Visual Identity: Systems and Semiotics

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Abstract: This essay seeks to sketch the fundamental interactive forces at play in a brand in the formation of an identity system that signifies a particular hosting entity. Two kinds of iconicity are at play in the initial informed exposure to a visual identity system: metaphorical iconicity employs an analogous symbol as substitute for the host's identification, while systemic iconicity builds the habituated exposure of the elements of the identity system. This article focuses on the dynamics in play in building systemic iconicity. Systemic iconicity can be analyzed using system and set theory by considering the system as a fuzzy set in which each of the graphic elements (logo, typography and so on) are treated as members. I postulate nine interdependent interactions that occur in systemic iconicity and provide shorthand formulae for describing them. These nine postulates indicate that visual identity systems must continually negotiate two opposing forces: pressures that pull them to converge toward a single, simple, unchanging visual element; or pressures that push them to diverge toward multiple changing visual elements. The article concludes by raising three issues which have the potential to expand the development of a neo-Peircean semiotics.

Keywords: Visual identity, branding, logo, trademarks, systems theory, set theory, fuzzy set, iconicity, metaphorical iconicity, systemic iconicity, Charles Sanders Peirce, relativity of Peircean classes of signs.

Introduction

In the lexicon of marketing, "branding" refers to the concerted effort to implant a favorable sense of a company in the public's mind. While historically brands were heated irons used to physically scar livestock, thereby marking them with the brand's device or logo so that ownership could be clearly verified, today's visual branding programs are made more complex by the intensely mediated contemporary environment. The need for visual identification of a variety of products and services means a good or service must coexist not simply alongside others in a single herd of cattle upon the vast open plains, but must be distinguished

amidst an interlaced variety of channels; and they must be distributed in a coordinated way across many digital and analog platforms.

Given the complex and often chaotic contemporary media environment, it is not surprising that branding has become an important sub-specialization in graphic design as well as marketing. What is surprising, is that just as custom dictated the use of the cattleman's firebrand in the 1870s, branding today continues to operate largely as a matter of custom. "How to" practice branding is well documented through exemplars and case studies, but relatively little has been written addressing the "why to"—the fundamental semiotic dynamics at play in establishing a sense of identity. To illustrate this point, in a current list of the fifteen most influential books
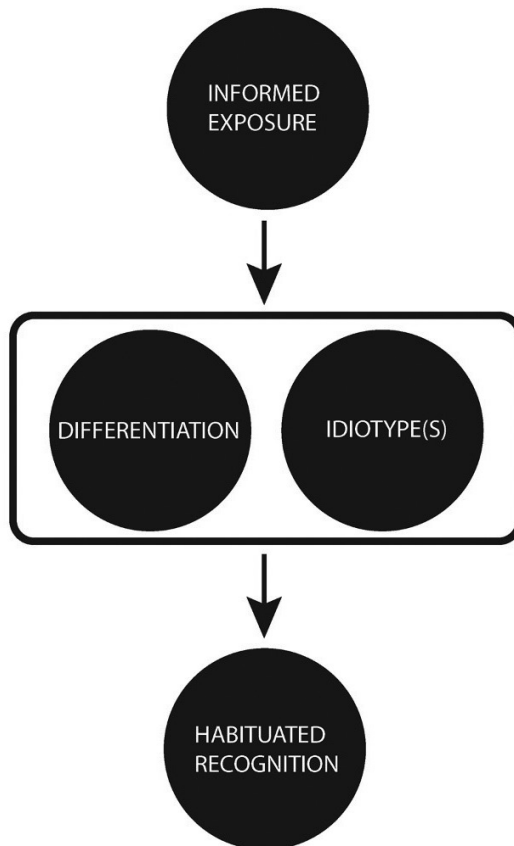
Figure 1. The process of visual identification begins with an initial informed exposure which leads to two related effects: differentiation and idiotypes. In time, repeated use of the identity systems leads to habituated recognition and builds the equity of the brand.

on visual branding,[1] only one, Douglas B. Holt's *How Brands Become Icons*, goes beyond a mere description and profile of successful identity systems. Holt embeds his work in cultural studies, arguing that brands are more successful and deeply recognized when they embody a narrative, or "myth", that goes beyond a logo (Holt 2004: 156–188).

Establishing a brand requires establishing a familiar, trusted pattern of interaction between a host institution and a public.[2] Successful visual identification requires a two-step process. In the first place, there must be a kind of "informed exposure". An audience is not only exposed to a visual cue but must be aware that the visual entity that they see is representing a particular—though entirely absent—host.

