



The Spirit of a Picture The Style of a Fiction Picture in the Context of Multimodality

Research Through Design Case Study

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Year of completion:	2021
Discipline/field:	Graphic Design
Type of Doctorate (e.g. PhD, DDes, ArtD)	ArtD
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Abstract

The study seeks to find out where an illustrator's visual style originates from and how it adapts to and varies in different contexts. The doctoral thesis includes two published scientific articles, an art exhibition, and a Valentine's Day postal stamp collection made for a client as a graphic design assignment. Artistic activity and design work are carried out methodically in the study, whereby research is created through art and design.

The theoretical frame is formed by research on multimodality, especially the Grammar of Visual Design by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen and the associated multimodal social semiotic approach that has a linguistic basis: Visual presentations are seen as a system that resembles language and has its own grammar. For instance, colour, typography, and layout are visual modes, semiotic resources of meaning. In a layout or the composition of a picture, the relationship between the presentation and the viewer is guided through vectors, cropping, the direction of the gaze of the illustrated subjects, etc. Modes and resources create meanings in two ways: through cultural



Figure 1. Glass works in the exhibition *Saturnal/Fantasy Forest* (2016). In these works, the different materials were experimented in developing a style that combines realism and fantasy.

connotations and experiential metaphors. Therefore, the cultural history of a given resource – where we have culturally grown accustomed to connecting a certain colour or typography – has a strong effect on interpretation. On the other hand, our experience of, say, boldface as something heavy or orange as a warm colour can be regarded as a more universal meaning.

In the summarising report, the definition of visual style is brought to the fore: It may be interpreted as a multimodal overall quality or meaning. Style affects the immediate atmosphere created by a visual representation. The article *Mysterious Mood: Overall Design as Conveyer of Meaning in Maurice Sendak's Picturebook Dear Mili (2019)* contains a multimodal analysis of the way in which a picture book as a whole produces moods and meanings. Together with the typography, layout, and illustrations, the material characteristics of the book artefact create a multimodal, stylistic fusion of meanings.

The art exhibition *Satumetsä/Fantasy Forest (2016)* tests through artistic practice various modes and resources in the creation of an overall atmosphere. Essentially realistic natural materials yield a presentation of the author's personal experience of nature that is characterised by mysteriousness and fantasy. Style can be regarded as magical realism. In this case, personal style leans to a great extent on memories and nostalgia, where cultural connotations of art history and old book illustrations function as stylistic models. The artistic experiments of the exhibition led to a visual style that was applied further in the stamp collection graphic design assignment *Ystävyys on valo/The Light of Friendship (2018)*.



Figure 2. Art print The First Day of September in the exhibition Satumetsä/Fantasy Forest (2016). The style experimented in the medium of digital image.

The project investigates how a personal style created freely in artistic activity is shaped according to the requirements of the genre and media in the commercial context. The design process is analysed in the summarising report and in the article *Happy hearts do not hang down: the design process for the 2018 Valentine's Day postage stamps of Finland (2020)*. The research setting makes it possible to observe not only the concept of multimodal style and its concrete development, but also the similarities and differences between an art picture and an applied art picture, or between art and design. Taken as institutions, the worlds of art and design differ from each other and have their own criteria concerning the definition of the value of a representation. The theoretical frame of the study builds on social constructionism: the meanings of art and design are created in a given time and place and are thereby



subject to social formation and transformation. Within the fields of conceptual art and graphic design, for instance, professionals engage in similar visual discussions on the nature of art and design. An applied picture, on the other hand, has an expressly commercial function and its purpose is to appeal to the public. This creates a politics of style and an intriguing friction, where the graphic designer also works.

Summary of research through design activity

In this thesis, the purpose of research through design activity is to test the theory of multimodality and visual grammar (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, van Leeuwen 2005, Meier 2014, Siefkes & Arielli 2018) in design practice. On the other hand, the design activity focuses on questions: how the personal style of an illustrator/graphic designer develops and is adapted to different contexts. At the first stage of activity, different modes (semiotic resources), materials and techniques were used in the experimental artistic process, which resulted in an art exhibition.

At the second stage, the style developed during the artistic project was adapted to the commercial graphic design project. During the research through design process, the new ideas of visual style as a multimodal meaning making resource were found. In the context of commercial illustration/graphic design there seems to be a tendency to avoid the ambivalence of poetic representation, e.g., the colours and compositions that can be interpreted as melancholic. Also, the question of the position of graphic designer working in the complex web of different relations to her/his client and audience made evident, that the visual style that the designer uses is everything but irrelevant. The concept of visual style can be seen even as a political question when reacting to different concepts of taste.

Underpinning research, context, and summary of methodology

The theoretical bias of the research is based on social constructivism. Thus, how we use and interpret visual representations depends on time and place and is culturally constructed. The social semiotic perspective of visual grammar and multimodality is mainly developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. In this thesis, modes are understood as semiotic resources that are used and interpreted at least partly in a similar way within a certain culture (time, place, group of people). That is, there is an assumption that we have a visual 'grammar' – or at least certain meaning potential – of composition, typography, colours etc. We interpret script fonts as more personal (handwritten) than Times New Roman and Helvetica as being more modern than Times New Roman. Semiotic resources of this kind are related to cultural connotations. In multimodal representations – like the products of graphic design –



different modes make meanings in interaction. Visual style can be seen as such as a result of intertwined meanings.

In this thesis, the theoretical framework of multimodal social semiotics is reflected in art and design practice, both during the processes and afterwards, building the theory forward.

References produced by researcher from/during doctoral research

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This Case Study is an outcome of the D.Doc Project, funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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