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SYMBOLISM - Representation, Meaning and Apprehension

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

The Moone 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

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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 conveyer 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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This study into the representation and meaning of symbolism as it applies to the design and communication of identity could not have been achieved without the kind help and support of the many people, friends, colleagues, students, and those involved in the various organisations have all made this work possible. As anyone who has been involved in research knows this network of support is of inestimable value.

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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."
Kaumatua ..... 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 fingerprint 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.
CONTENTS

Abstract ..... i
Acknowledgements ..... iii
Glossary ..... iv
Contents ..... vii
List of Figures ..... xi
List of Tables ..... xii
List of Images ..... xiii

CHAPTER ONE : SYMBOLISM-REPRESENTATION, MEANING AND APPEHENSION

1 Introduction ..... 1
1.1 Discussion ..... 6
1.2 Thesis Format ..... 7

CHAPTER TWO : DEFINING THE SYMBOL

2 Introduction ..... 8
2.1 Immediacy of Ideas ..... 9
2.2 Meaning ..... 10
2.3 The Swastika ..... 11
2.4 Symbol and Language ..... 12
2.5 Rhetoric ..... 13
2.6 Semiotic Theory ..... 14
2.7 Symbols, Conventions, and Imputed Character ..... 15
2.8 Conventions ..... 17
2.9 Symbols, Semiotics, and Information ..... 19
CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

5 Introduction ..... 65
5.1 Findings of the use of the Symbol/Logo/Icon/Image ..... 66
5.2 The Silver Fern/Fernleaf ..... 67
5.2.1 Visual Representation and Appreciation ..... 69
5.2.2 Order of Visual Preference for the Silver Fern/Fernleaf ..... 71
5.3 The Kiwi ..... 72
5.3.1 Visual Representation and Appreciation of the Kiwi ..... 75
5.3.2 Order of Visual Preference for the Kiwi ..... 77
5.4 Logos in Common Usage ..... 78
5.4.1 Comparative Evaluation of Three Logos in Common Usage ..... 78
5.5 Perceived Meaning of the Logo for Life Flight ..... 81
5.6 Perceived Meaning of the Logo for Fusion Insurance Services ..... 83
5.7 Perceived Meaning of the Logo for Trilogy Computer Services ..... 85
5.8 Gender Comparison of Associated Perception ..... 86
5.8.1 Comparison of Responses ..... 90
5.8.2 Comparison of Correlated Functions and Services ..... 90

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS OF DATA

6 Introduction ..... 95
6.1 The Reading and Interpretation of Two Icons ..... 98
6.1.1 The Silver Fern/Fernleaf ..... 100
6.1.1.1 Preferred Image ..... 102
6.1.2 The Kiwi ..... 103
6.1.2.1 Preferred Image ..... 104
6.2. The Reading of Three Contemporary Symbol/Logos ..... 105
6.2.1 The Evaluation of the Life Flight Logo ..... 106
6.2.2 The Evaluation of the logo of Fusion Insurance Services ..... 108
6.2.3 The Evaluation of the logo of Trilogy Computer Services ..... 110
6.3 Symbolic Correspondences According to Gender ..... 112
6.4. The Effectiveness of the Use of Symbols in Design ..... 116
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

7. Conclusion ...... 120

APPENDIX ...... 125

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...... 143
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Details of the 10 participants who took part in the pilot study ...... 44
Figure 2. Representation of gender of the 50 participants ...... 46
Figure 3. Representation of age of the 50 participants ...... 46
Figure 4. Representation of ethnicity of the 50 participants ...... 47
Figure 5. Representation of occupation or field of activity ...... 47
Figure 6. Representation of other occupations or fields of activity ...... 48
Figure 7. Percentage comparison of male and female associations with the Life Flight logo ...... 90
Figure 8. Percentage comparison of male and female associations with the Trilogy Computer Services logo ...... 91
Figure 9. Percentage comparison of male and female associations with the Fusion Insurance Services logo ...... 91
Figure 10. Percentage comparison of male and female associations with the Te Papa logo ...... 92
Figure 11. Percentage comparison of male and female associations with the Learning Media logo ...... 93
Figure 12. Percentage comparison of male and female associations with the Air New Zealand logo ...... 93
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Combined responses of the 50 participants indicating the evaluation of the attributes assigned to the silver fern/fernleaf ..... 67

Table 2. Combined responses of 50 participants indicating the ranked order of the silver fern/fernleaf according to preference ..... 70

Table 3. Combined responses of the 50 participants indicating the evaluation of the attributes assigned to the kiwi as an icon ..... 73

Table 4. Combined responses of 50 participants indicating the ranked order of the kiwi according to preference ..... 76

Table 5. Combined responses of the 50 participants indicating the degree of perception and meaning of the function/services and attributes of the Life Flight symbol/logo ..... 80

Table 6. Combined responses of the 50 participants indicating the degree of perception and meaning of the function/services and attributes of the symbol/logo for Fusion Insurance Services ..... 82

Table 7. Combined responses of the 50 participants indicating the degree of perception and meaning of the function/services and attributes of the symbol/logo for Trilogy Computer Services ..... 84

Table 8. The comparative responses of 20 men and 30 women on the services/functions of six contemporary symbol/logos ..... 88

Table 9. The comparative responses of 20 men and 30 women on the services/functions of six contemporary symbol/logos ..... 89
LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1. Pseudo-Lull Alchemical Treatise c. 1470 ..... 1
From Alexander Roob Alchemy and Mysticism. 305.

