

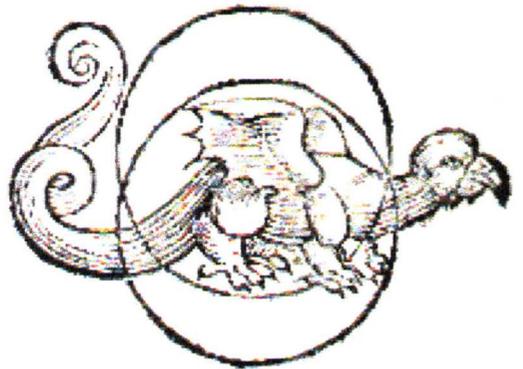
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# SYMBOLISM - Representation, Meaning and Apprehension

*Caroline Campbell*

*A Research Thesis submitted for the fulfillment of the Master of Design Degree*

*The Moon Dragon 1510*  
A serpent with a hawk's head situated between the circles of air and fire  
and symbolically representing the Greek capital letter theta.  
Agrippa of Nettesheim



College of Design, Fine Arts and Music  
Massey University  
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## **ABSTRACT**

What are symbols and how are they, as well as icons, perceived and used in New Zealand design? The key theme behind this study is to investigate whether icons and symbols, as logos, can be said to ideally represent the core concept of an organisation or company. It is suggested by semioticians, such as Pierce and Barthes, that the reading and apprehension of symbols is bound by social convention and cultural custom. Their meaning is apprehended through the configuration, or syntax, of design elements, or semes, such as colour, shape, line, and axial construction, and through situational context. In design praxis these graphic conventions reinforce the connection of the symbol with its referent, or object, and in semantic terms are described as imputed qualities. This definition questions the accepted practice in which the symbol/logo is designed to ideally represent the summative functions and core concepts of an organisation or company in an immediately recognisable way.

Historically, symbols have been used to structurally codify a set of beliefs, or social practices, or customs. This practice has identified them as marks, or brands, of identity which "ideally" signify those core attributes with which they have been associated. It is by association with these conventions that symbols, such as the Swastika, have been intentionally imbued with mythological values (different from the original meaning) which encapsulate the philosophical or ideological concerns of an organisation. The uprooted, historical example of the Swastika illustrates the capacity of symbols to act as powerful mnemonic signifiers functioning as gestalts, and capable of arousing considerable emotive reaction and identification.

With this contention in mind the aim of this study was to evaluate the hypothesis which questions whether the symbol/logo/icon is an effective conveyor of meaning. In order to test this proposition with some sort of rigour, both qualitative and interpretive methods have been used to assess the representation, meaning and apprehension of two dominant New Zealand icons, the silver fern/fernleaf and the kiwi, as well as six contemporary corporate logos symbol/logos. The methods included:

1. An in depth literature review
2. A questionnaire
3. In depth interviews
4. A focus group

The research study consisted of a questionnaire survey to evaluate the icons and the symbol/logos in terms of their significance, service or product, and preferred visual image from 50 participants. A focus group discussion was held with 7 individuals to determine their attitudinal responses to the same icons and symbol/logos. Three key informant interviews were conducted with two designers and one

communications consultant to discover how meaningful the use of symbolism was for them in the design process.

While research into the literary and theoretical analysis of the semantic function of symbols is necessary in considering their linguistic significance these issues are held to be secondary to the qualitative and interpretive evaluation of the visual representation of the symbol/logo/icon. Subsequently the application of this hermeneutic component as part of this study has enabled an interpretive and indicative reading and response to the symbol/logos/icons under investigation. In the case of the symbol/logos this has been achieved independent of the signifying typography which would literally contextualise and "name" them. It is this interpretive evaluation which has tested the representation and meaning of the symbol in its communicative capacity for the designatum.

The findings that arose as a result of this research methodology, while not conclusive, suggest that while symbols, alone, are not effective conveyors of meaning in their denotative function (in the contexts examined) they are effective to a degree in connoting the attributes which allude to the experiential activities with which the corporation or organisation is involved. While these meanings are not obvious, as in the case of indexical signs, the shape, form and colour of the symbols suggest certain attributes on closer inspection.

