VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN WEB DESIGN

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Abstract

This study proposes an interdisciplinary analysis concerning the features of visual communication in the field of web design. In the first part we intend to discuss the specifics of different forms of visual communication, and then we insist upon the importance of image functions in web design. In the second part of this study, using a qualitative research, we aim to interpret the aesthetic components of visual communication in recent web design and finally we will draw some conclusions.

Keywords: visual communication, image, web design, aesthetics.

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In this study, we aim to initiate an inter-disciplinary analysis regarding the specifics of visual communication in Web design. The study will initiate with an analyses of some of the theoretical aspects regarding visual communication in Web design, mainly focusing on image, after which we shall incorporate some of the aspects pertaining the functions of this type of communication. In the second part of the study, using semiotic, aesthetics and hermeneutics specific research methods, we will embark on a qualitative approach consisting of interpreting the aesthetic components of the image in Web design, so as in the end, to ideate a couple of conclusive appreciations.

We do mention that the interest and relevance of the subject are sustained by the important role that it plays in visual communication in Web design, particularly because of its aesthetic valence. Visual communication fulfils the space of remitting information according to the specifics of the particular Web site, adding to the verbal communication by visually translating the messages. Moreover, given its aesthetic valences, Web design becomes more graphic and expressive, generating a more or less intense aesthetic experience in the receptor.

1. Visual communication functions. Image in Web design

A Web page is generally defined as being „basic cell of information distribution in the global network, (…); a document or information resource available in digital format, which can be accessed via Web browser"[2]. The efficient accomplishment of a Web page entails applying techniques and methods from different fields, as Web design, communication science, marketing, psychology and aesthetics. The content of a Web page is comprised out of an ensemble of verbal communication means (textual and auditory) and non-verbal communication means. In the later category, we also mention visual communication. All types of Web pages, ranging form e-mail, socializing networks, blogs, search engines, audio-video streaming, online journalism, information, culture, electronic commerce, entertainment, etc. utilizes visual communication means. The selected codes for relating information are numerous – shape, colour, composition, being determined by the specific of the web page as well as by a series of factors focused on the receptor: demographic, social and cultural. Depending on the target receptor, we find *codes of mass spread* or *codes of limited spread* [3] being used. The first type of codes entail narrow semantics, with a singular meaning; their reception and understanding being generally accessible. The limited spread codes speak to selected individuals, to a scaled down audience, and in this case, their reception and understanding is being based on a common cultural experience.

The most important media of visual communication in Web design is *the image*, as much through content as appearance, the later, being itself represented by a series of nonverbal communication means: colour, font and style. An original image, with a coherent and consistent graphic expression, conveys identity to our Web page. Through visual identity, *a Web page* can be more easily remembered, moreover, it can be differentiated from other sites manly due to its aesthetic appearance.

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[2] Ion Stavre, *Comunicare audiovizuală. Aspecte ale europenizării societăţii româneşti*, Tritonic, Bucureşti, 2011, p.131

[3] John Fiske, *Introducere în stiinţele comunicării*, Polirom, Iaºi, 2003, pp.99-102

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Between the different semantic usages of an image, we mention the one we get from Wunenburger, according to whom; it expresses „a concrete, sensitive representation (as a multiplication or copy) of an object (model, reviewer), being it material (a chair) or ideal (a abstract number), perceptively present of absent and which thereby sustains a connection to its reviewer, can still be considered its representative and does not allow recognition, knowing and understanding”[4]. Generally speaking, the image, graphically of artistically represents a piece of information, a concept, an individual, an object, as physical bearer of a representation, being distinguished form the resulted mental image as assimilation of internal and external information. It is comprised of figurative elements and iconic signs that convey encoded visual messages. According to U.Eco, the visual message requires using different codes: *iconic* (figures, signs, enunciations); *iconographic* – culturally imprinted syntagmatic configurations (for instance religious symbols); *stylistic* – original creations, correlated with a aesthetic ideal or value and codes of the *unconscious* (which are the basis for mental reactions generated by different visual signs)[5].

