

INTRODUCTION

The ‘grammar of visual design’ Gunther Kress and I first published 25 years ago (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) focused on the way composition enables the representational and interactive functions of visual communication. Earlier work on images had mostly dealt with the denotative and connotative meanings of the people, places and things shown *in* images and treated composition in formalistic and aesthetic ways, or in terms of the quite specific conventions of genres like the Nativity, the Pietà, the Last Supper, etc. We wanted to show that composition realizes meaningful and systematic *relations* between those represented people, places and things, just as grammar realized meaningful and systematic relations between the words in sentences. To do so we combined concepts from literature on art and design, such as Arnheim’s (1982) theory of visual composition, with concepts from Halliday’s functional grammar, to show that images and words can make quite similar kinds of meaning, albeit in different ways.

This work had some success. A third edition of our book *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996) has recently been published, and, during the 25 years of its existence, the book has stood model for other work on non-linguistic modes of communication and been of use to a range of research projects. Yet we soon realized its limitations. Two are particularly important.

Firstly, in *Reading Images* we had focused mainly on images and diagrams. The book was called ‘*Reading Images*’. But visual design manifests itself in other ways as well. It also includes, for instance, typography and the decorative patterns that are so ubiquitous in our everyday environment. Although most people will never ‘read’ such designs consciously, they will nevertheless appreciate them and choose them with care, as expressing *their* taste, and hence *their* identity.

Secondly, we had developed a grammar which could be applied to materially very different images, to oil paintings as well as photographs, to still as well as moving images, and to two-dimensional as well three-dimensional images such as sculptures and children’s toys. But perhaps oil paintings, photographs and other media, even when drawing on the same compositional resources, do not make meaning in quite the same way. Perhaps they bring their own unique semiotic resources into play as well. This realization resulted in the distinction between ‘modes’ and ‘media’ which we made in our book *Multimodal Discourse* (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 3, the semiotic resources we had described in *Reading Images* we now called *modes*, and

semiotic resources that are grounded in specific materials we now called *media*, using the term the way artists do, as an indication of the materials used in a work. It also resulted in work on colour which we first published in 2001 and later included in the 2nd edition of *Reading Images*.

In this work on colour, we took our inspiration, not from grammar, but from phonology, the theory of the *sound*, hence the materiality, of language. In Jakobson and Halle's (1956) 'distinctive feature' theory, speech sounds are bundles of simultaneously present qualities. A [p] for instance, is unvoiced *and* labial *and* plosive, among other things. Colours, we thought, can, similarly, be conceived of as bundles of features, features such as hue, value, saturation, luminosity, and so on. All of these are simultaneously present, but to different degrees, and it is through the way they combine, in their specific proportions, that colours acquire their specific character.

For Jakobson, distinctive features have no meaning in themselves. They function only to distinguish phonemes, and hence words, from each other. For us, distinctive features are also semantic features. To explain how they make meaning, we drew on the cognitive metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), for whom meaning derives from metaphors based on concrete, embodied experience. In the case of colour this would include, for instance, our experience of day and night, of using lights and lighting in different contexts, and so on. We also realized that there exist standardized configurations of features, cliché's people can readily associate with specific provenances, with the times or places or other contexts from which they come. Meaning then derives from that provenance, from the associations which people have with those times, places or other contexts. In this we built on the way Barthes (1977) described how 'mythologies' such as 'italianicity' can be triggered by the use of the colours of the Italian flag in an advertisement for a brand of pasta.

We referred to resources such as colour as *parameters*, because they co-occur with other resources in specific media. Oil paintings involve shape and colour, and perhaps also texture, for instance, and animation films involve shape, colour, timbre, and movement, to mention just two examples. Parameters behave differently from the systems we described in *Reading Images*. Rather than offering more or less binary choices (placement on the right *or* the left, looking at the viewer *or* not) that lead to other more 'delicate' choices, they offer bundles of features which are always all present, but *graded*. The choice is not whether a colour is either dark or light, but *how* dark or light, *how* luminous or dull, *how* modulated or plain, and so on, a colour is, and it is this that gives colours their complex, composite meanings. The two colours in Rothko's *Red on Maroon* (1959), for instance, are dark, a little desaturated, warm, mixed, modulated and luminous. This makes them dark and brooding (value), complex and subtle (modulation), ambivalent (red mixed with blue), yet

also deeply felt (warm) and illuminating (luminosity) – not for nothing did Rothko call his paintings ‘mood pictures’ (Moszynska, 1990: 167).

Over the past 20 years I have developed these ideas further, together with key collaborators and friends, and applied them to work on vocal timbre (van Leeuwen, 1999, 2014; Mulder and Van Leeuwen, 2019), typography (Van Leeuwen, 2006, Johannessen and Van Leeuwen, 2018), decoration (Van Leeuwen, 2011) and texture (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2011), while two of my PhD students developed the approach to movement I will draw on in chapter 7 of this book (Leão, 2012, Han, 2021, see also He and Van Leeuwen, 2019). One of the aims of the book is to update this work and bring it together in a single volume. The book therefore offers a comprehensive approach to analysing graphic shape, colour, texture, timbre and movement, and the way they interact in multimodal texts, artefacts and performances.

But the book has another aim as well. Parametric systems not only make meaning in a different way, they also make different kinds of meaning. Whereas the systems we outlined in *Reading Images* described the *functional* design of images, the resources I describe in this book realize the *style* in which this is done - and style is, and always has been, a resource for expressing identity. This book therefore complements *Reading Images*, because in contemporary visual design, functional design and identity design always go together.

Identity is a complex issue. It has been, and still is, differently understood and differently experienced in different times and places. In today’s complex and rapidly changing society, it is often something people search for, uncertain where and to whom they belong, and what styles of life they should adopt. The other aim of this book, then, is to study identity from a *social* semiotic point of view, showing how, not only stable, but also hybrid and conflicted or confused identities manifest themselves through different uses of shape, colour, texture, timbre and movement, and how these uses are socially and culturally valued and regulated.

The first chapter will set the stage by presenting different conceptualizations of identity in their cultural, social and historical contexts, with particular emphasis on the contemporary ‘lifestyle’ identities that form the main topic of this book, and the way in which they transform other, older concepts of identity. The second chapter explains the differences between functional design and identity design, stressing that both always co-exist, even though identity design will form the main topic of this book. The third chapter discusses the semiotic principles that underlie how style realizes identity design. The remaining chapters describe and exemplify methods of analysing shape, colour, texture, movement and timbre, and, in the final chapter, a new take on analysing how they interact in multimodal texts, artefacts and performances. As digital technologies play a key role in providing

every computer user with resources and platforms for identity design, technology will play a key role in all of these chapters. Finally, throughout the book, I will make a point of showing how 20th century experimental artists have paved the way for contemporary identity design. The book therefore not only provides methods for analysing the values that are expressed in contemporary identity design, it also seeks to understand the history of identity design, asking how and why identity design, and the values it expresses, has become such a dominant aspect of contemporary culture.

