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SEMIOTICIANS AND DESIGN. RESULTS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents and discusses the results of an international survey¹ conducted in 2012 on the relationships semioticians have with design and on the value added to the conception, production, distribution and use of design artefacts. The point of view of 206 semioticians on design is presented here and particularly the views of those working with, on and in design.

2 WHO HAS BEEN CONTACTED AND HOW FOR THIS INTERNATIONAL SURVEY?

The survey was initiated in March 2012 and completes the studies conducted by Eric Fouquier (1999), Gille Lugin (2006) and Anthony Mathé (2011), but differs from them due to the nature of the questions focusing on design and the media and to its international dimension.

The survey comprised of thirty closed or open questions divided into three implicit series.

We will very briefly present the first series focusing on defining the identity of semioticians and their theories, the second series of questions concerned the relationship of semioticians with design and the media, and the last series addressed their views on the future of the collaboration between design and semiotic research.

The online survey was sent by e-mail to all semioticians belonging to semiotic networks and mailing lists.

Semioticians in agencies were contacted by using the major social networks and by directly contacting the agencies themselves.

All recipients were encouraged to share the survey with their colleagues, which had a snowball effect and yielded 206 responses in three weeks.

3 FROM WHICH COUNTRIES DID THE RESPONDENTS COME FROM AND WHAT DID THEY DO?

¹ This part of the study was published in Darras, B. (2012). Qui sont les sémioticiens et que font-ils ? Enquête sur leurs relations avec le design et des médias (Who are semioticians and what do they do? Investigating their relationships with design and the media). In *Signata*. Vol. 3 (2012) *L'institution de la sémiotique : recherche, enseignement, professions*. ISBN: 978-2-87562-010-1 ISSN: 2032-9806

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The 206 respondents to this survey were mostly European (84%) and 32% were French² Their places of business were generally large university cities and, in 43% of cases, capital cities.

Besides, 127 of them (61.6%) were academics, 11 were researchers, 17 were PhD students and post-doctoral students, 8 were undergraduate students and 26 (12.6%) worked in a design agency or office as semioticians, marketers, consultants, etc³. The commitment to semiotics of the respondents to this survey was therefore very strong.

In addition to teaching and academic research, 77 respondents (29% of the total) reported working as freelancers in agencies or other institutions. Some academic semioticians therefore had a dual activity and, conversely, some agency semioticians also taught at a university. (This was also observed and recorded in the studies carried out by Lugin, 2006 and Mathé, 2011.)

These field activities were distributed as follows: 45.5% of respondents were freelancers, 19.5% worked in an agency, 7.8% in a design office, 7% in an R&D centre and 4% in a market research institute. Two people worked in a government agency and two others in an art centre⁴.

4 WHICH DESIGN DISCIPLINES ATTRACT SEMIOTICIANS?

With 80 choices out of 569 expressed in this question with multiple answers, the nebula of communication design outweighed the very similar field of graphic design that brought together nearly 60 respondents and was placed slightly ahead of product design (55 respondents). These three types of 'traditional' design are followed at some distance by web design, ahead of product design, surface design being at the bottom of the list.

² Respondents were mainly European (173 of the 206²) and working in France (66), Italy (16), Germany (16), Finland (14), Estonia (14), Belgium (11), United Kingdom (9), Canada (10), Switzerland (9), Brazil (8), Denmark (5), United States (5), Luxembourg (4), Mexico (4), Spain (4), Tunisia (3), Sweden (2), Austria (2) Russia (2), Netherlands (1), Ukraine (1), but also Venezuela (1) and Lebanon (1).

³ Two designers, a musicologist and an artist also responded to the survey, with 13 respondents belonging to various other professions.

⁴ As we mentioned, this survey was easier to distribute in academic circles than to freelancers, agencies, institutes, offices, which are not as close-knit as academia. It is therefore difficult to use this study to demonstrate the range of career opportunities available to semioticians.