Regarding the *functions of communication through images*, the fundamental function is one of *information delivery*. The image facilitates the relationship between the announcer and the receptor, thus easing the spread of the informational content. Furthermore, the image fulfils a *social function*, being one of the factors which can influence the receptor's interest as well as the identity of the Web page. We could also add the *rhetorical function* (using iconic argumentative methods) and the *symbolic function*: according to a social-cultural or archetypical determined semantic convention, the imagine, in a allusive manner, delivers information, inside the limits of artistic recognition. Given the symbolic dimension, the image can be presented polysemantically, its decodifying entailing the correct application of interpretative conventions.

Besides the fact that a good image determines attention, it also has the capacity to maintain it, to evidentiate the most convincing information by means of figurative signs and symbols. In contrast to the figurative signs, which represent only an arbitrary convention, the significant and the signified remain inter-dependent, the symbol has a artificially attributed significance and „requires significant and signified homogeneity, in the sense of a organizing dynamism”[6]. The symbolic image gathers in its sense archetypes, myths, structures, configuring itself in a substitution expression with a particular semantic and emotional load that affects the structures of the mind, decoding it determines interpretation. In Web design, images are also used due to the „socializing function of symbols”[7], linking social groups, identities, appearances, cultural, religious and political communities. Without going into detail regarding the sociology and psychology or the image, our focus aiming for the

[4] Jean Jacques Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2004, p.14
[5] Umberto Eco, *Tratat de semiotică generală*, Editura Ştiinţifică şi enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1982, pp.282-283
[6] Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicţionar de simboluri,* Artemis, Bucureşti, 1994, vol. 1, pp.23-24
[7] *Ibidem*, p.45

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communication and aesthetic function of the symbol we do mention that the symbolic shapes in Web design, are correlated with diverse psychological, social, cultural, political and religious representation.

A Web page expresses a mixed semiologic structure shaped by image and text, meaning, by an *iconic significant* and a *linguistic significant*. Besides these two types of significant, we can also distinguish a *heteroclite significant* [8], where we encounter the discursive dimension as well as the iconic one (for instance, the representation of a brand logo on a Web site, where the iconic significant is represented by the image and the linguistic significant by the name). The image delivers thus meanings, aided by symbols from its content, different for one culture to another. For instance, colour symbolism is different depending on the cultural contextuality, as example, the colour red is associated in China with joy, in Japan with fighting and in Europe with life and love. However, numerous visual symbols have been established not depending on the cultural context, being constantly used in Web design.

Besides the stated functions, an important role is being fulfilled by the *aesthetic function* of the image. As a graphic-expressive structure, the image is capable to generate an aesthetic attitude of reception and contemplation with satisfaction of its component elements. The aesthetic manner in which a Web site is being presented can be decisive regarding maintaining the receptor's interest. The image, for the target receptor, delivers a message in queue with the characteristics of the particular Web page, expressed, as we have mentioned before, with the aid of visual language, accompanying and complementing the written and spoken one. Delivered in such a manner, the message makes communication more efficient; moreover, it has to bring new novel elements to capture the audience's attention.

2. Aesthetic components of visual communication.

Adding to the aspects regarding the „functionality, usability, isolating the application interface, adaptability, consistency"[9], when creating a Web page, an important role is relayed on the aesthetic components. These components confer an attractive, pleasant and at the same time high-end look to the Web page. One of the most important components of Web design is the creation activity. Adding to the application of software technology in Web design, choosing the aesthetic components, combining classical and modern artistic elements ensure identity and originality. To be able to ensure its objectives to inform, a Web page must be adequately received by the target audience, the aesthetic components being essential in this process. To obtain an attractive Web page, besides using special effects from various editing software, you need good knowledge of artistic language, generally, of communication means in graphic arts. To reach the desired effect, Web design must account for a series of cultural, social and demographic factors, as the age of the receptor, gender, education, cultural environment, etc.

