

# The vocabulary of visual messages

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All visual messages share a similar inventory of components through which designers shape the conditions for interpretive experiences. They are made up of *elements* arranged in *compositions*, which audiences interpret through visual *codes* or a grammar of form appropriate to the surrounding culture. Particular qualities in the rendering of elements, structure of compositions, and adherence or non-adherence to cultural codes constitute *style*, which we often associate with particular time periods, contexts, or philosophies.

## Elements

Elements are the physical signs and symbols (for example, images, words, colors, and graphic devices such as lines and shapes) used to communicate the subject matter of a message. The meaning of an element varies with its visual characteristics and surrounding context.

A drawing of a tool, for example, communicates differently from a photograph of the same object. We understand that in rendering the illustration, the designer chooses to include some features and to eliminate others. The quality of the rendering says something about the communication goal of the designer. A technical drawing executed on the computer evokes a different meaning (cool, clinical, precise) from a gestural marker drawing of the object in action (imperfect, human, expressive). In other words, most audiences assume some subjective intent in the choice to hand render an object through drawing rather than through other media.

In contrast—and because the camera includes in the image everything within its frame as a complete and literal representation of the subject (captured by an unbiased machine)—many viewers interpret a photograph as objective. This is why many consider photography to be a journalistic medium, impartial and accurate. But photographs can be just as subjective and connotative as drawings. Lighting, focus, cropping, depth of field, and pose or point of view can manipulate the meaning of the image, despite the mechanical means of its production (Barthes, 1977). And with today's software, photographers and image editors can digitally alter images, creating new meanings altogether. How elements are made and reproduced, therefore, carries connotative meanings over and above the subject matter of the elements themselves.

Words communicate differently from images. In some cases, they are more open to a range of possible interpretations. Consider the word "home." The meaning of the word alone depends on our personal experiences with the places where we have lived and our history of interactions with family, roommates, or neighbors in those places. A photograph of a particular home or the resident family, on the other hand, closes down the meaning to a much narrower definition (Figure 2.1). We make specific inferences about time, place, and people in ways not required by the word alone. While viewers may compare their judgments about the image to their own experiences, it is clear by the picture that the message is not about all homes in general. By contrast, the word "home" leaves these issues unresolved. In some communication, specific meanings are important. In other cases, a wider range of connotations encourages readers to "fill in" with details of personal experiences as part of the interpretive process.

Context also matters in determining what elements mean. A message that announces "Demonstration here!" means one thing at a science fair and another at the site of a campus protest. The words are the same in both contexts, but the surrounding environments lead to different conclusions about likely activities. Similarly, the individual meanings of any two elements may be very different from that of the same two elements in combination. An image of an apple means different things when combined with a book (teacher or education); a serpent (Adam and Eve, temptation); a computer (Apple Computer, Inc.); or a banana (fruit). Nothing about the image of the apple needs to change across the various compositions, but the presence of a second image shifts meaning in each case. Further, the range of potential meanings can vary even further when the audience doesn't share a particular cultural background.

**Figure 2.1**

The word "home" evokes many different meanings, each influenced by the specific experiences of the interpreter. On the other hand, a photograph of a particular home focuses the interpretation. While the viewer makes personal judgments of the time and place in the image, the range of possible interpretations narrows by ruling out meanings that do not fit the image.



Typographic form also depends on its juxtaposition with other typographic elements for its connotations. Designer Sibylle Hagmann developed a family of typefaces called "Triple Strip" (Figure 2.2). Individually, any one of the three typefaces is formally complete and has visual characteristics distinct from the other two typefaces. When used together, however, the three typefaces reflect the vibe of a city street; the energy of colliding styles and messages we find in urban environments. This intentional lack of visual harmony among the three typefaces is in contrast to the design of many other type families in which there are strong similarities among the weight and proportional variations within the family. The meaning implied by Hagmann's design, over and above the literal meaning of words set in the typefaces, depends entirely on the three typefaces appearing together.

Type/image relationships present additional opportunities for the construction of meaning. Under the simplest relationships, words "label" images and images "illustrate" words. In these instances, the individual meaning of the two elements are roughly the same and largely redundant. They reinforce each other or tell us what to think about the other in case the single element doesn't do the job. An advertisement that shows a sport utility vehicle splashing through a mountain stream bolsters the emotional content of the image with the words "rugged," "sporty," and "fit for adventure." The words label what the designer intends