Only then can an engagement with the second step occur, a process whereby the informed exposure is followed up by repeated and habituated recognition over a period of months and years. Habituated recognition is accompanied with contextual richness and controlled messages, which serve to strengthen the brand—not only increasing the memorability of the symbol but also enriching the essential characteristics, personality, and activity of the host.

This article will look at the semiotics that are at play in the initial exposure, which serve to unambiguously link an identifying system of visual entities with the host they stand for.

Exposure, Informing, Signification, and Differentiation

In the establishment of the brand it is essential that a public understand that certain visual devices—logos, trademarks, and ancillary elements—represent a host. Even in the case of a word-mark logo, where the logo is the name of a company spelled out, careful initial exposure is critical. A semiotic space must be cleared out so that the particular visual qualities of the logo and other graphic elements that comprise the branding system are clearly denotative of the host. As in a personal introduction, initial exposure to a brand often has little business to conduct other than fostering that clear, informed identification. It is only later, with familiarity, with habitual recognition, that the host develops an institutional image (Boulding 1956), a reputation, the full connotative significance that invests the logo with "equity" (see Figure 1).

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[1] According to a recent compilation by the authors of the website *Designers & Books*, entitled "15 Books on Branding and Brand Design" (19 May 2015, http://www.designersandbooks.com/blog/10-books-branding-and-brand-design).

[2] Although most visual identification systems are intended to be communicated to large numbers of people—i.e., a "general public"—the word "public" here refers to the audience, the receiver, or any intended recognizer, regardless of size.

Given the importance of initial exposure to a new brand, a good deal of effort is devoted to ensuring that the visual components of the brand are carefully planned. In a well-designed visual identification system, not only does the logo identify, but the entire system of typography and graphic features—from stationery to vehicle markings—functions as a symbolic whole, with the principles set forward in the "brand standards manual" performing the semiotic role of formator (Morris 1946)[3] in which a compositional routine signifies in its own right. A brand standards manual acts as a rule book explicitly laying out the situations, arrangements, and employment of all the components of the graphic system. Through reference to the standards manual, art directors anywhere in the world, tasked with acting in service of the brand, are able to adhere to the same visual style (see Figure 2). A selected combination of graphic elements, colors, textures, and so on, can be rolled out to the public in a coordinated way, through any of the many media. In this way, initial exposure leads to habituation: consistent repetition that ensures the visual experience of the brand becomes a familiar one.

But even in the initial exposure of even the simplest brand, it is important to differentiate between two sorts of semiotic operations. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the need to create significant *idiotypes*: specific private and trademark-able words, symbols, or pictorial elements that are adopted as the host's unique identifying devices. Audi uses four interlocking rings, representing the four original auto manufacturers that combined to form Audi; the Shell Oil logo is a pictograph of a scallop shell; the Disney company uses a stylized version of founder Walt Disney's signature; Starbuck's mermaid is a reference to Seattle's seafaring past (as well as the founder's abiding appreciation of Melville's *Moby Dick*). In most cases there is some back story, heritage, or other connection between the adopted devices and the host. These idiotypes become the signifying content of the logos of the identifying system.

But the second semiotic operation, one that must undergird every decision when planning the former—and therefore what makes it more fundamental than even an idiotype's unique relation to the host—is the plain necessity for graphic *differentiation*. Whatever logo and other visual devices are created for the brand, they must stand in clear contradistinction to those devices that are *not of* the brand.[4] For even if the brand adopts

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[3] The word is from Morris; in Peirce's terms, a format is an "indexical legisign" (see e.g., Peirce c.1903: CP 2.254–2.265).

[4] The exception to this is when one brand wishes to "piggy-back" on the equity of another by aping the look of the first. This practice usually leads to a quick lawsuit.

