

U-P analysis: A neo-Peircean analytic tool for visual subjects

Análise U-P: Uma ferramenta analítica neopeirciana para assuntos visuais

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Abstract: This essay presents a scheme for analyzing visual subjects. Abridging Peirce's first trichotomy, arriving at a division of subjects as either Unitary (visents) or Plural entities (systems), the proposed scheme provides the basis of a protocol for analysis. In the process of studying the implications of plural entities, distinctions between elements, motifs, style and genre become clear. The resulting framework provides a lithe and simple analytical method that trades comprehensive logical breadth for ease of use in practice. Moreover, because it can be inserted back into a fuller Peircean system, the breadth of the comprehensive Peircean semeiotic can be regained if required.

Keywords: Visual communication. Graphic design. Typography. Charles Sanders Peirce. Sign classes. Style. Design analysis. Advertising analysis.

Resumo: *Este ensaio apresenta um esquema para a análise de questões visuais. Abreviando a primeira tricotomia de Peirce, chegando a uma divisão dos temas como entidades Unas (visents) ou Plurais (sistemas), o esquema proposto constitui a base de um protocolo para análise. No processo de estudar as implicações das entidades plurais, as distinções entre os elementos, motivos, estilo e gênero tornam-se claras. O quadro resultante fornece um método analítico ágil e simples que compõe uma lógica extensiva abrangente para uso prático. Além disso, porque pode ser reinserida em um sistema mais completo de Peirce, a extensão da semiótica peirciana pode ser recuperada se necessário.*

Palavras-chave: *Comunicação visual. Design gráfico. Tipografia. Charles Sanders Peirce. Classes de signos. Estilo. Análise de design. Análise de propaganda.*

Introduction

Works of visual communication are notoriously difficult to analyze due to the fact that they are inherently polysemous in each of their components, whether typographic, line graphic or photographic. In a typical visual subject of analysis,

the typography (as verbal strings) follows linear quasi-linguistic laws, while the other visual components (and including the typography, too, when considered solely as graphic visual forms) are not linear and do not conform to linguistic practice. Barthes famously and almost despairingly wrote that photographs (to name just one kind of visual subject) lacked a code.¹ But even when codeless, visual subjects nevertheless possess referents and interpretants, and are wellsprings of semiotic dynamics. The difficulty has always been to find a way to tame their seemingly amorphous, ambiguous and slippery visuality and to obtain some kind of “bite-size” chunk that can be reliably managed by a specific protocol of semiotic analysis. This essay offers a program for accomplishing the former task; that is, it suggests a way of simplifying, or staging, the subject of semiotic analysis when that subject is an act of visual communication. While it does not take up the second task—performing or demonstrating a semiotic analysis under a specific protocol—it does point the way to such analysis by providing a contracted and convenient structure for Peircean analysis.

That Peirce’s semeiotic is more naturally adaptable to non-lingual subjects than Saussure’s semiology and its descendants is no longer questioned. The major Peircean advantage is that Peirce’s classes of signs, growing from logic and capable of being articulated with incredible precision—even to sixty-six or more classes²—is not bound to codes and various other linguistic baggage. But along with the laudable universality and intricate precision of the Peircean system, one must accept a limitation to its practical employment: the very detail which makes it comprehensive also makes it laborious to use. While the analysis of non-linguistic subjects within the Saussurian system eventually encounters innate and insurmountable limitations, it has proven easy to deploy and its success throughout the second half of the last century was, to some extent, a result of that convenience. What if a method, faithfully Peircean in its important dimensions and fundamental premises, could be developed as a kind of *practical abridgment*? Might it not then be possible to make the analysis of visual subjects quicker and more accessible, while retaining the rigor for which a Peircean method is rightly admired? I’ve tried to craft such a method, which I call U-P analysis, a term that will be explained in the ensuing paragraphs.