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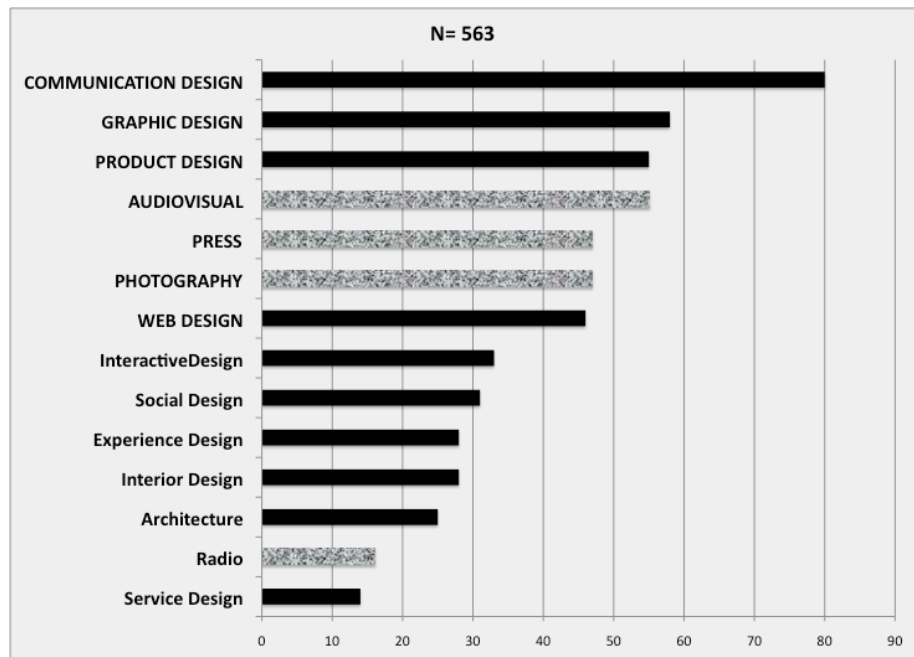


Figure 1 – This bar chart shows the types of design and the most frequently chosen media in capitals and others in lower case.

Concretely, epistemologically and historically, European semiotics comes from the academic world of the printed word, the page and the book. By extension, it has expanded to images by constituting a corpus of 2 dimensional objects. Is semiotics fundamentally predisposed to address this 2 dimensional world or is it merely a historical, sociological and institutional effect, the academic world having imposed its canonical objects to the theorists of signs?

The fact that a minority but significant part of studies is performed with objects that are not 2-dimensional suggests that semiotics is adaptable. In this area, pragmatic, systemic, interactionist and cultural approaches seem to have advantages that still have to be exploited. Interest in product design seems to escape this pattern, but when one takes stock of the studies devoted to it (See Darras and Belkhamza, 2009), one can see that semioticians are mainly interested in the interface areas of the 'skin' of the products and that these are often 2-dimensional.

Furthermore, there are new design trends that are both more complex and less well known. This is the case for interactive, social, experience and service design which creates 'objects' that are dynamic and fluid, seeming less easy to define and to comprehend through semiotics than the traditional forms of design. The challenge of the complexity at the heart of these devices is still to be addressed and it questions the theories and methods of the semiotics that are available at this moment in time⁵.

⁵ Semiotic studies of interior design and architecture also pose similar problems. The volume, size, dynamic complexity and nature of meaningful experiences question semiotics. Regarding the media, the areas of audio-visual, the press and photography are 'traditionally' part of the leading group, while radio seems to have been left behind.

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5 WHAT TYPE OF SEMIOTICS?

Like many future French semioticians, my training was in semiology following in the work of Roland Barthes and Georges Péninou who worked at the Publicis agency in the sixties. Trained in the semiotics of the Paris school, I was very interested in the work applied to design by Jean-Marie Floch, but, in 1978, the Writings on Semiotic by Charles S. Peirce translated by Gérard Deledalle provided answers to the methodological doubts left by structuralist approaches. For me, as for many others, it was the beginning of the turning point of pragmatism, as noted by Cécile Lavergne and Thomas Mondémé (2008). I left semiology for pragmatic semiotics. I was not the only one to make this move since, according to our survey, 40% of respondents followed the same course over their careers.