The logo
The logo box: Proportion and logo positioning

Specific proportions have been defined for the Allianz logo boxes. There are four fixed size versions available. The most common is 8 x 3 units for the Allianz logo, the Allianz logo with descriptor and short double-branding logos. The version with 6 x 3 units is used for short Allianz company logos, e.g. AGF. Logo boxes with proportions of 10 x 3 units or 12 x 3 units respectively are used for long Allianz double-branding logos.
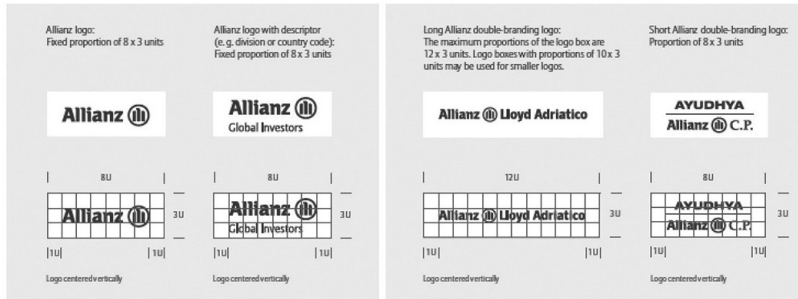

Figure 2. A page from the Allianz Brand Standards Manual. Standards manuals carefully prescribe the format for the displays of all elements of visual identity system

a perfectly apt idiotype to act as a metaphorical symbol, if its form comes too close to others it will always result in hesitancy in terms of recognition. To adequately function as an idiotype the visual element(s) must be unambiguously different. What follows will be a closer look at what is involved in the semiotics of visual identity taken in that latter, primal sense, as a unique sign, discriminable from all others; to understand identity we must look at the semiotics of differentiation.

Semiotics of Differentiation

How shall we pick up this thread? Despite etymological kinship, we we will steer clear of Derrida's (1963) notion of *différance*, as it carries too many connotative overtures toward linguistic practice (although there is certainly "play" and a degree of "erasure" in the discussion to follow). Other Saussurean or structuralist semiotics introduce the same problem of linguistic focus, although structuralism surely foregrounds the distinctions of signifiers within the codes of one language system and another. But I think a more fruitful approach to discussing visual distinctions, especially in a visual field where entire complexes of visual glyphs act as signs, is to be found in combining Peircean semiotics within the context of systems theory.

A System Is a Special Kind of Set

Brands are archetypically systemic. The founder of general systems theory, Ludwig Von Batalanffy, preferred not to offer a succinct definition of a system, averring, "What is to be defined and described as a system is not a question with an obvious or trivial answer" (Bertalanffy 1972: 407–426). Merriam-Webster (2018) gives the definition of a system as "a group of devices or artificial objects or an organization forming a network especially for distributing something or serving a common purpose." T. A. Ryan, who applied systems theory to business management in the mid-twentieth century, defined a system as "a set of objects or elements in interaction to achieve a specific goal" (Ryan 1970). The brevity is laudable and I will adapt it here in an even more concise form: *a system is bounded elements interacting for a purpose.*

The definition highlights four concepts: elements, interaction, boundary, and purpose. Two of these terms—elements and boundaries—are also properties of sets. Sets have members, or elements, that are included in the set by virtue of some stipulated property, or condition, and these stipulating conditions determine the set's boundaries. So for example, if I have a set that is /the collection of blue objects in my office/, then being blue and being in my office constitute the boundary conditions of membership in the set.

A system, then, is a kind of set, but a set that includes the two further conditions of interaction and purpose (sometimes referred to as the system's "teleology"). The stipulation that the elements of a system must interact distinguishes a system from non-systemic sets. The blue objects in my office do constitute a set, but because they don't interact with each other and their presence in my office lacks a teleology, they fall short of constituting a system.

The boundary of a system can be thought of in two ways: the boundary can be considered actively/prescriptively as the rules that determine what is in or out, or the boundary can be thought of passively/observationally as happens, for instance, when observing the population differential of insects as mapped in my garage. In the latter case, there is not only a boundary created by something being a non-insect (in which case it is not counted), but there may be boundaries created by the presence of insects in one location (lots of spiders in one particular corner) and lack of insects in another location in the garage (none of them seem to go for my golf shoe rack). By introducing the idea of non-included material, or empty material, we implicitly add to the notion of a system a contrastive

environmental context in which the system resides. In set theory, this context (the garage) is called the set's environment, or "universe of discourse".