1 The first trichotomy and the contraction of features

A quick recap of Peirce’s first trichotomy³ will remind us that three kinds of things may perform the role of sign: qualities, which Peirce names “qualisigns,” actual things or events, which Peirce names “sinsigns,” and habits or principles, which Peirce calls “legisigns.” Recognizing that our mission here is to analyze semiotically those subjects that are specifically visual, these three categories reduce to those qualities that are visual qualities, those actual things that are visual entities, and

1 BARTHES, 1977, p. 32-51.

2 BORGES, 2013, p. 281-291 (Visual animation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4iRLlkFSLk> as downloaded December 13, 2014).

3 CP 2.243-246.

the habits, principles or systems that are characterized as visual types and which are then applied to visual entities in particular token cases. In my admittedly “neo-Peircean” semiotic language, I call these three cells of the first trichotomy, as they pertain to visuality, “features,” “visents (visual entities),” and “systems.”

Erecting a structure to guide ensuing visual semiotic analysis would seem to call, then, for three basic categories. However, we cannot fail to notice that the vast majority of our work in studying visual communication will be devoted to the analysis of actual visual things as they present themselves in the world. In light of this, might it not be possible to trim our basic categories from three to two—the visent and the system? Doing so would seem to eradicate the qualisign entirely, while placing the emphasis of analysis on the visent and the system. But emphasis on the visent and systems of visents is entirely appropriate if the goal is limited to the analysis of actual things in the world. Moreover, while incomplete from Peirce’s strictly logical perspective, the truncated categorical scheme can regain the feature (qualisign) in its degenerate form⁴ by appreciating that features are to be found embedded within the visent. In other words, although the feature is not to be treated independently in the proposed scheme, features are nevertheless a component of description within the visent category, and are capable of signification just as potently as if they were taken up independently as “possibles,” which is what Peirce does with his qualisigns when he treats them as “Firsts.” Meanwhile, the decision not to analyze features divorced from their embodiment within visual entities, does not preclude us from studying systematic aspects of features, as principled feature habits are recovered within the larger category of system (legisign). So, to summarize the effect of this contraction: if they are regarded as attributes of a particular visent, features are recovered from within the visent’s category while if they are aspects of a system, features are recovered within the category of systemics.

In making this move to contract the first trichotomy and only consider directly the visent and the system, what we’ve done is construct two broad orders of analytic—one simple, whole and unitary, and the other multiple, partite, and plural. These are called the unitary (U) and plural (P) orders of analysis. The unitary order consists of turning attention toward the visent (remember the visent is a *smisign*—a *singular* visual thing), while the plural order consists of turning attention toward the multiplicity of occurrences and the habits, principles or rules that obtain in constituting the general class or set of which multiples are members. U analysis treats its subjects as wholes, while P analysis treats the member subjects as a structure of compounded individuals.

The illustrations figure 1 and figure 2 show the discussion so far. The three cells of the Peircean trichotomy (figure 1) have been reduced to two (figure 2), with features tucked into the visent, acknowledging that every visent has features, while features will not be treated independently of any visent.

4 The word “degenerate” here is used in its mathematical sense: something that is simpler than the class to which it is assigned, but nevertheless the assignation to the higher class is appropriate as the degenerate item occurs a trait in the larger class. See, for example, CP 5.72.



Figure 1

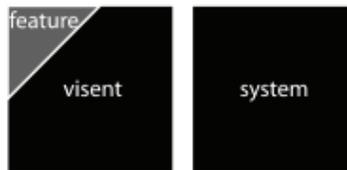


Figure 2

2 Recursion and the Display

In mathematics and programming, when a function “calls itself”—that is, when something is a result of a lower-level process that is structurally self-similar—the process is called “recursion.” Unlike natural language, the semiotics of vision is often deeply and irrevocably recursive. When I look at something, my gaze seems largely stochastic. My eyes dart around the subject view, my focus can be trained on something minute or on the entire thing. As I ascertain a part and look at more detail, my gaze is similarly stochastic within that more limited area. If I see a mountain and look at only a part of it, I see miniature mountain-things, called rocks. Looking at the rock with more concentrated focus, I notice it is made up of smaller rocky bits, and this recursive process can continue indefinitely until I am looking at a single grain of sand.

