H335/H535 Industrial Image-Making

(Daughter of Social Semiotics)

Study Guide

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Murdoch University
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<http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/~mchoul/H335>
Overview: Aims and Objectives

Social semiotics today is a very broad field of study and, increasingly, of industrial practice. In some previous years, the unit has been taught as a kind of survey of this field. The usual approach is to start with fundamental semiotic concepts (sign, signifier, signified, text, intertext, discourse ... and so on) and, in passing, to apply these to social, cultural and political questions.

This year, as in 2002, I want to try something quite different; something of an experiment in which we can all take part. During 1999 and 2000, I worked (with Pierre Van Osselaer) on translating a very important work of visual semiotics from the French. I did this specifically in order to set the book as a text for this unit. That book is Jean-Marie Floch’s Visual Identities. (Among many other things, the book is about logos — and the book’s own logo is on the cover of this Study Guide.)

So, a brief summary of H335 this year is that we’re going to be looking at the specifically visual dimension of social semiotics; and we’re going to be doing that by working in detail through this particular text. The book is under 200 pages long, so this might not seem like much of a challenge. On the other hand, a better set of essays could not be found — even in a specially designed reader.

The design of the unit (or should we say ‘the bricolage of the unit’?) works around the six industrial-visual phenomena and corresponding semiotic sites that Floch analyses:

- Advertisements:  
  Waterman pens
- Logos:  
  IBM and Apple computers
- Food:  
  Menus and dishes of a leading chef, Michel Bras
- Fashion:  
  Coco Chanel’s ‘Total Look’
- Department stores:  
  Habitat and Ikea
- Industrial products  
  Opinel knives
This gives us 12 main topics, organised into six thematic modules. In each module, we’ll examine basic concepts in social semiotics and how they apply to industrial-visual phenomena in general. Then we’ll look at their application, via Floch, to very specific industrial sites. This is the core business of the unit. A simple, but central, objective is therefore: how to read a single book!

One of the reasons for focusing on Floch is that he and his work straddle two domains. Floch was a Paris-based social semiotics scholar; but he also worked closely with image designers and he advised corporations on the kinds of visual identity they project to their various publics. This reflects the increasing interest in social semiotics on the part of practitioners in marketing, copy-writing, advertising and industrial design — not to mention graphic artists, photographers and web designers. (Over the page, you will find a short article on one such company, Semiotic Solutions).

The point is: whatever we happen to make (an actual knife, say, or an advertising logo for it), we will do so on the basis of our social and cultural knowledge. Quite often, however, such knowledge is implicit. Techniques in social semiotics allow us to formally analyse (and hence make explicit) such knowledges and ideas. In this way, semiotic analyses not only let us see how industrial images (or ‘visual identities’) work, they can also aid in the design and dissemination of those images. Semiotics can be a scholarly tool for understanding (and, if we insist, criticising) the increasingly corporatised world we live in; but it can also be instrumental in corporate processes themselves. (Take your pick as to which these activities is most ‘critical’.)

The main item of assessment in this unit, and the core outcome, is a Conference on design work and theory. It allows students to combine these two uses of social/visual semiotics (design and research) and to see how well they can be brought together — experimentally, using ‘bricolage’.
Readings

Set text

The set text for the unit is available from the University Bookshop. This is:


This is the only text that students need to buy. There is no Internal Reader. However, copies of the H335 External Reader for 2000 are held in Closed Reserve in the Library and supply many necessary background readings, including several of those listed below.

Further reading

The unit is not attached to a specific program of reading. At 300 and 500 level, students are expected to read both extensively and independently. The following list is merely a guide to this and is very far from exhaustive. It’s just a small sample of the available work relating to social semiotics generally, and its application to industrial and visual phenomena in particular. The list is, though, indicative of the work I’ve drawn on for the lectures. Most of these pieces can be found in the University Library and, as noted, several of them are collected in the 2000 External Unit Reader. My comments follow the asterisks (*).


Barthes, Roland (1987) *Mythologies*, New York: Hill & Wang. *A long essay on semiotics and politics (‘Myth Today’) plus some very readable analyses of particular cultural phenomena. Some of these are directed towards industrial products (such as soap-powders, margarine, toys and cars).*


Chandler, Daniel (1994) *Semiotics for Beginners*, WWW document at http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/semiotic.html. *Used to be a useful site — but tends to disappear from the Web.*


Eco, Umberto (1984) *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. *This one is for the theory-heads only.*


Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1972) *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. *This is a translation of the work La pensée sauvage, to which Floc’h makes frequent reference in the set text. Can be widely consulted for the more ‘anthropological’ aspects of visual semiotics.*