Distilling, now, from systems generally to a visual identity system, a visual identity system may be defined as a system of visual entities (visents[5]) that interact for the purpose of identifying something, or, more briefly: *visents interacting to identify a host*. In the framework of our discussion, a visent is the thing—perhaps a logo—that has been designed, produced and placed into the world—in short, visual objects (Feldman 2003)[6] that are perceived by the public.[7] When it is perceived, the visent assumes the role of sign,[8] and it is therefore the process of sign activity, semiosis (for which the visent is instrument), that is the visual identity designer's target. If we want to foreground the semiotic nature of the process, a more semiotic-centered definition of a visual identity system may be this: *a visual identity system is a planned semiotic exchange, whereby visual entities are configured to act as proxies for a host*.[9] Note that the words "planned" and "configured" stress the system's teleology.[10]

Identity Systems are Fuzzy Sets

There are two kinds of sets. In a "crisp" set, membership is discrete and entire: it is logically determined by a yes/no, true/false response. The set of /living presidents of the United States/ will include a definite number of individuals, with each person who has ever been president either entirely a member or entirely excluded. In "fuzzy" sets, on the other hand, membership is relative. If one is asked to determine the set of *tall* presidents, Abraham Lincoln (6'4") is in, James Madison (5'4") is out, but where do you put Teddy Roosevelt (5'10"), Gerald Ford (6'0"), Barack Obama

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[5] The neologism "visent" is a shorthand for "visual entity".

[6] Feldman provides a convincing account of how something in the world is perceived. The reasons for preferring the term "visual entity", or "visent", instead of "visual object" are explained at some length in *FireSigns* (Skaggs 2017); the reason has to do with confusion between semiotic objects, 3D objects, and other misleading connotations of the word "object".

[7] Although one might think of the visent as an equivalent to the psychologist's "environmental stimulus", I hope to avoid the dualistic body/mind framing of the experimental psychologist and move the discussion to a semiotic frame of reference.

[8] See my discussion in *FireSigns* (Skaggs 2017: 25–50), for an explanation of the transformation from visent to sign.

[9] Host: It is understood that in the case of commercial enterprises, this identification with a host also extends to the goods and services the host provides.

[10] Although it is conceivable that random indexical connections of visual elements to a host could allow accidental identifications to occur, in practice virtually all visual identity systems are carefully developed with the expressed intent to become effective communication vehicles.

(6'1")? In a fuzzy set, membership status ranges between 1 (definitely a member) and 0 (definitely not a member).

Identity systems function as fuzzy sets. This may seem at first counter-intuitive, because trademark stipulations demand that each company, for example, is entitled to a discrete logo which is entirely its own. Indeed, this uniqueness is a defining characteristic of an idiotype, one of the two semiotic operations at play in visual identification. But the definiteness that is baked into idiotypes and trademark law is not what we find in the second operational factor; instead, the differentiation of a visent among other visents, especially on initial exposure, is fuzzy.

In order to see how the fuzziness arises, imagine an extremely limited world, call it Simpletown, in which the universe of discourse—the visual identification environment—is extremely paltry. Indeed, Simpletown has only three businesses.[11] One uses a triangle as a logo, one a square, the third a hexagon.[12] Let us suppose a fourth business is started in Simple-town: *Sun, Inc.* A circle is proposed to identify the host. The iconic association of circle to sun might be considered a natural connection; but, at the most fundamental level of analysis—i.e., the differential level upon initial informed exposure—it is not the similarity of a circle to the sun that will determine the success; rather, it will be the differential *dis*-similarity of the logo to the various forms of its competitor's logos.

A logo's likeness to objects, like the sun, that may rightly become useful idiotypic symbols, is what we might call "metaphorical iconicity". But the kind of likeness that we are pointing to in the establishment of differentiation involves a simultaneous demonstration of form: both a resemblance to other elements within the identity system and, at the same time, contrast to objects external to the system. As opposed to the metaphorical iconicity at work in establishing a symbolic affinity, this is "systemic iconicity". This term might be considered a narrower semiotic framing of Wittegenstin's "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein c.1930). Systemic iconicity resists a precise or direct isomorphic superposition of signs or sign/referent but instead alludes to a relational and comparative similarity on the basis of visual form. Whereas (against common assumption) metaphorical iconicity is irrelevant, per se, to a logo's ability to be recognized as an identity system, systemic iconicity is indispensable and,

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[11] Branding is not limited to capitalistic, commercial, or business concerns; but I will use examples from that world because they are so common.