But I can also shift my gaze upward, following the mountain to a ridge line beyond which my eye rests on an area of blue that is clearly “not rock.” But even that ridge line, that edge between mountain and blue sky, cannot be stipulated beyond what is a “tentative” working conclusion: “Up there is sky—down there is mountain.” Even here, cognition is *précis*, summary judgment, an approximation: just exactly where the edge is (and, as Peirce himself once debated, what color the edge is) cannot be precisely determined no matter how acute my vision. This is a deeply pragmaticist process and it points to why Peircean semiotics has an affinity for the visual, which it deftly handles, though always with fallible and tentative conclusions.

In the same recursive way, at the seemingly hard binary edge between visent and system we find a semiotic object that must be accounted for, even if only in approximation, an object that is neither precisely a visent only nor a system only, but would appear to share attributes of each. This recursive semiotic object proves particularly important in analysis of visual stuff: it is the display.

A display is a particular kind of visent: one that is interpreted as being an intentional attempt to communicate information. Because it is interpreted as an attempt to convey a message, a display also has principles at play governing clusters of smaller, or lower-level components; this makes the display also a system. Examples of displays are the page, the screen, the poster, the advertisement, the street sign, etc. Displays partake both of the conditions of Unitary visents and the conditions of Plural systems. The display is a visent because it can be taken to be singular, a simple unbroken object of vision. But it can also be perceived as a principled, ordered, composition of elements and in that way it is a system. In a display, an array (system) of visual elements (visents) come together to convey a discrete bundle of information called a message.

The display is an emergent property of visents and systems. It emerges only when an interpretation is made that something consists of an effort to communicate. This emergence can be seen in the following thought experiment. Suppose you find yourself, on travels to a far-off place, on a hike through a meadow. Periodically, along your walk through the knee-high grass, you encounter large stones that sit on the ground and rise above your head. Your path leads you out of the meadow onto a trail climbing a rather tall hill. Upon summiting this hill, and deciding to take a breather, you turn and look back down upon the meadow you have just traversed below. To your surprise, you now see, clearly spelled out in 8-foot tall granite letters, the word “Masa.” In that instant, you regard the meadow with its rock letters as a display. If you are familiar with Spanish, you will understand the word to mean, rather enigmatically given its context, “dough.” If you are Malaysian, you will understand it to mean “time.” If Japanese, you might make the mental translation to the Kanji characters and think “duration, straight forward, or straight grain.” If you are American, the word will have no clear denotation at all. Regardless of such so-called verbal “content” the fact that you interpret the entire meadow as a frame for this single message unit makes of the meadow become, for you, a display.

The meadow, considered as the unit containing its message of boulder letters, is a visent. The meadow, considered as an array of parts—grass, boulder letters m, a, s, a, and the proportional spaces amidst them—is a system. A display thereby combines aspects of both the Unitary visent and Plural system while it adds a third component—the interpretation of message intentionality.

3 Displays and objects of study

The principles of composition, by which the display as a system is able to function as a whole unitary visent, is an object of study. Indeed, virtually all handbooks of what are known as the “principles and elements of design” are entirely devoted to detailing formalistic strategies for making an array of parts be seen as a single unitary whole. I’ll mention just one of these strategies, the principle one, in that it is the one that all displays necessarily share: a framing device—an edge, border, color break or surface-end—that provides a disjunction between what is display-stuff and what is non-display-stuff. That is, the identification of a display as such requires, as does any visent, the boundedness that separates itself from that which it is not. Framing devices need not be mathematically discrete—they only need to be discernible, a

visual feature that gesticulates the figure against a background, a perceptio-cognitive determination; looking at the ridge at the top of the mountain, an edge is enough to say, “Here is rock and there is sky.”