In our survey, pragmatic semiotics tops the preferred methods, being the discipline chosen by nearly half of respondents (47%), which combine it with cognitive approaches. The fact remains that the answers to this question show the diversity of semiotic theories, notably the diversity of support for epistemological and methodological methods.

Thus, nearly a quarter of respondents (23.8%) admit to having changed their approach, not by abandoning a semiotic theory for another but by 'picking and choosing,' 'tinkering,' mixing or enriching it, depending on circumstances and projects. This methodological syncretism⁶ undoubtedly deserves a special study regarding its motives and effectiveness.

6 WHAT IS SEMIOTICS?

When asked to prioritize what semiotics was for them, the respondents considered that it was first a method of analysis. As shown in the following table, this answer was the most common, being the top choice of 95 out of the 206 respondents and the second choice for 64 of them.

In second place comes semiotics as theory. Then, with a good preference level, in second and third place, semiotics as applied theory.

| | 1 st choice | 2 nd choice | 3 rd choice | Total answers |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| A method of analysis | 95 | 64 | 27 | 186 |
| A theory | 91 | 30 | 26 | 147 |
| An applied theory | 46 | 53 | 39 | 138 |

Figure 2 – What is semiotics?

⁶ See Berthelot-Guiet (2004) and Darras et al. (1993).

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As it was possible to classify the application areas in answering the same question, one can clearly see that these options are clearly less often selected, as indicated in the following table, which ranks the various items⁷.

| | 1 st choice | 2 nd choice | 3 rd choice | Total answers |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| A creative tool | 20 | 21 | 31 | 72 |
| An evaluation tool | 12 | 19 | 26 | 57 |
| A R&D tool | 9 | 19 | 21 | 49 |
| A consultancy tool | 9 | 17 | 20 | 46 |
| An auditing tool | 4 | 19 | 14 | 37 |

Figure 3 – Semiotics as a tool

We tested the distinction between 'academic semiotics' and 'commercial semiotics' by cross-tabulating the results, not taking into consideration the answers of semioticians who did not teach semiotics but worked in an agency, market research institutes, R&D or as freelancers. Their rankings were identical to those of the overall survey respondents and in the same proportions. "Semiotics is a general theoretical box of tools," as one respondent summed up.

7 DESIGN AND SEMIOTICS

WHY IS SEMIOTICS USEFUL FOR DESIGN?

Let's now return to the main objective of this study, which focuses more directly on the relationships semioticians have with the very wide field of design and media.

All phases of the design process proposed as a response option were selected by one respondent or the other as being usefully supported by semiotics. It is precisely what many respondents indicate, saying that "it is useful everywhere." This was also confirmed in the testimony of an academic with consulting experience: "My experience (in the different areas where I have undertaken semiotic studies: creative agencies, research institutes and businesses in the automotive, insurance and banking industry...) shows that most of the mentioned items are relevant to answer this question." D.B.

As stated by a Danish academic: "Semiotics is also relevant as a meta-theory of design, i.e. for understanding the nature of signs, tools, and models in design, the nature of cultural artefacts, etc." (M. M.)

However, when we classified the answers in the following table, it appeared that this overall usefulness can indeed be graded.

Among the leading answers, one finds the traditional disciplines of semiotics, dominated by the definition of the communication of a product (64%). The

⁷ This distribution was unequivocal in the wording of the items to choose from, which distinguished 'theory' and 'method' on the one hand, and 'tools' on the other.

