Introduction to Semiotics: DSGN 3100-1

Instructor: Robert Currie
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Class: Monday 9:00-12:00, Location N230
Credit Value: 3 Credits
Website   nscad.geneva9.com/dsgn3100/

Calendar Description:
This course surveys various theories of signs especially with relation to problems of visual communication. Prerequisite: 6 credits LAS. This course is cross-listed with CSTU 3100.

Planned Schedule:
Class 1   Introduction to semiotics
Class 2   Anatomy of signs
Class 3   Models of Communication
Class 4   Barthes: codes and myths
Class 4   Rhetoric
Class 5   Barthes: Semiotics of design
Class 5   Models of Communication
Class 6   Political semiotics
Class 7   Rhetoric
Class 8   Urban semiotics: signs and the city
Class 9   Technical semiotics: Software, interfaces and communication
Class 10   Greimas+McLuhan, bricolage and deconstruction
Class 11   Case study: How to apply semiotic analysis to a design problem
Class 12   Semiology of graphics
Class 13   Exam and wrapup

Grade Weights
Assignments:. 70%
Class discussion and quizzes . . 15%
Written exam. 15%

Texts and readings: see web site. Expect occasional short quizzes on assigned reading.

Additional readings: "The New Citroen" by Roland Barthes
"Semiotics in product design" by Sara Ilstedt Hjelm
"The Holy War: Mac vs. DOS" by Umberto Eco

Readings: Each class will include class discussion of assigned readings from the text or other sources. Expect to spend significant time on the readings; many of the readings will be challenging.

Course Objectives: This course serves as an introduction to semiotics. Students will be expected to have gained an understanding of the main schools of thought in semiotics, an understanding of the types of signs, and how to apply semiotic and rhetorical principles to practical and written work.

By the end of the course, students should be familiar with the context of semiotics as it relates to philosophy, linguistics and contemporary critical theory, and be able to use semiotics as a core design problem-solving skill.

Estimated weekly time commitment for this course: A minimum of 9 hours of work in and out of class. The readings are often challenging and will require re-reading and consulting additional sources to understand.

Responsibilities: Attendance at all classes and completion of all assignments and required readings is mandatory. Missed classes will only be excused with a doctors's note.

Grading System: Successful completion of this course requires that students perform to an acceptable standard in reaching the course objectives. This course will be graded as follows:

Letter Grade	Numerical Equivalent	Grade Point Score	Descriptive Term
A+	95 and above	4.3	Excellent
A	90-94	4.0	Excellent
A-	85-89	3.7	Very Good
B+	80-84	3.3	Very Good
B	73-79	3.0	Good
B-	67-72	2.7	Good
C+	63-66	2.3	Satisfactory
C	59-62	2.0	Satisfactory
C-	55-58	1.7	Satisfactory
D	50-54	1.0	Marginal
F(Fail)	49 and below		

At the end of the course, INCOMPLETE standing will be granted only in circumstances clearly beyond the control of the student (such as serious illness or bereavement) – at which time documentation will be required.

Grading Criteria: Completion of all assignments is mandatory. Evaluation will be based on a number of assignments, quizzes, and an essay assignment. Participation in class discussion will also account for a portion of the grade. Assignments and projects will be completed outside of normal instruction hours. Dates and details will be provided as the course progresses. All work must be submitted in English.

Accessibility

NSCAD University has a Policy on Disabilities (available on the NSCAD website) and is committed to providing equal opportunities to academically qualified students with disabilities. A key aspect of the policy is that students self-identify so that the appropriate accommodations can be made in a timely manner. Students with disabilities are responsible for initiating contact with the Coordinator of Financial Aid and Student Counseling ("Coordinator") or the Disability Resource Facilitator in the Office of Student and Academic Services before or within two weeks of the commencement of each semester. All information regarding individual students with disabilities is respected as confidential.

All faculty, staff, and students are responsible for safe working practices and procedures so as to safeguard their own individual health and well-being as well as that of other members of the NSCAD University community.

Without a current NSCAD ID, students will not be permitted anywhere on the campus after hours.

Individual instructors will provide information regarding the consequences of non-attendance specific to their course syllabi. Please note that students who miss the first meeting of a class may be withdrawn from the class so that waitlist demands can be met.