O’Sullivan, Tim, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery &
John Fiske (1994) Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural
of the main opposition to the European tradition in semiotics.
Richardson, John (ed.) (1993) Photogenic Papers, a special issue of
Continuum 6(2). *Includes a number of good examples of semiotics
applied to photography.
Saussure, Ferdinand de (1974) Course in General Linguistics, London:
Fontana/Collins. *The classic reference, at least in the European
tradition.
University Press. *Advanced.
University Press. *For all those into the ideas of the self, ‘the
subject’, ‘identity politics’ and the rest.
Social Semiotics: A Transdisciplinary Journal in Functional Linguistics,
Semiotics and Critical Theory. *The Library holds all issues since the
Social Semiotics, External Reader. *Available on Closed Reserve —
contains several of the readings in the present list.
can be considered ‘structuralist’, this is a useful background text.
and Histories, London: Macmillan Education. *More historical than
semiotic, but an in-depth analysis of the history of the photographic
image.
Thwaites, Tony, Lloyd Davis & Warwick Mules (1994) Tools for Cultural
Studies: An Introduction, Melbourne: Macmillan. *Despite its title,
a very good basic introduction to semiotics and its applicability to
many varieties of text, including visual texts. This is the set text for
the external version of the unit.
Tolson, Andrew (1996) Mediations: Text and Discourse in Media Studies,
York: Routledge. *Contextualises the importance of semiotics in
cultural studies and also includes useful examples of semiotic
analysis.
Umiker-Sebeok, Jean (ed.) (1987) Marketing and Semiotics, Amsterdam:
Mouton de Gruyter. *Collection of essays on these two fields. Still
useful in conjunction with the Floch text.
Williamson, Judith (1978) Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and
*One of the first book-length applications of semiotics to
advertising. Critical but insightful, even today.
Wright, Will (1975) Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the
Western, Berkeley: University of California Press. *The Western as
a semiotic site.
Lectures and Tutorials

Lectures are held on Fridays, 11:30-12:30, in the ECL3.
NB: Change of venue from the Robertson Lecture Theatre.

In the first week, you will be allocated to a one hour tutorial class. Tutorials begin in Week 2. There are no tutorials for Week 1. Tutorials begin following the second lecture. The Week 13 tutorial is given over to preparation for the final assessments — the Conference and the exam. Tutorial times are as follows:

- Group A: Fridays 12:30-13:30 EH 3.51
- Group B: Fridays 14:30-15:30 EH 3.51
- Group C: Fridays 14:30-15:30 EH 3.19
- Group D: Fridays 15:30-16:30 EH 3.19
- Group E: Fridays 15:30-16:30 EH 3.51
Lecture Schedule

Week 1
Introduction: Social Semiotics and Industrial Images
Reading: Floch, ‘Introduction: from design to bricolage’.

Weeks 2 & 3
Focus: ADVERTISING
Concepts and ideas: basic semiotic vocabulary / internal and external components of the sign / segmental and narrative analysis / narrative / identity / ethics /
Industrial site: The Waterman Pen
Reading: Floch, chapter 1.

Weeks 4 & 5
Focus: LOGOS
Concepts and ideas: visual invariants / messages / structural oppositions / the structural analysis of myth /
Industrial site: The IBM and Apple Logos
Reading: Floch, chapter 2.

[[Note: a non-teaching week follows Week 4]]

Weeks 6 & 7
Focus: FOOD
Concepts and ideas: typography / genotype and phenotype / the métis / mythology / synaesthesia / bricolage /
Industrial site: Michel Bras at Laguiole
Reading: Floch, chapter 3.
Weeks 8 & 9
Focus: FASHION

Concepts and ideas: branding / visual elements / classical vs. baroque /
continuity vs. discontinuity / the ethical grid / more problems of
identity and ethics /

Industrial site: Coco Chanel and the ‘Total Look’
Reading: Floch, chapter 4.

[[Note: two non-teaching weeks follow Week 9.
Time for serious preparation for the Conference]]

Weeks 10 & 11
Focus: DEPARTMENT STORES

Concepts and ideas: consumption values / ideology / the semiotic grid /
the Epicurean / the chine /

Industrial site: Habitat and Ikea
Reading: Floch, chapter 5.

Weeks 12 & 13
Focus: INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS

Concepts and ideas: the not-sign / taxonomy / objects as heroes / bricolage
(reprise) /

Industrial Site: The Opinel Knife
Reading: Floch, chapter 6.
Assessment

The letter grades used in Murdoch University unit assessment are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HD</td>
<td>High Distinction</td>
<td>80-100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Distinction</td>
<td>70-79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>60-69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>50-59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Conceded Pass</td>
<td>45-49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP</td>
<td>Ungraded Pass</td>
<td>50% or above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>below 45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Discretionary</td>
<td>45-49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that in cases of extenuating personal circumstances such as serious personal illness or bereavement, there is provision for deferred assessment in the unit as a whole. Refer to the current University Handbook for details. Your attention is drawn to the Programme’s Progress Regulations, also in the current University Handbook.

