Do Graphic Designers Ever Construct an Argument?

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When the ten classes of signs postulated by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, are applied to the world of visual communication, a question arises about the class he labels "Argument". Can a graphic designer construct, in the arrangement of his visual materials, a complete argument? This is the question pursued in this paper. After translating Peirce's classes into language familiar to the design industry, and looking at the requirements of Argument as a discrete class of signs, I suggest that designers always produce assertions, but rarely, perhaps never, do they construct a complete argument.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Graphic designers practice a discipline that is inherently infused with making decisions about signs, referents, and interpretations. Designers are charged with planning the visual appearance of everything that communicates through the sense of sight. Books, magazines, web sites, advertising, government information, exhibitions, logos, packaging, newspapers, typefaces – the list could continue – are all planned by designers. As such, graphic design is a kind of laboratory for testing ideas of a general semiotic character, while at the same time semiotic concepts inform design practice, which provides the best chance for developing a theory to undergird the discipline of graphic design.

One area where this reciprocal interaction is felt is at the fundamental taxonomic and theoretical level of identifying particular kinds, or classes, of signs. The most influential of these systems of classes was proposed by the American Pragmatist, Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's system makes for a difficult study for several reasons, among which is the fact that he continued to develop it over a span of five decades, never summarizing it in a final state. This has hindered its widespread acceptance. However, by the early 1900's he postulated ten major classes, or general species, of sign relations and these provide a potentially valuable resource for design theory. I will briefly lay out the ten classes below, first in the language Peirce offers, followed by a second listing of them, this time as I have proposed in the language more familiar to visual artists and designers.[1]

II. PEIRCE'S TAXONOMY:

I. Qualisign
II. Rhematic Iconic Sinsign

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[1] For a full accounting of the Peircean classes the reader is referred to the Collected Papers, where citations are based upon Volume and paragraph number, in this case: 2.254-263.

III. Rhematic Indexical Sinsign
IV. Dicent Indexical Sinsign
V.   Rhematic Iconic Legisign
VI. Rhematic Indexical Legisign
VII. Dicent Indexical Legisign
VIII.Rhematic Symbolic Legisign
IX. Dicent Symbolic Legisign
X.   Argument

III. <u>THE VISUAL DESIGN TAXONOMY</u>:

Now, these classes can be translated into the language of visual communication design:

I.   Feature
II.   Depiction
III. Mark
IV.   Evidence
V.   Diagram
VI.   Format
VII. Demonstration
VIII.Symbol
IX.   Appeal
X.   Argument

IV. <u>DERIVATION OF THE TAXONOMIES</u>:

In order to explain these classes as they are conceived in Peirce and translated into visual communication, it is necessary to begin by explaining that they derive logically from Peirce's foundational notion of categories of Being. According to Peirce, there are three varieties, or modes, of relatedness: the mode he calls "First" is something not in relation to any other but simply existing in itself; the mode he calls "Second" is something existing against a background, or otherwise in relation to some other; the mode he names "Third" involves something in relation to some other through the mediation of a third. As Figure 1 shows, each of the successively higher modes inclusively envelope the more limited ones, so that Thirdness includes both Secondness and Firstness, and Secondness includes Firstness[2].

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[2] Where a term is being used strictly as a name for a Peircean class of sign, I will use a capital letter. Where that term is used as a modifier of other terms throughout the text, I will use lower case.

Figure 1. Peirce's Three Modes of Being
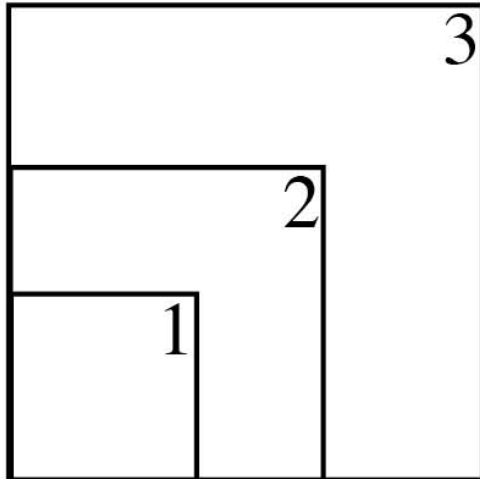
[Figure 1]