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usefulness of semiotics for the study of practices (59.9%) and reception (54.3%) also obtained a large amount of answers, as did the preliminary study phases (54.8%).

| ITEMS | | |
|--|--------|-----|
| To define the communication of a product, a visual, etc. | 64.00% | 126 |
| To study practices | 59.90% | 118 |
| In preliminary studies | 54.80% | 108 |
| In reception studies | 54.30% | 107 |
| | | |
| During the pre-creation phase | 48.70% | 96 |
| During the creation phase | 47.20% | 93 |
| In market studies | 45.20% | 89 |
| In usage studies | 42.60% | 84 |
| During the creation process | 41.60% | 82 |
| To test prototypes | 36.00% | 71 |
| | | |
| To write specifications | 29.90% | 59 |
| In <i>benchmarking</i> studies | 25.90% | 51 |

Figure 4 – What is the use of semiotics?

In line with the answers to the previous question, the usefulness of semiotics was also recognized in the creative phases of pre-creation and creation, but somehow in second place. Semioticians were often criticized for having the tendency to hinder or block the creativity of designers with their recommendations, which may be manifested here in the hesitation of a large part of the respondents. It is also noted by one of the semioticians in the field: "In my view, semiotics is more of a tool of knowledge (of a market / of strategies as well as stakeholders, to understand market fundamentals and differentiate oneself / of the strengths and weaknesses of the stakeholder studied vs the competitors) than a creative tool. It is used upstream of a study (which explores attitudes, habits and reception), and downstream to highlight the points of reception." F. M.

Surprisingly, we observed that market studies did not attract a lot of answers.

At the bottom of the scale are the most technical operations such as Benchmarking studies (25.9%) and writing specifications (29.9%). However, in agreement with the above quote, we know from experience that a comparative study of the strengths and weaknesses of the competition can be improved when a semiotician is in charge or at least gets involved. Similarly, the contribution of a semiotician in the drafting or supervision of specifications is also very useful.

8 WITH WHOM DO SEMIOTICS ACTUALLY WORK?

Communication departments are at the top of the ranking, they are the favoured partners of semioticians, who can then rub shoulders with kindred spirits. Designers and, to a lesser extent, creators are also frequent partners. Then come other partners, notably sales staff, who seem the least attractive. A

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further study on the values and the technical culture of these two communities remains to be undertaken.

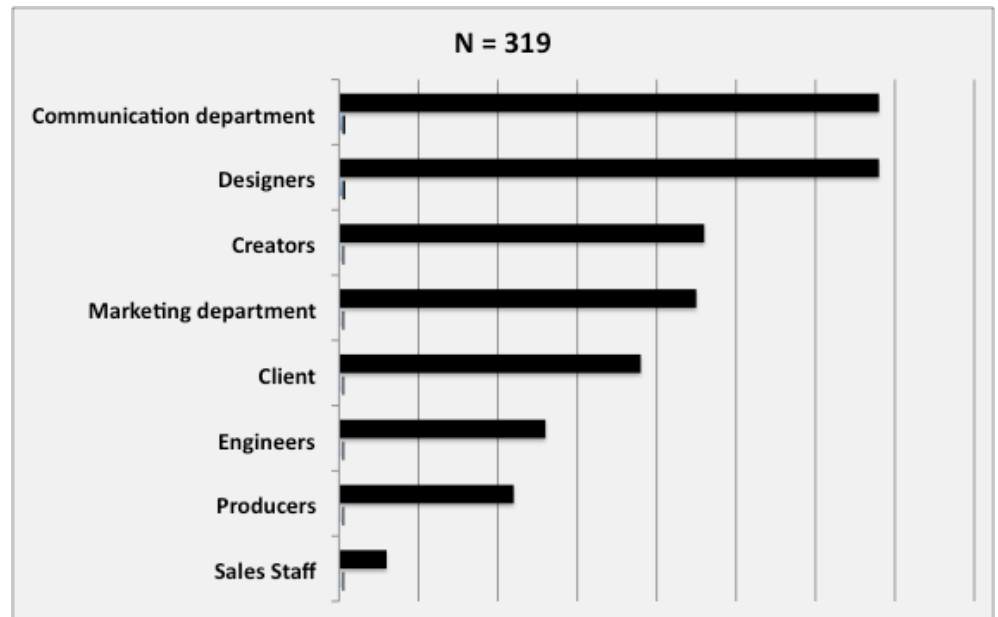


Figure 5 – With whom do semioticians actually work?