[12] Such limited environments are virtually impossible to find today because of wide-spread media, but a correlate situation does occur in the physical spaces of small towns and villages where there may be only a few businesses.

indeed, makes possible whatever metaphorical iconicity may come to be adopted. Before we see the circle as representing the sun (and therefore *Sun, Inc.*), we must see the circle as being *not-triangle*, *not-hexagon*, *not-square*—the other competing forms in Simpletown's limited visual logo domain.[13]

So instead of a logo's metaphorical iconicity, it is rather its distinctive formal character that must be firmly established. The semantics of metaphorical reference are subordinate to sheer syntactic distinctiveness. The success of the identification depends upon the development (in the public) of a clear connection between the logo's unique differentiated form, and the continued indexical, environmental connection to the host. What begins as raw, syntactical distinction, develops into a semantic interpretant, and soon a symbolic connection to the host, irrespective of whatever metaphorical reference may or may not be present. The public can only be brought to understand the connection between an identity system and host through repeated, habituated exposure. The exposure happens first through primary differentiation of form, then develops in two main ways: through consistent markings of goods and services; and through conscious education, as in advertising, announcements, and other direct conveyances. Even a trademark that is ideographic (an abstract form, such as *Nike*'s swoosh), totally lacking metaphorical iconicity, will come to be easily associated with its host if it retains systemic iconicity within its own identity program.[14]

Behavior of Systemic Iconicity in Identity Systems

We will now explore some of the situations that are implied in establishing a clear systemic iconicity. In doing so, it may be helpful as a kind of shorthand to employ some basic symbols. The most fundamental of these are:

Q Host

Qi Identity system for Q

E Environment within which Qi functions (that is, Qi's universe of discourse)

∂ Boundary

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[13] To understand why this is so, just imagine that one of the other businesses in Simpletown is called *Moon, Inc.*

[14] The excellent branding designer Dan Stewart once told me that a spot of mud thrown against the side of a building could become a perfectly fine logo for an investment bank—if it were deployed well in the process of habituation.

Regardless of the presence of the indirect metaphorical relationship of Qi → sun/"sun" → Q, it is the direct, symbolic Qi → Q connection that needs first to be made. And this cannot happen unless Qi is differentiated from all non-Qi visual elements in its domain. A strong set boundary ∂ must exist. In Simpletown, recognition is fostered because the circle is easily differentiated from all the other geometric forms.

Now let's look at the situation in nearby Busyville. In Busyville, there are so many businesses vying for our attention that the identification environment contains a plethora of geometric forms, including a 20-sided regular polygon. In Busyville, it is much more difficult to distinguish *Sun, Inc.*, because the distinguishing features separating a 20-sided figure from a circle are simply too subtle to be easily noticed.

Here, it will be easier for the reader to see at a glance the situation than to describe it further: Figure 3 shows the situation in each town, with the circle compared to the shape closest to it within its universe of discourse. In Simpletown, the circle has clear membership within Qi, a value close to a crisp set's value of 1, meaning it is almost impossible to misidentify. But in Busyville, if one were to measure "membership confidence" by noting how often it is confused with other candidates, the membership in Qi could be expected to be much lower, perhaps as low as 0.5—a coin flip.

We say that in the Simpletown case, in which the circle had little visual competition, the identity of the visent is highly "resolved" (i.e., has high differentiation, resolution, or clarity). It is easily discriminated from each of the other candidate identities in its environment. In Busyville, with its dozens of competing geometric shapes, including the 20-sided figure, the circle would have low resolution of identity. The identity of the circle is less resolved, more ambiguous, vague. High resolution of an identity is essentially the same as the establishment of a clear boundary between a host identity and competitors, so that boundary strength can be substituted as a marker for the strength of resolution. Highly resolved identity sets have high ∂.

Notice that in Figure 3, the drawing of the logo itself remains unchanged; its resolution is completely influenced by the diversity of competing logos in its environment E (universe of discourse); as a greater number of competing elements inevitably leads to greater diversity among the elements, we can draw the following proposition:

Where $n[E_l]$ is the quantity (number) of logo-like visents[15] in the environmental domain that Qi inhabits:

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[15] The use of the term "logo-like" here is a way of segmenting the visual environmental context into a domain in which the visents are taken to be other competing identity system