The three-part relation involves a referent, the sign that represents it, and an interpretant. The classes are derived when one takes these three modes of being and looks at what they imply in terms of the possible connections between signs, their referents, and their interpretations. Figure 2 shows the matrix that follows. The result is what Peirce called the three trichotomies. The first trichotomy is the result of asking "What kinds of things are fit to function as signs?". In the First Mode slot one finds qualities; in the Second Mode, actual things and events (Peirce calls these "Sinsigns"); and in the Third Mode are habits or systematic regularities (which Peirce calls "Legisigns"). When one asks "What kinds of relations might exist between a sign and the referent it stands for?", the result is found in the middle row: in First Mode, iconic relation; in Second Mode, indexical relation; in Third Mode, symbolic relation. When one asks by what force or authority toward action the sign/referent are presented to interpretation, one finds in First Mode, general terms (Peirce calls these "Rhemes"); in Second Mode, assertions or propositions (Peirce calls these "Dicisigns"); and in the Third Mode, "argument".

	First Mode	Second Mode	Third Mode
Fit to be Signs	Qualities	Actual Thing or Event	Regularity or Habit
Relation of Sign to Referent	Iconic	Indexic	Symbolic
Authority of Sign/Referent to Interpretant	Image	Assertion	Argument

[Figure 2]

Now as we bring this matrix into use with the sign classes of graphic design, I find it helpful to dispense with Peirce's numbers for the classes and instead use small diagram mnemonics to remind one of the cells in the matrix that are activated by each sign class (Figure 3). In using these diagrams, it is important to remember that each class will have its most salient cells fully activated (shown as black) but that in each of these classes certain other cells are included (recall that Firstness is enveloped within Secondness and Secondness within Thirdness) and these subtle, less salient cells are shown here in gray. Cells that are left "empty" (outlined but not colored in) are not functional for that particular class.
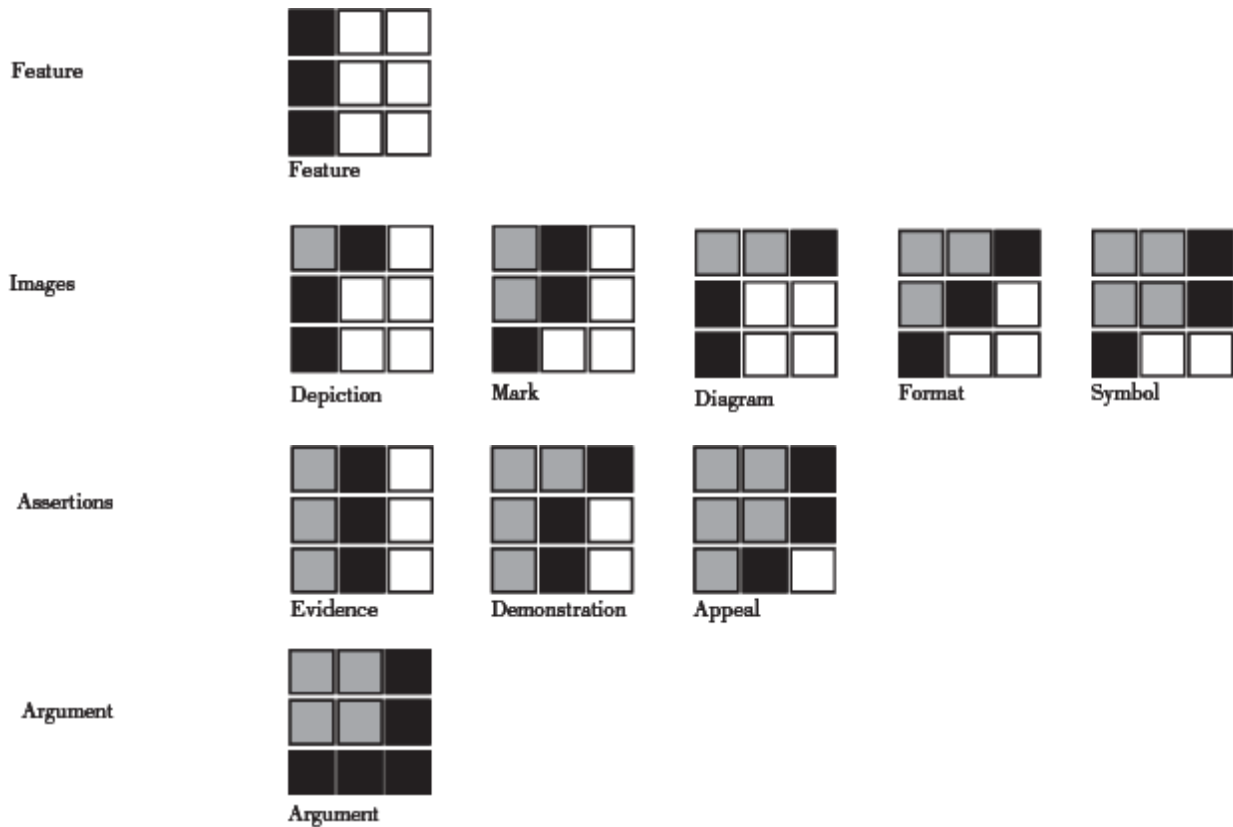
[Figure 3]