Finally, the branding of identity and the use of symbolism in that process is not just a contractual relationship between two parties rather it is an eternal triangle. Those involved in this three-way communication are the designer, the client and the customer, or recipient. What significance does this have for business, commerce and education? From the research study results and taking into account the reading of contemporary theory it is suggested that the use of symbolism is very much linked to the mythic structure of a corporation or organisation. It is this mythic structure, the narrative, which provides the framework from which the connotative meanings, the inherent qualities, are derived. It is suggested that this is the area which need to be developed prior to formulating the symbol/logo as the main denotative signifier. If not the symbol/logo runs the risk of being an empty vessel.

Further research into the correlation of symbols with their associated suggestive and emotive attributes and how those are perceived by a wider group than the one surveyed, systematically, would be of value not only for visual communication design but also for information design.

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## GLOSSARY

*Bricolage* ..... A term introduced by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in which new structures are pieced together from a combination of either heterogeneous or disparate elements.

*Connote* ..... The implication of meaning/s which are secondary to the primary meaning which, in this study, is signified by the denotata, name or designatum. These meanings or connotations are described as qualities or attributes.

*Deconstruction* ..... A theory associated with Jacques Derrida whereby the dominant reading of the text was subverted to become secondary. Rather than having a primary meaning the text was read as having many meanings that were dependent on the "gaps" and "supplements" in construction.

*Denote* ..... To signify as name for, to identify, to stand in for. In this case the symbol/logo once recognised can become a stand alone such as the Red Cross, or the Nike swash, or the golden arches of McDonalds.

*Designatum* ..... The name of the referent or the object. As it applies to this study it is defined as the organisation or corporation or product.

*Eponymous* ..... The Oxford Dictionary definition for this term is "one who gives his name to a people, place, or institution", for example, Kiwi.

*Fylfot* ..... Another name given to the swastika which is also known as the gammadion, or cross cramponnee. It denotes the path of peripheral forces.

*Gestalt* ..... This is defined as the configuration of shape, pattern or form which is more than the sum of its parts. In psychology it is used to describe the perceptions, reactions and responses which are determined by yet secondary to the stimuli.

*Hermeneutics* ..... This study is concerned with discovering and understanding the essential meaning of subject matter and its significance, whether that be human actions, utterances, products or institutions.

*Icon* ..... Sebeok describes the icon as having "topological similarity between a signifier and its denotata." The icon resembles the denotata in shape, colour, form. These Sebeok defined as "likenesses."

*Kaumātua* ..... A Maori elder.

*Kowhaiwhai* ..... A pattern of decoration featuring a branching form terminating in a koru.

*Logo* ..... The badge or emblem of an organisation, company or product which signifies as its mark of identity.

*Metonymy* ..... A linguistic term where the represented meaning of a subject or object is substituted with an attribute or part. For example the symbol of the crown for the Queen, the symbol of the hand for the worker, the symbol of the finger print for the individual.

*Ontology* ..... A metaphysical philosophy which seeks to answer the nature of being.

*Poststructuralism* ..... A theory which questions the dogma of subjectivity and language, and presents an alternative view in which difference and otherness as they apply to the subject/object relationship are valued.

*Praxis* ..... Accepted practice or custom, or practicing of an art particularly as it applies to representation.

*Rhetoric* ..... The art of persuasive and impressive speaking or writing which was purposefully designed with intention to impress or persuade the recipient. Aristotle classifies the art of oratory into the *deliberative*, which addresses the future; *judicial*, which addresses the past; and *evaluative*, which addresses issues of honour and disgrace.

*Semiotics* ..... The theory and analysis of signs and signification originating from the study of linguistics and its application to social and cultural conventions.

*Sign* ..... These Sebeok describes as indexical in that they are contiguous to, or on a continuance with, the signifier or are a sample of it. For example the direction of the weather vane with the wind; a directional arrow pointing out the intended flow of traffic.

*Structuralism* ..... A theory which investigates cultures and their social phenomena in terms of reading the symbolic interrelationships that are determined by the conventions and customs of that culture.

*Symbol* ..... These are described by Sebeok as signs having neither similarity or contiguity with the signifier. Symbols are defined by convention, by laws, by learnt association from which a consensus of meaning is evolved. For example the lion typifies courage and strength; the cross resumes the idea of sacrifice.

*Ur form* ..... The original or earliest form of representation of a thing or idea, a prototype. Possibly derived from the earliest known civilisation the Ur of the Chaldees. Chaldea is acknowledged by anthropologists to have existed in what we now know as present day Iraq.

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