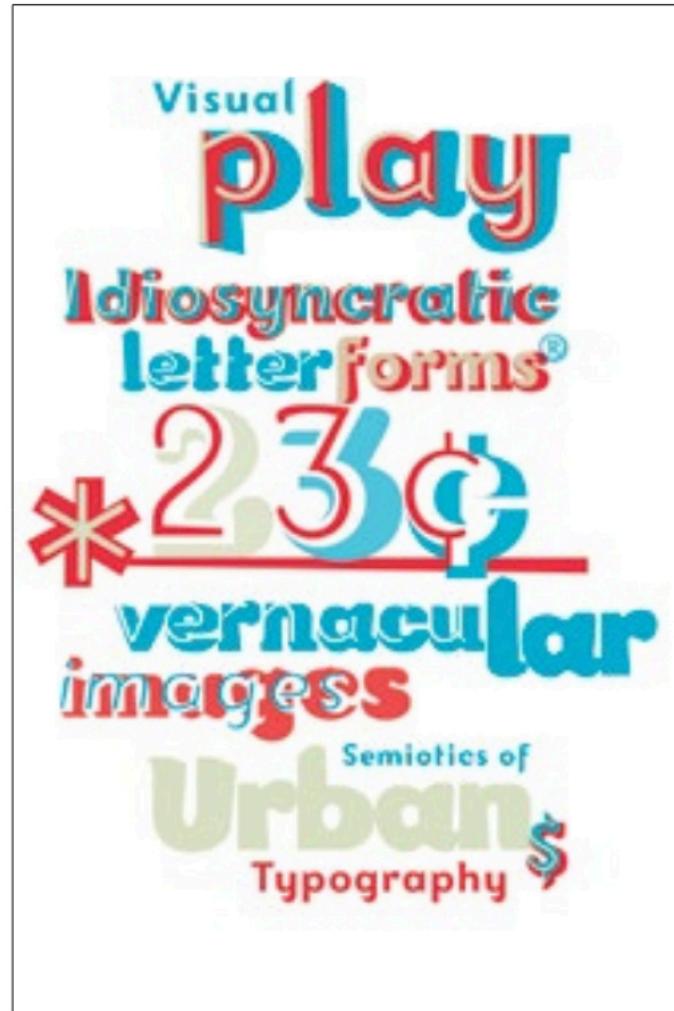
us to feel about the image. In other cases, an image can illustrate and narrow the possible interpretations of a word. The word "women" on a lacey pink background reinforces traditional ideas of femininity, shutting down alternative representations of women that might come to mind from the word alone. For better or worse, the image directs the audience to the specific meaning the designer intends by means of illustration.

More interesting, however, is when an element expands the interpretation or raises questions about the meaning of the other. Lacey pink typography that says "women" sitting next to a photograph of a woman in a hard hat with a sledgehammer says something about the diversity of women and their roles. The two views of women, one captured in typographic form and the other in photographic form, are in a dialogue that undermines conventional perceptions and expands meaning.

In another example, "Billions and billions sold" is an advertising slogan that describes the number of hamburgers served by a popular American fast food chain. When coupled with images of overweight children, however, the text/image combination serves as critical commentary on the causes of obesity—a "third meaning" not present in either of the two messages alone. And the text/image message is stronger than single images of overweight children and hamburgers because the

**Figure 2.2**  
TripleStrip typeface  
Sibylle Hagmann,  
Kontour

Hagmann's design of the type family Triple Strip combines seemingly dissonant typeface designs. While any single typeface is formally complete, its true character is defined by its contrast to other members of the family. Used together, these three typefaces mimic the eclectic qualities of an urban street.





**Figure 2.3**  
**Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, 1919–1920**  
**Lazar Markovich Lissitzky, 1890–1941**  
El Lissitzky's abstract composition refers to factions in the Russian Civil War immediately following the 1917 revolution. Even without knowing the history behind the work, the aggression of the red wedge is apparent. Its relationship to the white circle is a metaphor for violent conflict.

company sees the slogan as something to brag about. Many remember the phrase emboldened on the sign outside the restaurant. In this way, the combination of typographic and photographic elements expands meaning beyond that of the elements alone and invites conversation by the questions it raises.

Abstract shapes also take on different meanings in combination. The red triangle in El Lissitzky's "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" is more threatening when combined with a circular shape than when seen alone (Figure 2.3). We need not know the title of the work or its reference to the violent history of the Russian Civil War to understand the aggression of the red wedge. In this case, abstract form is metaphorical. The association of the triangular element with the physical attributes of

weapons and military action (for example, bayonets and the forward movement of an attack) versus a softer, more vulnerable object in a static position is consistent with the message content.

Elements also have cultural significance and mean different things to different people. A raised thumb online tells others how many people "like" the content of a website or comment, but the same gesture is offensive on the streets of Greece. Red is used as a sign for danger in many countries but means "good luck" in China. And 0/l is familiar to digital natives but probably less so to a technologically challenged grandparent (Davis, 2012). The choice of elements, therefore, has varying content significance for different audiences.