A Web page contains an array of static and dynamic images (graphic files in a GIF, JPEG or PNG encoding) which, to capture attention, can utilize multiple aesthetic components. An advantage is to be considered, due to the unlimited space in

[8] Jean Michel Adam; Marc Bonhomme, *Argumentarea publicitară. Retorica elogiului şi a persuasiunii*, Insitutul European, Iaşi, 2005, pp. 91 – 103

[9] Sabin Buraga, *Proiectarea site-urilor Web. Design şi funcţionalitate*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2005, pp.199-200

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the Web world, the images can be constructed and devised in a variety of ways. An original Web design can generate an artistic image, meaning a metaphoric or symbolic graphic representation with aesthetic value[10]. In this case, the image is engrafted on the aesthetic content of the decorative components that express different artistic classical or modern styles, most of the times in a re-significant and eclectic manner: Baroque, Gothic, Impressionism, Art-deco, Art nouveau, Minimalism, Suprematism, Abstractionism, Surrealism, Pop-art, Graffiti, Urban-art, Retro, Grunge and so on.

Out of the aesthetic components found in Web design, we mention[11]: geometric aspects (surface graphics, perspective, framing, dimension, profile, lines), content-shape ratio, whole-part ratio (fragmentation, overlapping, dividing, insertion), chromatic scale, usage of light (contrast, intensity, saturation), transparency effects, symmetry, asymmetry, using dynamic of animated effects, page texture, font type and size, painting perspectives, etc.

The chromatic elements represent the aesthetic components most used in Web design, being determining its success[12]. Because of its aesthetic, semantic and affective value, the language of colours expresses multiple and complex significations, being able to communicate mental information and aesthetic attributes, engaging intense aesthetic emotions.

Colours can influence the receptor's attention and can communicate complex messages; this is why choosing the shade range in Web design is extremely important. The colours used in Web design fulfill the role of attracting and capturing the receptor's attention. More over, if they are associated with a visual symbol can generate recognition and identification (for instance, depending on the context, a colour can be associated with a brand, a religious sign, a politic value). Various studies have emphasized that using colour represents a decisive factor, „determining a percentage of over 55% of accepting or dejecting a Web site"[13]. Colours influence us in a positive or negative way, determining certain psychological and physiological states. Generally speaking, extroverted people are attracted by bright colours, whilst the introverted ones by pale colours. Dark colours can induce depression; the light ones can bring joyfulness and a state of wellbeing. As an example, the colour violet induces melancholy, yellow is a dynamic and warm colour, expressing joyfulness and spontaneity. Besides the fact that they can induce certain mental states, creating affective reactions, colours can influence communication, thus warm colours have the ability to stimulate, the cold spectrum of colours to hinder. When designing a site targeted towards children, using mostly warm and bright colours is advised[14]. Colours bear multiple and diverse symbolic representations, their signification being different depending on culture, religion and demographics. For instance, in western culture, black can have different significations, symbolizing, depending on context, mystery, death, elegance or refinement, in eastern culture, all of these are attributed to the colour white.

From the different tonalities associated with colour symbolism, we mention but a few significations, with the mentioning that it can vary between the contexts:

[10] Patrick McNeil, *The Web Designer's Idea Book, Vol. 2: More of the Best Themes, Trends and Styles in Website Design*, How Books, F+W Media, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2010, p.14
[11] Armin Vit, Bryony Gomez-Palacio, *Graphic Design, Referenced: A visual guide to the language, applications and history of graphic design*, Rockport Publishers Inc., 2012
[12] Călin Ioan Acu, *Optimizarea paginilor Web*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2003, p.123
[13] *Idem*
[14] *Ibidem*, p.123