(1) n[E$_l$]↕Qi

That is, the number (n) of logo-like visents (*l*) in the environment (E) is inversely proportional (↕) to the integrity, or crispness, of the host's identity set (Qi).
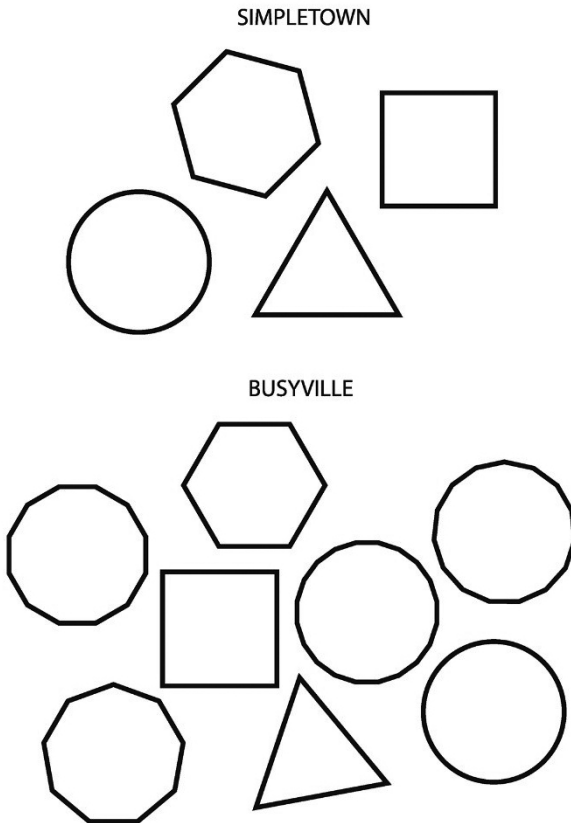
SIMPLETOWN

BUSYVILLE

Figure 3. The ability to distinguish, and therefore identify, any element depends upon its difference from other elements in its domain of discourse. The circle is easily distinguished when it is competing with Simpletown's shapes that have only a few sides, but it is very difficult to distinguished from Busyville's 20-sided regular polygon.

elements. The actual visual environment would contain many visents (cars, trees, clouds) which are in no way connected to the identification of host entities. For simplicity's sake, in the present article I want to concentrate on the discrimination of identity systems from each other rather than taking on the more cumbersome challenge of explaining how we discriminate identity systems from chairs and tables and other extraneous entities of vision.

Furthermore, since the integrity (strength) of the set boundary (∂) is inevitably weakened by the quantity of visents on *either side* of it (that is, regardless of whether the visual entities are determined to be competitors in the environment, or fellow members of the identity set), then it also holds that:

(2) $Qi \updownarrow n[Qi_e]$

where n is the quantity of visents that are elements of the host's identity set. In other words, the resolution and crispness of identity sets are threatened by the increase of visents, especially logo-like visents, irrespective of whether the logo-like visual entities are external to, or are part of, the identity set.

What this suggests is that logos are most effective as identity devices when they avoid competition from other logo-like things. While this statement is not surprising, it is also an impossible ideal to fully realize in today's complex, visually mediated, world. In practice, at least for any group where access to media is common, a visual identity system always has stout visual competition. We are about to find, then, that identity systems face exigencies that push the system in two contradictory directions.

Convergent and Divergent Pressures on Identity

These contrastive external influences can be thought of as competing "pressures" influencing, guiding, or disrupting the efficiency of visually identifying any host. Some of these pressures squeeze, with what may be called convergent pressure, an identity system toward distinctive simplicity; while others conspire to push, with what we may call divergent pressure, the system toward greater complexity.

Convergent Pressures

We have already seen a couple of the convergent pressures at work. These can be expanded as follows.

The fewer elements of an identity system, the greater the system boundary of the identity system:

(3) $<n[Qi_e] : >\partial[Qi]$

The more definite and strong the boundary, the greater (crisper) the resolution of the host's identity set:

(4) $>\partial[Qi] : >Qi$

The fewer elements of the identity system, the greater the resolution of the host's identity system—from (3) and (4):

(5) $<n[Qi_e] : >Qi$

Each of these can, of course, be stated in their inverse functions as well.

Divergent Pressures

But we have yet to speak of important influences acting in the opposite direction, pressures that work to *increase* the number of elements in an identity set. Even though, as we have seen, any increase in elements weakens identity, these systems need to communicate across many demographic groups, in a variety of situations and circumstances. For example, to minimize variation of a logo, a designer may wish to stipulate that the logo only be used in the color green. But then what happens when the logo must be presented against a backdrop of evergreens? The practical solution is to offer some choices for the colors of a logo, perhaps black and white in addition to green, so that versatility is enhanced, even though the introduction of such variability diminishes (slightly) the resolution of the identity.

It is the multiplication of these kinds of demands that, even in a well-planned system, lead to an increase in $n[Qi_e]$. Divergent pressures are usually responses to two instigating factors: circumstance and novelty.