## Composition

Designers arrange elements to form *compositions*. The meaning of a message depends not only on the choice of particular elements, but also on their organization within a visual field (or in a sequence of visual frames, as in a film, book, or website). Composition determines which elements the audience encounters first and last; the perception of relationships among particular elements and not others; the affiliation of elements with specific areas of the surrounding visual field (for example, top/bottom, foreground/background, or presence/absence within the frame); and the construction of meaning through the integration of all aspects of the composition.

Contrasting size, color, shape, location, direction, and/or movement can draw attention to one element over others, to a hierarchy of importance among units of information. Designers influence our perceptual judgments of the importance or “behavior” of elements in terms of their appearance of weight or size in relation to other elements, balance with other elements, and distance from the viewer, even though all elements are simply marks or pixels on a flat, two-dimensional picture plane. Bold type appears to weigh more than light type. Two small squares on the right appear to balance one large circle on the left. A very large hat at the bottom of the visual field appears closer to us than a tiny horse at the top because we know the real sizes of the two objects and understand the illusion of depth achieved through size and position. The wiggling letterform on the screen seems poised for action or movement, while static text appears at rest. In other words, we assign meaningful behaviors to designer’s choices about the formal qualities of elements in two-dimensional compositions on the basis of our real experiences with objects in a physical world. Contrast with the surrounding field and novelty within a group of elements can direct attention to a single word over the entire sentence; the edge of the visual field over things in the more obvious center; or the smallest element in a field of really big shapes.

**Figure 2.4**  
*Céline Condorelli: Support Structures, 2009*  
**Sternberg Press**

**Designer:**  
**James Langdon**

The topic of Céline Condorelli’s installation, *Support Structures*, is what bears, sustains, props, and holds up. Langdon’s design for the catalog reflects the diverse nature of the subject through images that bear little obvious relationship to each other. Compositionally, within spreads and from spread to spread, Langdon establishes relationships through color, shape, and alignments that govern how viewers group elements.





Visual similarity among elements, alignments in their placement within the visual field, or ordering by some principle (such as a gradation in size or color) signal the viewer that certain elements share some particular relationship not shared with others in the composition (Figure 2.4). A reader distinguishes the chapter titles of a book from subtitles and footnotes by their visual treatment and placement—chapter titles are usually set consistently in larger type, surrounded by white space, and at the top of a page. If the numbers representing high and low temperatures in a weather report are typographically alike but different from other numbers (such as wind speed or dew point) readers interpret them as related, indicating how extreme temperature variations during the day will be. And photographs that share similar proportions or typographic elements with aligning edges may be seen as categorically alike but different from other elements in the visual field (for example, as representing a sequence of steps in a process). The compositional strategies that designers use not only create hierarchies of relative importance among visual elements, but they

also identify groupings of elements that are similar in their contribution to meaning. These strategies direct attention to relationships that are informative, beyond the literal subject matter or visual character of the elements alone.

Compositional strategies can create narrative relationships among elements as well, implying unfolding actions or suggesting stories through interacting elements. We interpret a stack of shapes as “tipsy” and likely to topple if there is sufficient empty space into which the shapes could “fall.” If there are eight people in a photograph but only two are looking at each other, we intuit some significant relationship between the two by virtue of the line formed by their gaze. A vertical financial bar chart tells a story of gain and loss in ways not as obvious in a horizontal chart of the same data. And when the sequence of pages in a book, frames in a film, or screens in a website exhibit deliberate pacing (from quiet arrangements to chaos and back again to quiet, for example) we read significance from one visual experience to the next (Figure 2.5).

**Figure 2.5**  
*El Taller de Gráfica Popular* (The Workshop for Popular Graphics), 2015  
Designer: Roy Brooks  
Courtesy of the Georgia Museum of Art

The spreads in Brooks' book design are as diverse as the graphic works and artists in the collection. There are layouts that match the bold straightforwardness of the art and others that encourage scholarly reflection. Together, they represent a compositional strategy that produces a specific experience for the reader.