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red expresses life, vitality, love, passion, intensity, speed, fire, courage, femininity, enthusiasm, vigilance, war, violence, aggressiveness, sin; *yellow* – dynamism, energy, strength, fertility, masculinity, optimism, faith, eternal life, wisdom, envy, suspicion; *gold* – royalty, godliness, power, luxury, opulence, wealth; *pink* – romance, tenderness, affection, kindness, shyness; *green* – environment, nature, youth, spring, joy, eternity, vigour, immunity, grace, freedom, hope, success, luck, money, concentration, security, health, regeneration, recycling; *blue* – spirituality, transcendence, infinite, loyalty, law, order, water, sky, truth, serenity, meditation, dreaming, melancholy, peace, wisdom, tranquillity, protection; *white* – innocence, truth, purity, sincerity, perfection, medicine; *black* – absolute, nothingness, unconscious, magic, mourning, inferno, sadness, non-conformism, mystery, refinement, elegance, professionalism; *orange* – energy, creativity, equilibrium, dynamism, vibration; *brown* – earth, stability, security, power, confidence, authority, comfort; *purple* – spirituality, sacrifice, wisdom, grace, introversion, ceremony, royalty; grey – maturity, intelligence, modesty, technology[15].

We mention that in Web design, colours are mainly used with positive symbolic signification and associated with aesthetic values. A similarity between the manner in which colours are used in advertising and Web design can be noticed. Under symbolic aspects, as in advertisement creation, all the four types of colours can also be found applied in Web design: *trend colours* (specific to certain stylistic trends, used only in certain periods of time, generally over a short time span), *social colours* (their signification is attributed to the values of certain communities, institutions, generations), *cultural colours* (regarding specific customs, traditions or rituals) and *archetype colours* (symbolic representations of the sacred)[16]. For instance green is considered to be a trend colour by designers, signifying nature, youth, freedom. Its *social signification* is mostly associated with ecology, the *cultural signification* is the coming of spring, regeneration, nature, health, and the *archetypical* signification refers to different symbolic representations of the sacred.

Over its psychological functions, colours in Web design have the role to highlight the other aesthetic components, especially through effects of *luminosity*, *shade* and *intensity*[17]. The black-white association is another aesthetic component widely used in Web design as a background element, framing and contouring for the other colours. Choosing the black and white images presents various advantages: they concentrate the essential and ease the assimilation of the central element of the Web page, from an aesthetic point of view, the suggest elegance, refinement, slenderness. More than that, they can be creatively coded; black and white associations can be found in different cultural contexts.

[15] Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Op.cit.*; C.I. Acu, *Op.cit.*, p.124

[16] Petre, Dan; Iliescu, Dragoş, *Psihologia reclamei şi a consumatorului*, Comunicare.ro, Bucureşti, 2004, p. 80

[17] C.I.Acu, *Op.cit*, p.124

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Figure 1: Painting elements of Impressionism;
http://davegamache.com/chase-happiness/

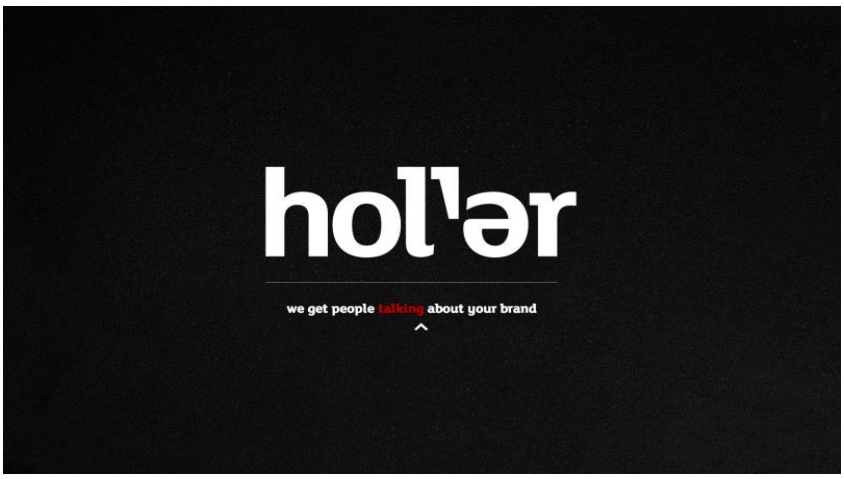

Figure 2. Stylistic minimalism; black-white contrast; http://holler.co.uk/



Figure 3: Elements of Impressionism; photographic and light effects;
http://www.julianabicycles.com/