The very understanding or interpretation of the display as a message means that Jakobson’s phatic function—the communicative function that calls attention to the signal itself as a “Hey, I’m talking to you” device—is in play. The phatic function is not simply a mechanical checking of the physical channel of communication, it is alerting the receiver that a message exists—in other words, it has an indispensable semantic, meta-informational component. No matter what syntactic features may comprise a display, its inherent function (as display) is always primarily and inherently semantic. Unlike the visent and the system, which can be described as if they are entirely syntactical structures (even though connotations invariably flow, like a comet’s tail, from the syntactical material), the mere mention of a display already admits prior interpretation at the conceptual, informational level—without interpretation, one would not have understood the display to be a message to begin with. So, unlike the visent and the system, for which choosing to avoid any discussion of semantics is at least possible, if not usually productive, admitting that something is a display necessarily invokes the phatic-semantic component.

With that explanation in mind, then, figure 3 shows the display as it takes its place between visent and system to indicate that it is a hybrid, visent and/or system depending upon how one interprets it. But the display is also placed not just between, but also *behind* the visent/system pair, existing in its own third dimension, to suggest that unlike visents and systems, displays inherently involve a semantic component.

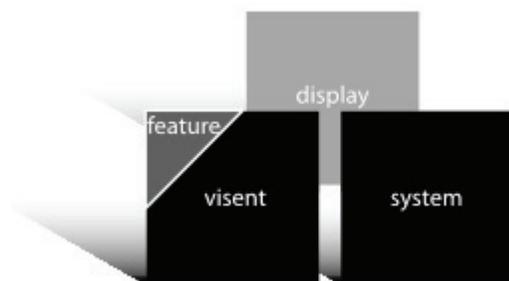


Figure 3

4 Element, motif, style and genre

At this point we have a duality between Unitary and Plural orders, represented by the syntactically necessary, but semantically optional, visent/system pair, while we also have the display, which is semantically necessary but can be regarded as either a visent or a system depending on how the analyst wants to treat it. By looking at the implications of the Plural side of the model, we gain certain further insights (figure 4). Some aspects of systems lead to recognizable habits of visual behavior—

recurrences that begin to fit a larger emergent pattern. For example, a visual element of a system, when repeated in a display, is known as a “motif.” Just as the concept of visent envelopes the embedded degenerate feature, so the very concept of a motif necessarily includes the unitary “element,” of which the word “motif” is already anticipating potential repetition. Unlike the motif, which is housed within the Plural order of analysis, the recessively embedded element is discovered to be nothing more than a visent considered at the Unitary level of analysis.(!)

Furthermore, just as a motif is the repetition of a visent within a single display, so the motif, when it is repeated across several displays, begins to yield its own pattern of family resemblance in systemic repetition; this repetitive family resemblance of motifs, across different displays, is known as “style.” Unlike element-to-motif, the move from motif to style need not be a slavish repetition of the same unitary motif, but the several motifs do need to be recognized as sharing features, and sharing them with a strong enough systemic wholeness to have a striking recognizable resemblance. This iconicity across displays must congeal into an integral perceived whole (as family resemblance system) while yet remaining distinct from other pattern-families: Art Nouveau is, after all, a different style than Art Deco. The entire swirling soup of these motivistic groupings of family resemblances eventually constitutes a cultural line of visual thought, distinctive enough to be recognizably assignable to this or that stylistic camp. Notice that style therefore has the same hybrid structure as display, being Unitary (a single style) or Plural (a variety of motifs accorded some relationship of features) depending upon context and the analyst’s purpose.