**Figure 2.6**

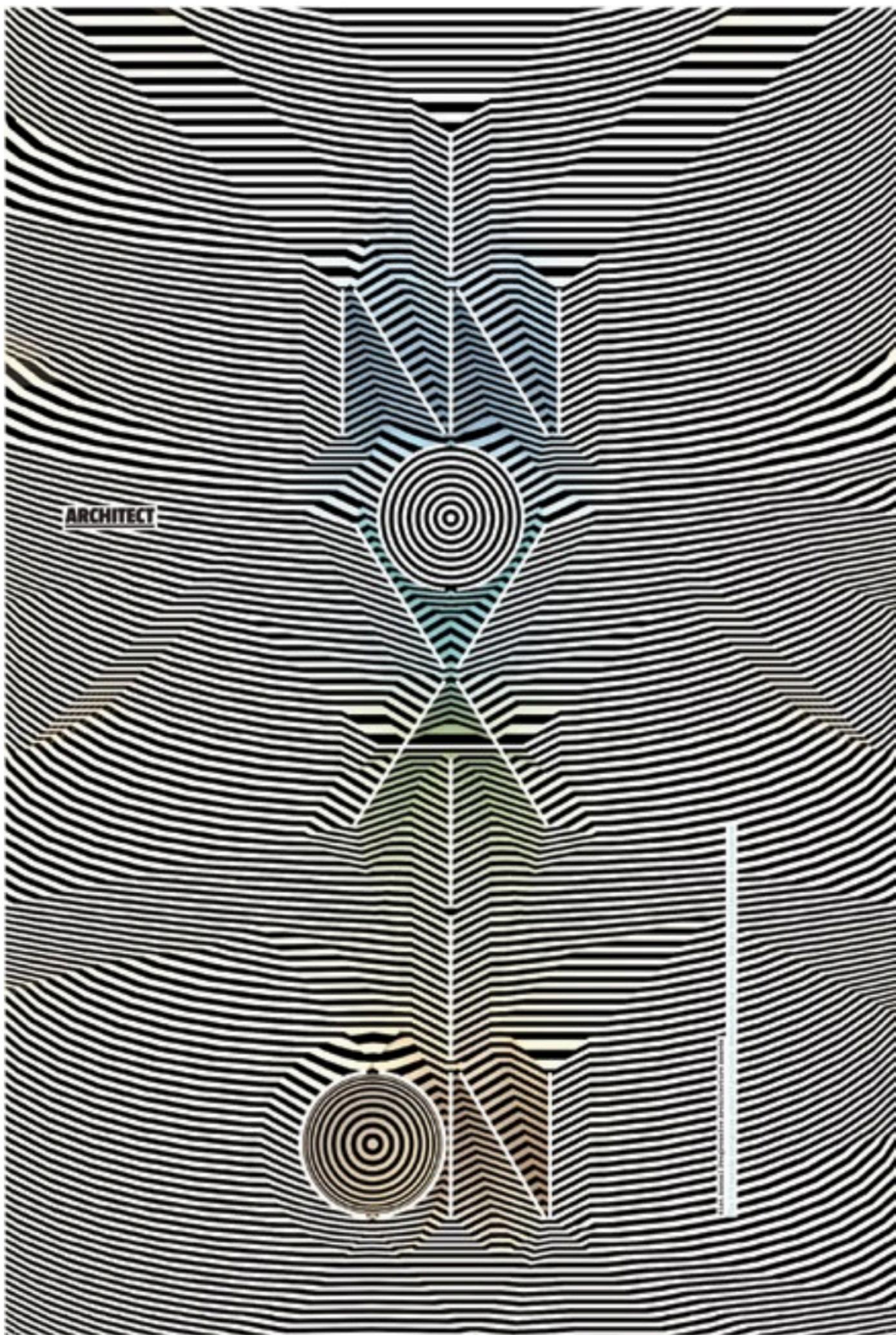
Fashion advertising often crops images to highlight a single perfect feature. In doing so, it robs the image of any story about the person, focusing instead on the model as an object.

Cropping, or the selective framing of image content, can dramatically change the meaning of an image. When designers tightly crop images, they intentionally reduce the narrative possibilities. There is less potential for interaction among elements, and meaning depends entirely on the content and qualities of the emphasized element. Advertising product or fashion photography, for example, often isolates specific attributes of a subject to highlight an attractive feature, avoid qualities that are less than perfect, or distract the audience from focusing on elements that are less relevant to creating the desired emotional response (Figure 2.6). In doing so, cropping eliminates the action or interaction among elements necessary for storytelling. Our attention is drawn to the sleek lines of the computer or the dewy eyes of the model, but we struggle to assign a story to these compositions.

Likewise, symmetrical compositions frequently stabilize all elements, shutting down the possibility of action communicated more typically through asymmetrical compositions. Symmetrical compositions align all elements along a central axis. This alignment is usually stronger than the effect of other visual variables that could signify specific relationships among some elements and not others. Such compositions often rely on top-to-bottom or center-outward hierarchies and the individual characteristics of elements (size or color, for example), reinforce the order of reading but rarely tell a story (Figure 2.7).

Compositional strategies also zone areas of the visual field, dedicating specific locations within the picture plane to certain types of information. For example, newspaper design frequently discriminates between content that appears “above and below the fold,” favoring the uppermost area of the paper for high-appeal headlines and images. Maps often cluster legend information in the corner of the printed page. And websites typically place navigational information at the top of the screen.