General Policy on Assessment

Students should consult the University Handbook regulations under 'Assessment' (regulations 40-48).

Plagiarism and Collusion

‘Plagiarism constitutes using the work of another without indicating by referencing that the ideas expressed are not your own. Collusion (or unauthorised collaboration) constitutes joint effort between students or others, in preparing material submitted for assessment, except where this has been approved by the unit coordinator. The University regards most seriously any acts of
dishonesty in assessment such as plagiarism, collusion, re-submission of previously marked work in different units, examination misconduct and theft of other students’ work. These acts could result in penalties including failure in the unit and possible exclusion from the University. For further details please refer to the section on “Dishonesty in Assessment” in the current Murdoch Handbook and Calendar’ (page 20).

**Non-Discriminatory Language**

Note: the paragraphs below are the general University policy on non-discriminatory language. Students in H335 should be critically aware of the subtle semiotic work that ‘discriminatory’, ‘non-discriminatory’ and ‘policy’ languages can perform.

‘Murdoch University is committed to the use of non-discriminatory language in all forms of communication. Students and staff should avoid the use of discriminatory language in units and in all other activities within the University. This applies to both oral and written communication.

‘Discriminatory language is that which refers in abusive terms to gender, race, age, sexual orientation, citizenship or nationality, ethnic or language background, physical or mental ability, or political or religious views, or which stereotypes groups in an adverse manner. This is not meant to preclude or inhibit legitimate academic debate on any issue; however the language used in such debate should be non-discriminatory and sensitive to these matters. It is important to avoid the use of discriminatory language in your written work. The most common form of discriminatory language in academic work tends to be in the area of gender inclusiveness. You are therefore requested to check your work for this, and to ensure it is non-discriminatory in all respects’.
Assignments

1. Conference or Essay

Option A: Industrial Image-Making Conference, 50%
To be held: Monday 10th to Wednesday 12th November 2003, inclusive
Venue: Brian Hill Lecture Theatre
During the course of the semester — particularly in tutorials — students will work towards the end-of-semester Industrial Image-Making Conference. Students may choose to work alone or in teams of up to three. (For group work, where exhibited items are clearly ‘authored’, students must agree upon either collective or individual assessment.) Work may vary from hands-on design work (clearly informed by social-semiotic ideas) to illustrated presentations of the results of research into the social-semiotic analysis of visual identities. Each presentation will be allocated up to 15 minutes and must be broadly grouped under one of the following section titles:
- Advertising
- Logos
- Food
- Fashion
- Department Stores
- Industrial Products

Important date: By 4:30pm on Monday 13th October, students must submit a Conference Proposal detailing their work at the Conference, including an Abstract. (This is based on professional industrial and academic conference procedures and is to be taken very seriously. Unless all Proposals are submitted by the due date, the Conference as a whole cannot be organised.) An electronic form will be provided and Proposal submissions can be made by e-mail. The quality of the Proposal is part of the assessment for Option A. It is worth 15/50 marks (i.e., 7.5% of the overall grade for the

* Please note: students enrolled in the H535 version of the unit (usually MA or Honours students) may seek personal variations from the assessment schedule in order to bring it into line with their research interests. This should be done as early in the semester as possible.
Failure to submit a proposal by the due date will mean the student automatically defaults to Option B, below.

The unit co-ordinator will also accept tenders for **one** team of up to **three** students to act as conference organisers and facilitators. (That is, in place of presenting at the Conference.) These students will be assessed on (a) the quality of their tender; (b) their design of conference publications and web materials; (c) their capacity to design and organise the event itself; (d) a submitted document explaining the design rationale for the Conference. Tenders close at 4:30 on Monday 13th October.

**All students must attend all days of the Conference as delegates.**

Attendance sheets will be circulated.

Further detailed instructions on this assessment item will be distributed during lectures and tutorials. Also see the previous years’ Conference programs at the unit website:

http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/~mchoul/

**Option B: Major Essay, 50%**

Due date: 10th November 2003

Topic: Write a detailed semiotic analysis of a specific industrial image, including in-depth reference to its historical and social contexts.

Length: 4000-5000 words

**2. Tutorial work, 25%**

Tutorials will be the main ‘workshops’ where students and tutors work towards bringing together the social-semiotic *phenomena, concepts* and *sites* dealt with in the unit. They will also be the venue for discussing and negotiating topics for the final Conference (see above). From time to time, tutors will allocate short preparatory assignments towards these ends and students will be assessed on the quality of their work.
3. Examination, 25%
To be held during the Semester 2 assessment period (17th-28th November).
The examination will take the form of a test on a selection from the various semiotic concepts covered in the unit. The minimum University examination time is two hours; however, the test can be completed in one hour.

Note: Students must pass all components (including tutorial work and full participation as delegates at the Conference) to pass in this unit.