V. THE RESULTING TRICHOTOMIES:

Feature:[3] A trait or quality acting as a sign.

The Five Image Classes: The Images share the fact that as images they are actual visual things being considered only in their being, not as what they might assert about the world. As a result, again solely in their role as image, they may be described but they are not to be found "true" or "false" as they make no proposition.

Depiction: A depiction is a visual sign that relates to its referent through resemblance or some kind of likeness.

Mark: A mark is an image that relates to its referent by being actually influenced environmentally by it. So for example, a calligraphic stroke refers to a movement that was made because that movement actually made the sign on the paper.

Diagram: A diagram is an image that relates to its referent due to the way it resembles a process, regularity, or habit. A diagram makes use of consensually agreed upon system to communicate.

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[3] See Peirce CP 2.243 – 2.264 for a concise account of all these trichotomies.

Format: A format is an image that is able to refer to its referent due to the arrangement of its parts so that the arrangement conforms to some regular system or habitual practice.

Symbol: A symbol is an image that refers to its referent via consensually agreed upon standards. In other words there is no "motivated" or necessary connection between the image and the thing it refers to except that it is commonly or habitually taken to refer to it.

The Three Classes of Assertions: The Assertions are distinguished from Images by the fact that they are making a claim about the world. The claim they make suggests that it could be validated, tested for truthfulness, even if this is never ascertained. These are not exclusive categories: it is important to keep in mind that any given visual display can be analyzed in its role as image or in its role as assertion.

Evidence: Evidence asserts by being involved with environmental contact or proximity. Smoke is evidence of fire, a flag's unfurling in the wind is evidence of a blustery day.

Demonstration: A demonstration is an assertion that exemplifies a process or regularity by its very being or its doing in the immediate environment. As such it has a large indexical component and if it were moved from a location or environmental situation it would not be successful. For example an identification placard saying "Restroom" must be placed on or near the door of the restroom to which it refers. Placing it on another door would lead to mistakes. The placement (not the placard alone) is a demonstration.

Appeal: An appeal is an assertion that is made by use of symbols, including numbers and words.

The Class of Argument: An argument is a syllogism in which at least two propositions are accepted as given, whereby a case is presented in which if it is found to be inclusive of the propositions, it is found to be valid. An argument obliges the recipient to act in accordance with the truthfulness of it. Unlike features, images and assertions, arguments involve drawing conclusions.

VI. GRAPHIC IMAGES AND ASSERTIONS:

Now, there can be no question that graphic communication makes assertions of various kinds. A graphic figure 5, when placed at the corner of a page in a book, asserts that that particular page is the fifth in a sequence. It will be beneficial, by using the matrix, to see how fully the sign renders this assertion. First of all, the number five, considered as a general concept, is a member of the regular, systematized concept of natural numbers. As such it is prepared to act symbolically. How it does this is by taking on a particular recognizable graphic form, "5", which is legible due to its adherence to habitual practices for representing the number five (Skaggs, 2006). This glyph or graphic form – 5 – when actualized by being imprinted on the page, is an image, a visual sign. As an imprinted thing it is a mark, an image that is able to refer to the action of its own coming-into-being through indexing the printing process. The 5 is also a symbol in that it stands for the number five through consensual agreement (e.g., nothing in the shape of the figure has the quality of fiveness, it is strictly arbitrary).