In other cases, clusters of like elements in particular locations can reinforce meaning. For example, isolating two contrasting political opinions in the left and right halves of the visual field support the interpretation of contrasting liberal and conservative positions on an issue. Locating general ideas at the top of a concept map with increasing specificity as the nodes cascade down the page helps viewers understand the hierarchy among elements better than a randomly distributed network of nodes. In these instances, placement adds to or strengthens the meaning of elements.



**Figure 2.7**  
**Progressive**  
**Architecture Annual**  
**Awards poster, 2014**

Thirst

Designer: Baozhen Li  
Designer/Creative  
Director: Rick Valicenti

Thirst's poster for the 61st Progressive Architecture Annual Awards uses a rigidly symmetrical composition, offset by asymmetrical typographic elements. The typographic elements draw attention precisely because they interrupt the strong axial arrangement of the title and pattern.

### Code

Just as the physical characteristics of architecture establish a visual and spatial grammar that orders the activity expected of us in different spaces—where to enter, where to linger, and where to keep moving, for example—there is a code to visual communication that shapes our interpretive experience. Culture determines these conventions for reading visual form. For instance, for those of us who read in English, there is a top/down, left/right code for working our way through text on a printed page. Not so in Mandarin Chinese. In Western cultures, it is typical for parallel lines in a composition—such as the two sides of a railroad track—to diminish in width and converge as they go into the distance. This system of artificial perspective is understood as a Western convention for creating the illusion of depth in a two-dimensional composition. Historically, Chinese and Japanese compositions communicated depth or distance by lines that converged in the foreground, grew wider in the background, and avoided any shadows that undermined the flatness of the picture plane. In other words, the meaning-making practices of a culture determine these grammatical codes for the arrangement of form, whether through repeated use by producers of visual artifacts or as extensions of attitudes, habits, dispositions, or belief systems built up by the culture over time. While seeming permanent, they are, in fact, frequently in flux and often evolve with the times.

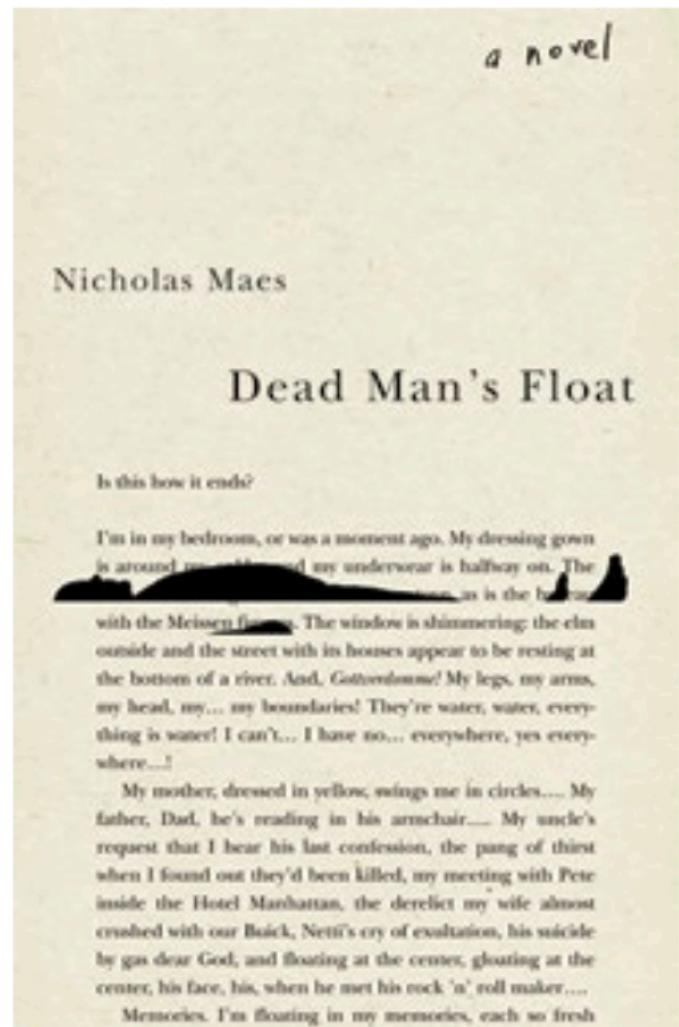
**Figure 2.8**  
**Dead Man's Float book cover, 2006**  
**Véhicule Press**