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Figure 4: Elements of Pop art and urban-art; http://aestheticapparatus.com/

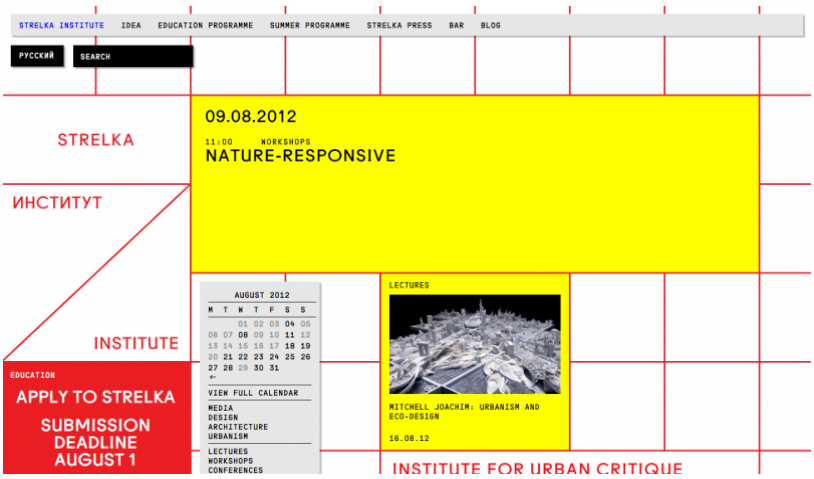

Figure 5: Elements of Surrealism; warm colours; http://www.strelka.com/?lang=en



Figure 6: Chromatic contrast on black background; photographic effects; http://ryanmichaelkelly.com/

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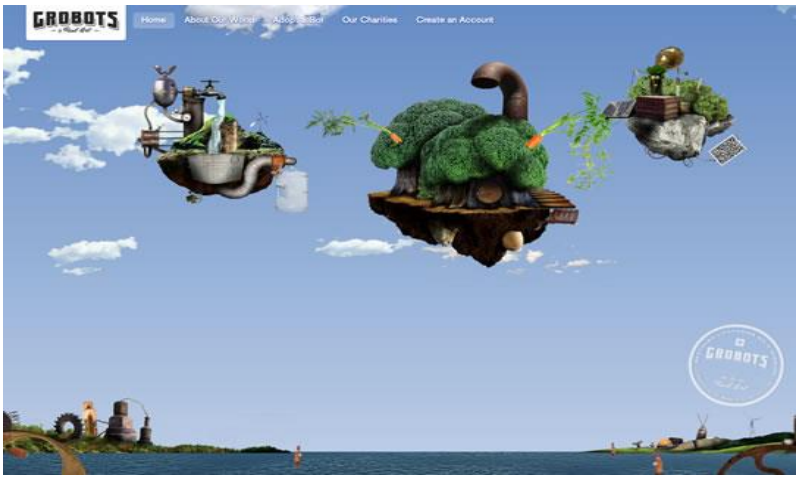

Figure 7: Chromatic symbolism (green, blue); http://www.recycledlifeforms.com/

3. Conclusions

Visual communication in Web design is, most of the time, more expressive than verbal communication, being able to symbolically illustrate attributes, emotions, feelings and values. Web design entails composing a spectacular image that can capture the receptor's attention, quickly communicating as much information as possible in the shortest time possible. The image becomes a mandatory instrument in conceiving a Web site, being able to efficiently, graphically and artistically convey a message. In Web design, aesthetic components are decisive, the semantic valence of aesthetically valuable images are capable to determinate the receptor's attention. When properly created, from an aesthetic point of view, the image can cultivate the audience's sensibility and taste.

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Note: The Web sites have been have been accesed between 15.05.2013 - 7.06.2013

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