Attendance Policy

Class attendance at NSCAD is expected. Unexcused absences could result in lowered or failing grades. Any absences must be discussed with the course instructor who may request supporting documentation. Missing sequential classes that include essential health and safety training may result in the student having his/her enrolment in the course cancelled. Specific requirements for individual courses will be found in the course outline.

Plagiarism

NSCAD University has a policy on Plagiarism. This is a serious violation of Academic Integrity and penalties range from a zero for an assignment grade to Dismissal from the University. The Plagiarism Policy can be found at http://nscad.ca/site-nscad/media/nscad/plagiarismpolicy.pdf

Note: This course outline describes the course in general terms. Some changes in schedule may be unavoidable.

Planned Assignments

These dates and descriptions may change; in all cases, complete assignment descriptions will be posted to the class web site. In case of any discrepancy, the class web site is the definitive version.

Assignment 1
Visually document signs.

Label each one, and classify each example as indexical, iconic, or symbolic. Make sure each sign is one you have found and documented yourself - you may use photographs, sketches or text where appropriate.

Ensure that you are choosing a wide variety of signs, and not limiting yourself to obvious examples such as icons, way-finding signs, etc. Some signs may be difficult to classify, or may be difficult to designate as signs, but be prepared to justify their inclusion.

Submit as a PDF file. For each sign, note the signified (and if not obvious by the image) the signifier, and its Peircean category (index, icon or symbol). If sign spans multiple categories, note them. Lay out the document with multiple signs per page. **Due Jan 14.**

Assignment 2
Take a walking survey of the environment - choose a street, or series of streets, and choose a category - cars, buildings, businesses or other element.

Record names of the items of the type you have chosen, and then organize them into (possible) categories based on the names - a bestiary, if you will. Make sure you organize based on the characteristics of the names, not the products them-selves. Connotations values of names is what is most important here. Think about why the names are appropriate. What conventions are there about naming in this category? What qualities are the names trying to convey. In Barthian terms, what myths are these names supporting? **Due Jan 21.**

Assignment 3
Logos, Ethos, Pathos.

Locate three works of design - one for each of the three modes of rhetorical appeal. Create two alternate versions of each, using the other appeals. For example, if the work uses logos, create a version that uses ethos and pathos.

You do not need to redesign each work - you only need to submit an altered concept, using words to describe the new version. Submit as a PDF file. **Due Jan 28.**

Assignment 4
Dollar Store Semiotics

Make a visit to a Dollar Store. Choose a product that uses persuasion to suggest it is something it is not: healthy, genu-ine, effective, etc. Carefully analyse the systems of signs present in the item, using techniques similar to those in class on the knockoff brand chocolate bar. Treat the item as expressing a rhetoric: a systematic series of signs and messages, all performing different tasks.

Make reference to the various rhetorical strategies and appeals (ethos/pathos/logos), denotative and connotative language, types of codes and their audiences. Write a descriptive essay, outlining the semiotic aspects of the item. Use Barthes's "Rhetoric of the Image" as an inspiration, if you need. The Semiotics of Food and Drink may also be helpful. **Due Feb 11.**

Assignment 5
This is not a place of fun

Your task is to create a playground that kids will not want to play in.

Background: Cities often require land developers to provide playgrounds as part of new housing developments. The land developer in this case must comply and build a playground, but doesn't want kids hanging around, because rea-sons. The playground you describe must follow the basic rules for playground safety and accessibility. You can review some of these rules here. You can't use obvious impediments such as fences, razor edges, land-mines, etc. Nor can you simply post signs that say, for example, "No playing allowed." **Due Feb 25.**

Assignment 6
Tropes and schemes

Review the Rhetorical Handbook. Choose a single type of physical product - furniture, architecture, etc.

Create four versions of it using different rhetorical schemes and tropes. Label each one, specifying the trope or scheme. You may use words or images (or both) to construct your versions. All of your versions must be of the same product - your task is to create different variations on it. **Due March 11.**

Assignment 7
Metaphor and Interface

Choose an interface for a real software or hardware device. Re-design it using a strong metaphor (or metaphors.) Create a 1-page, landscape-format document depicting the interface. This is not a visual design exercise, but an exercise in communicating a concept.

Be prepared to explain your concept in class, using concepts covered in the "A Semiotic Model Of User-Interface Metaphor" reading. **Due March 25.**

Quiz

Written quiz on key concepts and readings.
April 8