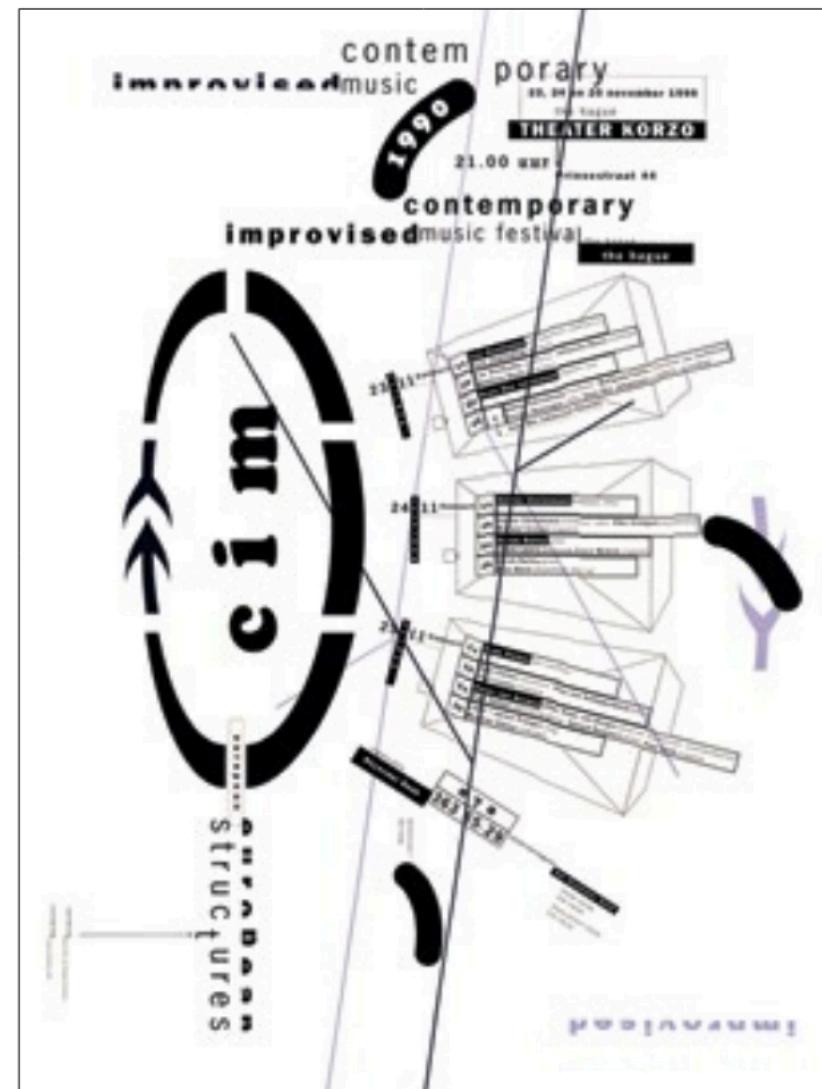
**David Drummond**

Drummond uses the conventional visual code for the typeset design of a book chapter with descending sizes of type as the text moves from the upper left to the lower right. He then undermines this code, turning the text into water by overlaying an illustration and annotating the cover with handwriting in the upper right corner. In doing so, he calls attention to the visual grammar of books while at the same time inserting elements that carry a story.

Conformity with cultural codes reduces the audience effort required to interpret the meaning of a message; we rely on past experience to recognize repeating structures. For example, we are used to seeing a monthly calendar arranged in a grid with Sunday at the front of each week and Saturday at the end. There are other ways to organize thirty consecutive days—we find many in contemporary day planners—but scheduling under these alternatives requires more thought to orient ourselves to the structure before doing the actual scheduling.

Designers can subvert codes for expressive reasons through careful decisions about elements and compositions. For example, if the upper right and lower left corners of visual compositions tend not to attract attention under the typical reading order in English, then placing a visually dominant element (by size, color, or shape) in the fallow corners pulls the viewer out of the normal reading pattern and slows down the mental processing of the composition. If the goal of the design is contemplation, then subverting the typical reading order may add some value to the interpretive experience. It could be an asset in the design of a thought-provoking poster, but not useful in the layout of a novel where maintaining the rhythm of reading from page to page is important (Figure 2.8)





Breaking the rules or undermining the accepted code is a typical strategy for design movements that challenge the status quo. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Futurists experimented with fragmenting the linear reading order or *syntax* of text. By breaking apart the logical sequencing of words in sentences and paragraphs—instead arranging typography in compositions with random letterforms of different sizes and fragments of sentences—designers sought to “wake up” readers for more critical interpretations of the social and political discussions of the time (Davis, 2012) (Figure 2.9).

