstract universal symbols, now often used interchangeably with gestalts in the field of mass communication. The ideological roots of the De Stijl clearly found refuge, at least in part, in the overlapping movements of Constructivism and Bauhaus, eventually being absorbed into the International Typographic Style.<sup>17</sup>

Within the context of twentieth century graphic design, the De Stijl movement secured the future of universal signs and symbols in visual communication through the liaison of traditional art and graphic design movements, creating effective visual symbols that have defined the contemporary field of mass communication. The De Stijl movement enjoyed a rich heritage of innovation and multidisciplinary study, resulting in increased openness in every segment of the graphic arts and fine arts, leading to the openness of subject matter enjoyed by the abstract expressionists, the universal symbols and gestalts necessary for the corporate identity boom of the 1950s, and the canonization of typographic style, both hierarchical and expressionist, employed in modern graphic design.

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<sup>17</sup> Philip B. Meggs. *A History of Graphic Design*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 320-21.

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