9 HOW DO SEMIOTICIANS EVALUATE THE IMPACT AND THEREFORE THE VALUE OF THEIR STUDIES?

For most respondents, the level of impact of their analysis on the final product is strong, 37.4% of cases, or very strong (8.4%). More prudently, 29.6% of respondents believe that their impact varies widely. For others, it is average (14.8%) or has little or no effect (5%).

10 WHAT DO SEMIOTICIANS THINK ARE THE BENEFITS OF THEIR SEMIOTIC ANALYSES?

The next question was aimed directly at value, “according to you, in terms of quality, uses and success, what are the most important benefits semiotic studies provide to design products and the media?”

The vast majority of respondents (166) have answered this question and after analysing their differences and similarities we gathered them into six large groups. On this occasion, we noticed very complete answers and a fairly low recurrence rate, except for a few key notions or concepts, which are highlighted in bold in the following sections. This low convergence of answers is typical of heterogeneous samples.

This is probably the case for the respondents to our survey who actually belong to different theoretical, professional and national ‘communities.’ The detailed answers that result also reflect the richness of the relationship that semiotics

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and semioticians have with design. Once assessed, all responses offer a wide overview of the contributions, benefits and values that semiotics brings to design.

1. Semiotics provides a theoretical and conceptual framework

Like all major theories, semiotics is used for thinking and reasoning, it offers a theoretical and conceptual framework for the following activities: observing, distinguishing, analysing, categorizing, comparing, structuring, synthesizing, understanding, evaluating, criticizing, describing, objectivizing, arguing and rationalizing.

2. Semiotics provides a set of methods

It allows one to deepen, broaden and diversify the meaning and go beyond the frameworks of reference of producers and receivers. "Going beyond the consumer's frame of reference."

These methods are used to connect and interact, co-construct meaning and identify the functioning of interpretive communities.

They also contribute to link theory and practice, deliberation and action, the laboratory or design office and the field.

They favour the construction of an overall vision, as well as mapping and modelling.

Finally, they help analyse processes and products, but they also support creativity, the process of creation, invention, innovation and research for originality.

3. Semiotics provides a set of qualities

It increases attention and especially sharpness, to quote George Péninou, but also accuracy, clarity, lucidity and insight, as well as intensity and depth. It is powerful, transfixing, trans- and cross-disciplinary.

It is logical and promotes rigorous work, objectivity and supra subjectivity.

4. Semiotics supports the following activities

It is a major tool upstream for benchmarking activities, preliminary studies, diagnoses and audits, planning and anticipation phases, but also downstream during the phases of test development and interpretation, assessment and feedback.

It helps formulate and solve problems, notably by offering functional solutions. It supports the development of the project, the development of scenarios and strategies and ensures their continuity.

It supports decision-making and ensures the responsibilities and consequences of those decisions.

It is also an aid to coordinating and monitoring because it encourages interdisciplinary cooperation. It promotes and supports the dialogue between creators, designers, strategists and communicators by contributing to the translation of knowledge and expertise.

Finally, it fosters team upskilling.

5. Semiotics can achieve the following objectives

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Upstream, semiotics helps define objectives, differentiate them, target recipients and position a brand, a concept or a product.

It helps clarify, adjust, optimize and adapt them by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, by distinguishing the good from the eccentric, by avoiding mistakes, shortcomings, paradoxes and contingencies, which it helps correct and redirect.

It emphasizes the objectives of intelligibility, readability and precision, and promotes relevance, as well as powerful and persuasive effects to potentiate and valorise the product in order to enlarge the number of its receptors, recipients and users.

It aims at product efficiency and contributes to the product's success and profitability, while helping to improve their characteristics, ergonomics and usability, as well as the comfort and well-being of the recipient.