Finally, if a style is employed within a culture in a way that begins to form a habitual pattern—a particular style being employed for a particular kind of message subject—then that unifying subject (not so much the style independently but the style *associated with* the cultural subject for which the style tends to be employed) begins to emerge as “genre.” Genre, then, can be thought of as the systemization of style such that a style family is conventionalized or associated with a particular cultural subject. For example, certain melodramatic detective stories share a style: darkly lit, rainy urban streets and allies, a particular pace of editing, a first person voice-over narrative. Such have emerged as the “Film Noir” genre of cinema. A genre, once established across a culture, will tend to be self-perpetuating, forming a feedback system. Future detective stories that deal with the gritty details of urban life will tend to be filmed with dark light and rainy street scenes. The audience expects certain formalistic conventions of the film once the film is understood to belong to the genre. Figure 4 shows how the relationship of motif (with embedded element), style and genre mirrors that of visent (with feature), display and system.

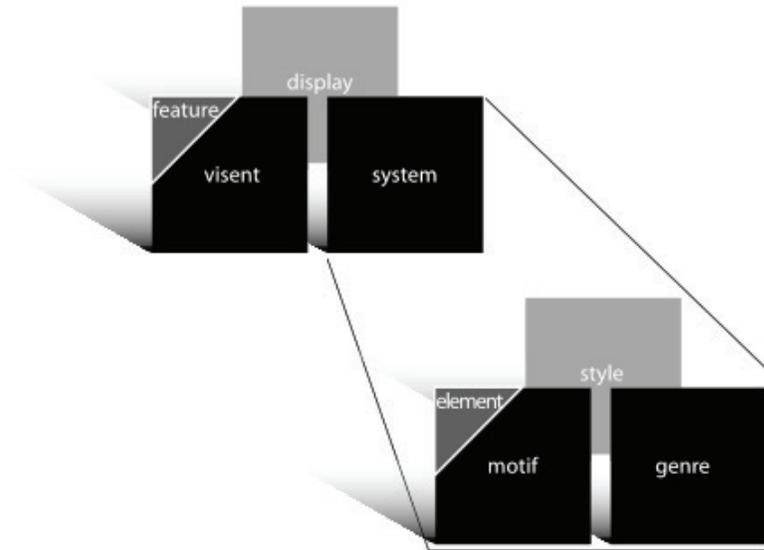


Figure 4

One might be tempted to conclude that a visual system is comprised entirely of motif-style-genre material. But such is not the case. Analysis of system is not exhausted by the analysis of motif, style and element. Motif, style and genre are important attributes of visual communication that are highlighted by the notion of visual systems, but there are aspects of system that escape treatment in the motif/style/genre triplet. One such aspect of system is the single principle, habit, or set of expectations that forms the backbone of system and provides the general case which permits the construction of system in the first place. There may be others. Having said that, the analysis of motif, style and genre can be expected to yield a great deal of information about how any visual system operates in practice, through its token displays, and through, also, a display's individual visents.

Summary

As the present scheme aims for simplicity and ease of use, I have not attempted a comprehensive logical entailment of Peirce's categories. Instead, I have taken quite the opposite approach, taking up only Peirce's first trichotomy and then even truncating that. But I make no claim that when confronting a piece of visual communication, an analyst's work is complete once the intricacies of the Unitary and Plural categories are studied. To the contrary, this U-P analytic only points to salient factors in introducing any ensuing analysis. What I have presented as U-P analysis is not the analysis of a piece of visual communication, but only a method (perhaps among many possible methods) for reducing Peircean principles to a manageable, segmented framework that provides a more convenient analytic tool. All I have tried to achieve here is a Peircean armature upon which ensuing analyses can be placed.

I haven't attempted here to demonstrate U-P analysis in practice, a task that would require far more than the present space and which is to be treated in other places.⁵ Instead, for the present, I hope that recounting its Peircean derivation will help U-P analysis prove to be a practical, functional, and insightful vehicle for exploring the still largely uncharted semiotic territory of visual communications.

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Data de envio: 13-12-14

Data de aprovação: 23-01-15

5 See an extended analysis using U-P analysis in *Fire Signs: A Semiotic Theory for Graphic Design*. MIT Press (forthcoming, 2016).