At the end of the twentieth century, communication designers turned their backs on modernist compositional codes that favored clear typographic hierarchies thought to communicate the singular meaning of an author’s text. Believing that meaning is inherently unstable and ultimately

constructed by the reader—that we think differently about a text each time we read it and on the basis of our cultural position—designers explored compositions in which every element had multiple relationships with other elements on the page. No single element overshadowed another, and therefore, many meanings were possible. The shifting relationship could never be seen as producing a single interpretation because elements were always in struggle for dominance with others in the composition (Figure 2.10)

In both historical examples, designers challenged conventional Western reading codes to express new ideas and to produce specific experiences for readers. Such challenges usually arise from shifts in theories about how meaning is made and associate the disruption of visual conventions with particular philosophical movements or time periods in design history.

**Figure 2.9, top left**  
*After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Car, 1915*

**Filippo Tomasso Marinetti (1876–1944)**

The avant-garde Futurists used the disruption of syntax—the visual ordering of words and images—to challenge the traditional visual codes of printed communication with the intent to “wake up” a complacent reader.

**Figure 2.10, top right**  
*CIM Poster, 1990*

**Allen Hori**

Like the avant-garde work in the first part of the twentieth century, postmodern designers of the 1990s explored the role of syntax in visual messages. Forgoing an obvious hierarchy among elements, these compositions challenged a singular reading of the text.

## **Style**

Although *aesthetics*, *taste*, and *style* are concepts often used interchangeably, they have slightly different definitions. *Aesthetics* is a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, as well as a branch of philosophy that grapples with these notions. Philosophers debate the role of sensory and emotional experiences on our judgments of what is and is not beautiful and what is and is not art. While there are different perspectives across history and across cultures regarding what constitutes beauty, philosophies of aesthetics deal with a general class of concepts that are thought to transcend time and place.

*Taste* is an individual's pattern of preferences for certain qualities of form over others. Social and cultural experiences influence taste, so our preferences for form may change over time as we are exposed to education, advertising, popular culture, or new experiences. The distinctions between "good" and "poor" taste are often aligned with class, age, or ethnic differences and taste can be used as a means to discriminate against those whose likes and dislikes are different from our own. For example, a fundamental idea underpinning modern design movements of the early twentieth century was that by surrounding ordinary people with "well-designed" objects and environments they would overcome the limitations of their social class and economic status. Not everyone agrees that qualities such as detail, imperfection, or traditionalism are real limits to social mobility, so there is rarely a cultural consensus regarding issues of taste. *Kitsch* is a term used to describe objects thought to be in poor taste because they are garish, cheaply made, or nostalgic but appreciated in an ironic way or from a critical position on culture. These objects are often read in different ways by different social classes or subcultures.

*Style* is a distinctive form or way of presenting something that is characteristic of a time, place, or philosophy. While we often refer to individual artists and designers as having *personal styles*, the more common use of "style" in design refers to the collective approach of many designers to the rendering of elements, composition, and conformity or non-conformity with the visual codes of their times. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, commercial manufacturers produced poorly made goods in styles that imitated artifacts from the distant past. Stamped and cast metal replicated forms once carved in wood and stone, and industrial printing presses churned out

thousands of reproductions an hour with little concern for the fine art of bookmaking. The efficiency of these processes allowed average consumers to purchase the illusion of higher social status by owning stylistic facsimiles of objects previously available only to the wealthy. The Arts and Crafts movement in Europe was a reaction to the shoddy quality of these faux objects and to public nostalgia for styles of the past. Members of the movement advocated handcrafted work by trained artisans, "truth to materials," and forms found in nature as a means for bringing good design to every home. This approach was economically unsustainable as a business strategy, yet the visual vocabulary of the movement survived in a popular turn of the century style called, *Art Nouveau*. The style used colors and intricate ornament inspired by botanical forms (curling vines, leaves and petals) and can be found in objects as diverse as subway gates, furniture, and books.

Later periods of design history viewed style as something superficial that distracts the viewer from the direct experience of message content, as the opposite of substance. Mid-century modern movements such as De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and the International Typographic Style (sometimes called Swiss Design) developed new visual forms that celebrated the inherent characteristics of modern materials and machine production. Communication designers of this period favored geometric form, asymmetrical arrangements of elements on a grid, sans serif typefaces, and a color palette limited to primary hues, black, and white. Of course, this was no less a style than previous approaches but its origins were in function, not in cultural symbols of the past. More recent philosophies, however, view style as something that extends meaning beyond that of function and subject matter alone. Style evokes connotations built through our previous experiences of form or represents a deliberate break with the past. We associate typefaces, color, and the treatment of images with particular periods of history or contexts of use—as in the Vienna Secessionist, Constructivist, Art Deco, and Postmodern styles, for instance.