It is usually less expensive than qualitative and quantitative studies. This is indeed the hypothesis advocated by a participant: "They provide an approach based in complexity and pragmatic, and the result they show are normally similar to that you can get through a qualitative survey." Unless the semiotic study includes qualitative and quantitative studies...

Finally, semiotics contributes to reassure the sponsor of the studies and sometimes tends to 'impress' them.

6. Benefits in comprehension

The answers regarding the benefits in comprehension offered by semiotics were divided into two groups, on one hand, everything that related to the processing of the meaning and significance of the product itself and, on the other, what related to the stakeholders of the exchange network.

Regarding the product as a sign, semiosis, speech, etc., the respondents identified four types of benefits.

a- As shown by the number of occurrences, the interpretive benefits of signs take precedence on monitoring the chain of meaning and the traceability of the meaning of products, but also on the interpretation of qualitative and quantitative studies. Reference was also made to the revelation of implicit or hidden meanings.

b- The respondents observed benefits in the identification of signifying elements, on the link between the meaning and the perceptible, of reading contracts, the study of multimodality, as well as the impact of context and environment.

c- Another type of benefit concerns the clarification of the operation of signs and semioses, their impact, the effects they produce and their various consequences, including on the development of cognitive processes.

d- Finally, some respondents pointed out the possibilities for action on signs and semioses to better control them, but also to emphasize and enhance their effects, and overall to improve them so they make 'more sense.'

In most cases, the benefits in comprehension are focused on reception, beliefs, values, uses, practices and experiences of the user.

Some respondents mention the comprehension of the relationships and interactions between the signifying structure of the product and the practices and uses associated with it.

Rarer still were those who mention the benefits in comprehension for designers and creators.

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Only a few semioticians (including us) emphasized the benefits in comprehension when addressing the entire channel of commission, design, production, product, distribution, reception, use and their interactions and closures.

As one respondent explained, "communication is no longer seen as a destination-reception-feedback process, but as a continuous phenomenon of signification."

This approach that has long been advocated by Eliséo Veron, Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall for example, was surprisingly little mentioned.

11 CONCLUSION

As reported in 1972 Georges Péninou (p. 22) "the higher the degree of awareness a creator has towards what he does, the sharper his lucidity becomes, the better his mastery of the advertising sign becomes, the more his awareness of the responsibility of the signs can develop." This view is shared by seventy percent of respondents to our survey, who think that the future of semiotics is big or fairly big in the training of designers and creators where it already exists⁸.

This semioticians' point of view on design will soon be complemented by a survey with designers to determine their relationship to semiotics and semioticians, as well as their expectations. According to semioticians, who are also researchers, semiotics as a theory and as a tool brings a lot to design.

The answers given to the thirty questions of this survey show the remarkable commitment of almost all semioticians who agreed to share their views and expertise.

However, when reading the comments accompanying the responses to closed questions, we have identified some challenging remarks about the exploitation and enslavement of semiotics.

Although very rare, they reflect, in our opinion, a purist approach to the theory and low esteem for applied semiotics and so-called 'commercial' applied studies or at the service of "the dominant ideology and neoliberal governance." These remarks would deserve a thorough debate on praxis in semiotics, on fundamental, speculative and empirical research and on the engagement of semioticians in R&D.

In response to these ethical and political criticisms, we agree with the comment made by a female semiotician when responding to the survey: "Since I believe that Peirce's system is a way of thinking or interpretation, it is potentially useful for all aspects of design: analysis, projection and synthesis. Of course, we need to transform the theory into useful tools to make it actual and useful for practice. In other words, by itself semiotics is not useful (though valuable), but can be made useful." R. C.

⁸ When asked about the academic future of semiotics, respondents were rather optimistic as nearly 55% of them think that this future is big or fairly big⁸. However, 19% of them think that it is limited or small. In 2014, the French Ministry of Higher Education seemed to prove them right by requiring universities to apply Bachelor's and Master's degree denominations in which semiotics had disappeared. If nothing changes, the semiotics curriculum will therefore only be considered as complementary to the main curricula, and future semioticians will have to, as they once did, train through specialization.

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