Image 2. Negative hand print in red ochre, the Grotte de Gargas ..... 2
From the New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology. 3.

Image 3. The logo of Te Papa ..... 2
Courtesy of Te Papa

Image 4. Cover Design for Graphis Logo 1 ..... 3
From Graphis Logo 1, cover.

Image 5. The logo of Learning Media ..... 3
Courtesy of Learning Media

Image 6. William Swainson Black tree fern 1847 ..... 8
From the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Image 7. Neil Dawson Fernball ..... 8
Photograph: Caroline Campbell.

Image 8. Detail Raymond Lull The Alchemical Tree ..... 10
From James Wasserman Art and Symbols of the Occult. 29.

Images 9, 10, 11. Permutations of the logo of the New Zealand Tourism Board ..... 11
Courtesy of New Zealand Tourism Board

Image 12. The Swastika ..... 11
From Per Mollerup Marks of Excellence. 88.

Image 13. The logo of Fernmark Gold ..... 13
Courtesy of New Zealand Wool Group

Image 14. The logo of Life Flight ..... 16
Courtesy of Life Flight

Image 15. J. Bowring First Degree Board 1819 ..... 17
From Alexander Roob Alchemy and Mysticism. 293.

Image 16. Window transfer for the New Zealand Insurance Co., Ltd. 1859 ..... 18
From Richard Wolfe Kiwi More than a Bird. 22.

Image 17. "Buy N.Z. Made" ..... 18
From Richard Wolfe Kiwi More than a Bird. 51.

Image 18. Wellington City Council public toilet sign ..... 19
Photograph: Caroline Campbell.

Image 19. The Hebrew letter Tav ..... 22
Calligraphy: Caroline Campbell.

xiii
Image 38. The spiral of the National Library ..... 101
From the Strategic Plan of the National Library of New Zealand, inside cover.

Images 39, 40. Historic and contemporary phoneboxes ..... 101
Photographs: Caroline Campbell

Image 41. Maarten Holl Street performer Tim Denton ..... 103
From The Evening Post February 24, 2000, front page.

Image 42. R.N.Z.A.F. Kiwis fly sticker ..... 104
Courtesy of The R.N.Z.A.F.

Image 43. New Zealand Insurance Co., Ltd. window transfer 1859 ..... 104
From Richard Wolfe Kiwi More than a Bird, 22.

Image 44. The logo of Kiwi Mail ..... 105
Courtesy of Kiwi Mail

Image 45. Henri Dunant The logo of the Red Cross 1863 ..... 106
From Per Mollerup Marks of Excellence, 70.

Image 46. Rudolf Koch Sun Wheel 1930 ..... 106
From Steven Heller Symbol of the Century, Print, 42.

Image 47. Rudolf Koch The Swastika ..... 106
From Steven Heller Symbol of the Century, Print, 42.

Image 48. The logo of Life Flight ..... 107
Courtesy of Life Flight

Image 49. The logo of Fusion Insurance Services ..... 108
Courtesy of Fusion Insurance Services

Image 50. Book of Kells illumination The Chi Rho early 8th century ..... 108
From The Picture Encyclopedia of Art, plate 64.

Image 51. W. Jamnitzer Perspectiva Corporum Regularum 1568 ..... 110
From Alchemy and Mysticism, 625.

Image 52. The logo of Trilogy Computer Services ..... 110
Courtesy of Trilogy Computer Services

Image 53. S. Trismosin Splendor solis 16th century ..... 113
From Alchemy and Mysticism, 235.

Image 54. The logo of Te Papa ..... 114
Courtesy of Te Papa

Image 55. Huerta Record cover 1980 ..... 114
From Friedl, Ott, Stein eds., Typo, 291.

Image 56. The logo of Learning Media ..... 115
Courtesy of Learning Media
Image 57. The logo of Air New Zealand ..... 116
   Courtesy of Air New Zealand

Image 58. Carolyn Davidson The Nike Swash ..... 116
   From Per Mollerup Marks of Excellence, 172.

Image 59. Deidre Cassels The logo of the Wellington Regional Aquatic Centre ..... 117
   Siren Design

Image 60. The logo of the National Westminster Bank PLC ..... 123
   From David Carter ed., Logos of Major World Corporations, 100.

Image 61. The logo of Banque Paribas ..... 123
   From David Carter ed., Logos of Major World Corporations, 60.

xvi