Circumstantial instigators, such as the need for environmental color contrast mentioned above, are discovered through research of the physical and social worlds in which the visual identity system will be functioning. While the initial responses generally involve efforts to differentiate the form of the identifying visent from anything else that would be encountered in proximity to it, such attempts often run into contradictions where environmental noise (from the point of view of the desire to identify) requires the addition of system elements. These elements may rarely involve variations in the logo itself, but more commonly involve adding new graphic elements to supplement the logo and expand the versatility of the system, though at a cost to strict repetitive simplicity. Such elements might involve the use of certain typefaces, ruled lines, and other ancillary visual entities. The addition of such elements necessarily increases system complexity.

In addition to circumstantial factors, the desire for novelty is a second contributor to divergent pressures. As it is important for the host to retain the attention of the public, and since repeated exposure to the same stimuli leads to attentional fatigue, there is always a subtle pressure

for change within the identity system, even though any change to a visual identity system must weaken the set boundary.

These divergent factors can be shorthand notated in the following postulates as follows:

E_c Environmental circumstances

$\Delta[Qi_e]$ Change in the elements of the identity set

A Attention of a public

These two pressures toward diversity can be stated as follows:

Greater circumstantial variability tends to produce a greater number of elements of the identity system:

$$(6) >E_c \rightarrow >n[Qi_e]$$

Change in the elements of a host's identity system produces greater attention:

$$(7)\,\Delta[Qi_e] \rightarrow >A$$

$$(8)\,\Delta[Qi_e] \rightarrow >n[Qi_e] \text{ and therefore} \rightarrow <Qi$$

It should be noted here that, whereas the greater attention is short term, the weakening of the identity set is usually a longer-term effect and is progressively more difficult to overcome. For this reason, it is usually a good idea to heed the advice CBS Art Director William Golden gave to (then) staff designer Lou Dorfsman with respect to the CBS logo. Dorfsman was growing tired of using the CBS eye and asked Golden if he could make some variations on it; but Golden declined, saying, "It is just when you or I are becoming bored with a mark that the public is beginning to know it exists."[16]

Following from (7) and (8), and in keeping with Golden's remark: change in the elements of an identity set leads to a weakening of the system boundary:

$$(9)\,\Delta[Qi_e] \rightarrow <\partial[Qi]$$

One of the outcomes that may be expected from working with identity systems is that minimal, static systems retain public recognition, but gradually lose the attention of the public. This leads to occasional

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[16] This exchange may be apocryphal, but it has been transmitted to three generations of graphic design students.

"refreshing" of the identity system, and this refreshing will have the effect of initially looking foreign to the audience while gaining attention short term, requiring a period of exposure to "resettle" to an identifying role. But frequent churning only hurts identification.

Three Semiotic Issues Provoked by Systemic Iconicity

While convergent pressures dictate the designing of a unique and simple form, easily recognized within an environmental context, circumstantial factors as well as a desire to maintain the public's attention conspire to pressure the system to become more diverse, more adaptive, more open to change. This push-and-pull dynamic continues within an environment where the system's iconicity demands not only resemblance within—but also non-resemblance without. That is, it is as important to distinguish the host as "apart from" non-hosts as it is to engender a sense of familiarity and resemblance among the system's elements. This ever-changing calculus raises some questions about how the semiosis, over time, of identity systems evolve. Although this article has put aside the question of metaphorical iconicity, even focusing on the systemic iconicity half of the picture raises interesting issues for semiotics.

Is the Boundary a Sign?

For example, the most effective sense of visual identity for a brand comes from having very strong, one might say "compact" iconicity within the system and opposing that compact holism to a clearly discriminated non-iconicity in the brand's surrounding environment. Such a condition is an example of a strong boundary (∂). The fascinating semiotic question raised by this is: Does ∂ constitute a sign? And if it does, then what kind of sign could it be? In some ways the comprehended boundary would seem to be, in Peirce's terminology, a logical interpretant of degenerative thirdness (Peirce 1904: CP 8.332)—a conclusion that is reached upon observing a group of visual entities that are part of the system, and other visual entities that are differentiated from them. On that view, the boundary is only a sign in the sense that an abstract stated proposition acts as a sign. In other words, it is a sign within the understanding of receivers, lacking reified, physical existence. But there may be another way of seeing the situation: that much like a landscape might contain a wetlands or marsh between two towns, ∂ is the distinct region of "barren silence" that is the stillness between the otherwise humming, active, cultures of brands. There would seem to be an opportunity here for further inquiry.