Most germanely, it also stands for the fifth page and as such it indexes the particular surface it is on. But how does it do this? The 5 does not include within it a sentence saying "This is page number

five in an ordered sequence of pages.". Or, rather, in a manner of speaking, it *does* say as much since it conveys essentially that very statement as interpretant. It manages to do so simply by virtue of the fact that it is placed in a certain location on the page. This location is part of a format, a plan of the book that reserves particular locations for specific kinds of information. There is a "local" format that is specific to the particular book design, and there is the general larger category, or meta-format, that is the habitual practice, or tendency, in the culture of placing page numbers near corners. In these ways, the 5 is a sign asserting several things: it is *evidence* of having been through a printing process; that this is, *demonstrably*, a page in a particular sequence; and through the simple *appeal* of its recogniz-able (symbolic) form as a five, it claims to be the page after the fourth page and the predecessor of page six.

VII. <u>THE ARGUMENT AGAINST ARGUMENTS</u>:

But can we say that the 5 makes an argument? Or that any graphic sign or display makes a com-plete argument? Here we can turn to Peirce, the logician, for insight:

> Every inference involves the judgment that, if such propositions as the premises are are true, then a proposition related to them, as the conclusion is, must be, or is likely to be, true. The principle implied in this judgment, respecting a genus of argument, is termed the leading principle of the argument (CP 2.462). … There is no argument without prem-ises, nor is there any without a leading principle (CP 2.465).

A proper argument requires a judgment, a comparative "sizing up" of premises, as put forward through assertion, and a subsequent proposition that is considered in light of them. This is a compara-tive judgment. How can the graphic display, even if it includes the premises, perform the action of the comparison, or the *judgment* of validity? It is not the graphic display that is drawing a conclusion. It would seem that the argument is something that is presaged by the graphic display, in the manner of establishing the premises or the assertion, but that the receiver of the message must be the one to com-pare the syllogism's components and draw the conclusion. A graphic display can establish the back-ground or context for part of the argument, but it must be the receiver's background and context, repre-sented by the information he brings to the display, that plays the key role in drawing a conclusion.

In the famous example of the analysis of the food product advertisement conducted by Roland Barthes[4] (Barthes, 1977), the advertisement makes assertions. The connections the viewer makes are never the explicit ones of syllogism. Barthes shows us an advertisement containing a prominent pho-tograph of a mesh grocery bag full of Italian pasta products. Barthes points out that the image makes subtle connotative references to Italianicity, to freshness, as well as direct verbal assertions through the typography. In his discussion, it is clear the image works through a manipulation of expectations based on already held preconceived notions that the viewer has. I would argue it is these preconceived ideas of the viewer that graphic design plays upon in every instance. These preconceptions become the sec-ondary premise in the argument, which, when combined with the assertion made by the graphic dis-play, result in the viewer reaching a concluding judgment. The designer leads the viewer to a conclu-sion, but it is for the viewer to close the argument.

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[4] *Image, Music, Text*, p32-51.

VIII. <u>CONCLUSIONS</u>:

In this circumstance, the argument lies outside the limited realm of the graphic display in the same way (or converse way perhaps) that Feature is contained within. The graphic display has features, but although features signify, they are not separable from the images in which they inhere. In the case of Argument, the judgment is made on the part of the viewer as an interpretant that is consequent to, but not a part of, the graphic sign.

The possible exception I can think of is taking something like a book, or taking something like the syllogism as a printed thing on the page. It is clearly a graphic form, and it is a statement of an entire argument with premises and conclusion spelled out, linguistically rendered. But even here, the printing of it on the page is a mere assertion that the argument is valid, even then leaving it for the reader to concur. In its graphicness, it asserts. In its verbalness, perhaps, it argues.

I thus conclude that designers always produce assertions, but rarely, perhaps never, do they construct a complete argument.

IX. <u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>:

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