There is a difference between *imitating* style and *referencing* style to evoke and repurpose the connotations we associate with the original use. Paula Scher's hand-drawn maps, for instance, refer to well-known cartographic styles: the airline flight paths in onboard magazines; nodal diagrams in contemporary subway maps; and typography that follows landscape contours and political boundaries



on historical maps. The colors and graphic elements feel familiar, yet Scher's versions are fresh reminders of other maps without being literal reproductions of existing styles (Figure 2.11).

We classify typefaces by their styles, often noting references to the tools that originally contributed to the form of their stylistic predecessors. Old Style typefaces, for example, were originally created between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The thicks and thins in their strokes and left-leaning stress—an imaginary line connecting the thinnest parts of the letterform—originally resulted from the use of a calligrapher's flat-nosed pen (Figure 2.12). Although fonts are no longer drawn with pens, contemporary versions of Old Style typefaces still carry these connotations. These typefaces recall the elegance of hand-drawn form and the singular importance of the formal documents of the time.



**Figure 2.11, above**  
*U.S. Demographics and Economy, 2015*  
Paula Scher

Scher's painted maps refer to the style of topographic and airplane flight maps. They do not literally replicate these familiar artifacts or attempt to display accurate data, but instead use cartographic form to recall readers' experiences with graphic representations of geography.

**Figure 2.12, left**  
**Goudy Old Style typeface, 1915**  
Frederic W. Goudy  
(1865–1947)  
**For American Type Founders**

Goudy's type design exhibits the characteristics of Old Style typefaces (thick and thin strokes, oblique stress, and cupped, angled serifs). Many of these characteristics result from the tools used to draw the letterforms. The flat nib of a pen makes a thick stroke in one direction, a thin stroke in another. Contemporary typefaces that exhibit these characteristics may also be classified as Old Style and reflect the historic associations of the category.



**Figure 2.13**  
***The 9/11 Report:***  
***A Graphic Adaptation,***  
**2006**

**Ernie Colón and  
 Sid Jacobson**

Comic artists Colón and Jacobson condensed the report of the 9/11 Commission, which published the findings of events leading up to the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The original report involved interviews with 1200 people and a review of 12.5 million pages of documents. The artists made an important report understandable to the average American by using a style that is both accessible and expressive.



We also relate style with particular contexts of use. There are styles we associate with first-person shooter games, cellphone interfaces, international travel signage, and tabloid newspapers. When designers use these styles, they borrow the meanings associated with their use. In 2006, comic book artists Ernie Colón and Sid Jacobson released a graphic adaptation of the 580-page report of the *9/11 Commission*, which investigated the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York (Figure 2.13). The intent was to provide a more accessible explanation of the event in a style that the average American might actually want to read. Although some critics felt the graphic approach to the publication diminished the account of personal tragedy and government shortfalls, most reviewers praised the artists for making an important report comprehensible.

The interplay of message content, elements, composition, code, and style are the stuff of visual communication design. They shape people's use of information, influence their interactions with the world, and contribute to their histories of meaning-making. The chapters that follow describe principles and concepts through which designers construct the conditions for meaningful experiences. Discussions connect the visual vocabulary of messages with the sensemaking we apply to interpreting content. How does the treatment of elements, for example, draw attention to some elements over others? What are compositional cues that tell us where to begin reading? How do cultural conventions for the arrangement of form reinforce the meaning of texts and the hierarchy of information? What qualities of visual signs make them compelling and memorable? The explanations that follow connect our everyday experiences of perceptual phenomena with the tasks of visual communication designers and interpretations by their audiences. While there are no rules for the invention of form, it is possible to ground design decisions in experiences that are fundamentally human.

## SUMMARY

All messages include elements—words, images, and/or symbols—that contribute to the construction of meaning. How these elements are generated and the contexts in which we see them shape our interpretations. We make different assumptions about a photograph versus a drawing and respond according to expectations built through prior experience with representations and their contexts.

The arrangement of elements within a visual field or across time also influences what we think messages mean. Composition communicates a hierarchy of importance among elements and provides information about relevant interactions among particular components of a message. The ordering of elements can be narrative, communicating a story of evolving actions or relationships. Cropping robs images of their narrative potential, focusing our attention instead on image features rather than interactions that contribute to a story.

Visual codes constitute a grammar or set of rules for reading visual form. They are culturally defined and shared by people with common experiences and language. For example, readers of English interpret text from the upper left to lower right of a page unless the visual properties of particular elements pull attention to fallow areas of the composition.

Style is distinct from aesthetics and taste. It is often associated with specific periods of time, cultures, or philosophies. Style connotatively expands the literal meaning of messages, and when repurposed in a new context or time, brings forward content associated with its original use. A successful repurposing of style refers to these meanings without being direct imitations of the original.