Evolving Symbol Complex

A second semiotic issue concerns the dichotomy of a visual identity system as both a holistic system for a brand, and yet a collection of elements making up that system. The brand is more than its logo. Think of what happens in our initial exposure to a new brand: We begin with noticing a new graphic element in the environment, and with repeated sightings, we form a visual habit. A symbolic link is constructed; we connect not only the logo, but the typography, color palette, and the entire system of graphic elements—to a host. The symbol that arises in an identity system is a *symbol complex*. The entire set of elements serve to reinforce the entire system-as-identifier. While the logo certainly connects us to the host, the habitual use of the entire system also has this capacity, even when the logo is absent.[17] A kind of meta-symbolic gestalt emerges in the format and each of the component elements comprising it, along with the formal relations of the entire identity system. The designed choices, schematized and prescribed in the standards manual, continue to carry the "vibe" of the identity system. This aspect of semiotics, one concerned with multiple members of a set working together for some purpose, also challenges our analytical framework in which we are often starting with "the sign vehicle", or a semiotic moment's sign, as if it is a discrete object instead of a set of interacting entities. We are reminded that in any analysis the framing of the moment and the sign is an ad hoc move.

Relativity of Peirce's Categories

As presented in the scenarios just described, iconicity is more a judgment discerned on the basis of relative likeness, calling to mind Wittgenstein's family resemblances (Wittgenstein c.1930), rather than absolute mapping of binary coordinates. The relativity points out the liquidness of Peirce's categories. Consider what happens in Busyville: What may seem at first to be a clear and distinct visual entity (a circle recognized as such) becomes less so when embedded in an environment of competing visents (such as a 20-sided polygon). To confirm the system iconicity, we might have to rely on its symbolic (e.g., metaphorical iconicity) or indexic situation (is this the kind of location in which I would expect to see *Sun, Inc.*?). What at first seem to be discrete classes of sign/referent relation end up becoming positions along a spectrum—or a position mapped upon a

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[17] The reader may wish to observe this by going to a well-known chain restaurant such as *McDonald's* or *Starbucks*; taking a beverage cup, cover up the logo with your thumb and notice how the other graphic elements and colors are contributing to inform you of the brand.

territory—often determined by environmental conditions or the interpreter's previous experience. If visual identity in branding reveals the relativity inherent in iconicity, it makes one wonder if a similar relativity might not apply to indexicality and symbolicity. Imagine a Peircean system composed of three spectra—degrees of relativity between the nodes of iconicity, indexicality and symbolicty. How does rethinking Peirce with respect to fuzzy sets and sliding spectra of sign classes affect our understanding, and what new initiatives might such a practice suggest?

Conclusion

Concerned with the visual identity systems used in branding, this article has limited the discussion of the behavior of systemic iconicity, leaving the other major mode of semiotic iconicity—metaphorical iconicity—to be taken up at another time. Systemic iconicity is the ability of an identity system to be perceived as standing for the host simply by virtue of differentiation from others in its domain. Only subsequently, through habituated exposure, does the system become a fully developed symbol for the host for which it stands.

But for such habituated exposure to occur, a public needs first to be able to discriminate the identity system from other visual entities in the environment. Such systemic iconicity can be analyzed by considering it as a fuzzy set in which each of the graphic elements (logo, typography and so on) are treated as members. Nine important manners in which elements, environment, and boundary conditions interact interdependently were presented. Using these nine interactions, it should be possible to develop additional means of comparative analysis for visual identity systems which will expand the "why to" knowledge base.

From those interactions within the visual identity system, it becomes apparent that there are two competing pressures on the system. A convergent impulse tends to make the visual identity system extremely simple and unchanging. A divergent tendency, however, has the opposite effect, creating pressure for the system to become variated, large and changeable. Every visual identity system must chart a path between these two polarities, and must be guided to a profile that is suitable for it, considering market, audience, economics and other parameters.

Finally, in the consideration of system iconicity, three fundamental questions with respect to general semiotics emerge: What can be said of the boundary as a sign? What is the nature of an evolving sign complex (rather than discrete sign) such as a brand? And lastly, Is it worth considering Peirce's division of sign types as spectra with degree relations rather than

as mutually exclusive semiotic entities? These questions are worth joining the issue of metaphorical iconicity as material awaiting further discussion.

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