

Introduction: The makers and the made

Mike Zender, Editor

Academic disciplines are a help and a hindrance. While they advance knowledge by focusing disciplinarians on a coherent set of related issues, those same boundaries that define and focus, also delimit and inhibit expansion of universal knowledge for the broad benefit of humanity. Such are Communication Design and Visual Anthropology.

Visual communicators (the discipline) focus on cultivating knowledge and methods to help designers make more effective communication objects. Professional communication designers, engaged often by clients to help them craft their communications to stakeholders, focus on making the clients' messages clear. While the visual communication design process increasingly includes evaluation of the effectiveness of communication for people, at least in the past, professional designers were often professionally indifferent about the actual content of the message or its cultural impact.

Visual Anthropology studies the visual aspect of cultural lives while also using visual techniques in anthropological research and representation. Designers are makers of visual objects that enter culture. Visual anthropologists study the visual cultural lives and experience. This seems like a recipe for cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Visible Language (VL) and *Visual Anthropology Review (VAR)* collaborated to produce this issue of *Visible Language* as an experiment to advance knowledge. *VL* invited two dozen visual communication scholars to read a selection of articles from *VAR* and respond. The seven authors and eight articles in this special issue are their response.

A couple of things stand out. Naomi Baron's article calls out the presupposition in Hammond, et al "Interrogating cultural anthropology text covers: Intended messages, received meanings" that textbook covers can shape students understanding of a discipline and that publishers intend messages about book contents in their covers. While Baron gives anecdotal examples that legitimately question how seriously students take cover designs, it is the *VAR* authors themselves that uncover the many factors that go into a cover design, very few of which concern students understanding of a book's contents let alone a whole discipline. Budgets often dictate outcomes. Part of that is the dictum that that covers use inexpensive (relatively) stock photography. Stock photography, while an interesting cultural study in itself, necessarily limits the potential that a specific cover will symbolize a specific book's contents. Rather, stock photos use off-the-shelf

generic photos created to fit a broad range of possible uses. The authors also point out that cover design is often guided by branding requirements for the publisher, or a line of books, or even the catchy title of a series of textbooks like “Mirror for Humanity” whose cover logically shows a reflected image, or “Seeing Anthropology” whose cover crops an image of eyes. Other factors the VAR authors did not explore also impact cover design, such as a designers’ style, or the perceived expectations of certain adoption committees. All of these factors go against the likelihood that covers are intended to communicate a book’s specific content, let alone the essential nature of a discipline. Baron suggested that Hammond and colleagues interesting study overplayed the theory that students are impacted by book covers. Most people just do not take book covers seriously. A recent article by Sabina Sieghart “The Influence of Macrotypography on the Comprehensibility of Texts in Easy-to-Read Language” in this journal pointed out that the genre of a communication can by itself communicate much to a reader. Low literacy readers could infer much of the content of an instruction manual or a menu or a poster just because the reader recognized that they were an instruction manual or a menu or a poster. This suggests that people know a book cover is not likely to do more than attract attention, as the students in Hammond’s paper suggested.

For visual anthropologists, this means that’s semiotic analysis should begin with understanding of a communication object’s genre and of people’s expectations of that genre. People know posters and book covers are trying to sell them something and interpret them accordingly. Menus and instruction manuals are read more seriously and interpreted more critically. A poetic instruction manual that leaves a lot of room for interpretation would be a failed instruction manual, whereas a book cover that is colorful and engaging but vague in meaning is probably fulfilling its role. To be more specific, in their semiotic analysis visual anthropologists should not infer that “the wall which runs horizontally across the image, dividing the water from the temple, connotes the separation of the terrestrial of humanity from the ethereal” when the user of the book cover with that image is just looking uncritically at an attractive, colorful cover whose photo reinforces the title, not searching for the meaning of the universe in it

In short, designers can learn from visual anthropologists to consider the possible impact of their work on people, and visual anthropologists can learn from designers to infer meanings in relation to people’s awareness of design genres.

Another thing that stands out is from Mary Dyson’s consideration of the things considered, and not considered, in LeMaste’s “Reappropriation of gendered Irish Sign Language in one family” in VAR. Mary observed that the authors did not consider adequately the forms of the signs in sign language. Designers know intuitively, if not explicitly, the principle of representational correspondence: that visual representations

should correspond with our mental representations. Up is best represented by something high on the page for example. Applied to icons and symbols, representational correspondence means that symbols that are closed in appearance (closer in semantic distance) to what they represent are easier to understand and recall. Dyson observed that this basic principle did not seem to factor into the analysis of which sign language symbols were selected to become Irish Sign Language. Because designers are invested in creating the most appropriate signs and sign systems, they would likely have evaluated the form of the signs selected with an eye to how well the signs fit the meaning. This factor jumps out to those who design symbols but was not considered by the visual anthropologists. Related to this would be how easy or difficult the sign is to make or how easy one symbol is to distinguish from all the others in the system. While designers would likely have glossed-over how many men's versus women's signs were chosen, the visual anthropologists focused on sex to the exclusion of form.

I could go on, but to conclude this introduction, I can say conclusively that our experiment in speaking into each other's disciplines has been fruitful to me. One of the first *VL* articles that I published as editor, Beier & Dyson's "Influence of Serifs on "h" and "i" Useful knowledge from Design and Scientific Research," called for more collaboration of communication designers with scientists, a call that echoed the call of *VL*'s founder Meradl Worlsted over 50 years ago. While the general idea that we should learn something from reading papers from another discipline is neither novel nor surprising, the features of what is exposed when we cross boundaries of visual communication and visual anthropology are unexpected and enlightening.

All the *VAR* articles cited in this issue are available on-line at the Visible Language website.