

12th World Congress of Semiotics, Sofia 2014 article [\(Submitted 4 November 2014\)](#)

[Published online Feb 2016](#) pdf version Jan 2017

http://www.iass-ais.org/proceedings2014/view_lesson.php?id=142

Interpreting Pictures: A Systemic-Functional Semiotic Model for Visual Imagery

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1. “Look! The Sun obeys my syntax”

Velimir Khlebnikov’s (1913) wry observation about how our languages structure our realities is an apt introduction to an article which explores how a semiotics of language may be adapted to analyse and explain how visual work may also structure our experiences of the world in a shareable form.

Semiotics, the study of signs within society, is a powerful tool of interpretation, able to facilitate the negotiation of multiple meanings from visual works. This article introduces the provenance of systemic-functional semiotic theory, and contextualises its application in the domain of drawing. Demonstrating the flexibility of a visual semiotics through the compilation of a chart formulated for decoding visual (rather than linguistic) modes of communication, the article examines divergent interpretations through an analysis of selected drawing practice. Alternative interpretations and insights are shown to be negotiable as a result of a series of choices made by both artist and viewer. Semiotics reveals how images generally deemed to be straightforward and natural within their conventional

discourse are actually cultural constructions, the result of social and historically formed positionings.

2. The Provenance of Systemic-Functional Semiotics

Semiotics is generally understood as the study of *signs*, and the discipline was first mooted in Europe by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). Semiotics is often used to analyse how meanings are negotiated within the process of communication, but can also be useful as a means of synthesising work..

A *sign* is anything that can be used to stand for something else, or as Umberto Eco (1976:7) quipped “Semiotics is...the discipline studying everything which can be used to tell a lie...”, illustrated, for example, in Magritte’s famous warning about the treachery of words and images:



Figure 1 Rene Magritte 1929 *The Treachery of Images* oil on canvas 60x80cms Los

Angeles County Museum of Art.

As a linguist, Saussure realised that language was (and still is!) a system of arbitrary signs, *symbols* (written words, spoken sounds) which bear no relationship to their referents in the world: the word *pipe* bears no relation to a real pipe, and neither does the word *Ceci*, or ‘this’, as Magritte asserts. To that extent, Saussurean semiotics would seem of little use to visual artists.. However, the American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (1867), working much earlier, had already recognised a taxonomy of signs, including some which actually do bear relationships with their referents: *iconic* signs, which resemble their referents – as does Magritte’s image resembling a pipe, and *indexical* signs which are caused by their referents, as Magritte’s handwriting points to – indicates - the speed and pressure of the hand that made it. A synthesis of the insights of Saussure and Peirce affords the possibilities of a visual semiotics which *can* be of use to visual artists, and it is this potential we shall explore in this article.

3. Functions of Communication

Saussure’s work influenced the Russian Formalists, who were theorising language and literature around the time of the 1917 revolution. Roman Jakobson (1958), a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and later a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, developed a model of six *Factors* involved in the process of communication: the *Sender* and *Receiver* of the *Message*, within a *Context* involving the necessity for *Contact* and the sharing of a *Code*. These six factors have their corresponding six functions of communication: the *Emotive* drive of the Sender and the willingness – the *Conative* drive – of the Receiver to negotiate the *Poetic*, the function which draws attention to the Message itself, which is normally *Representational* of its subject-matter. The *Phatic*

function ensures Contact is maintained, and the *Metalingual* ensures both Sender and Receiver share the same Code:

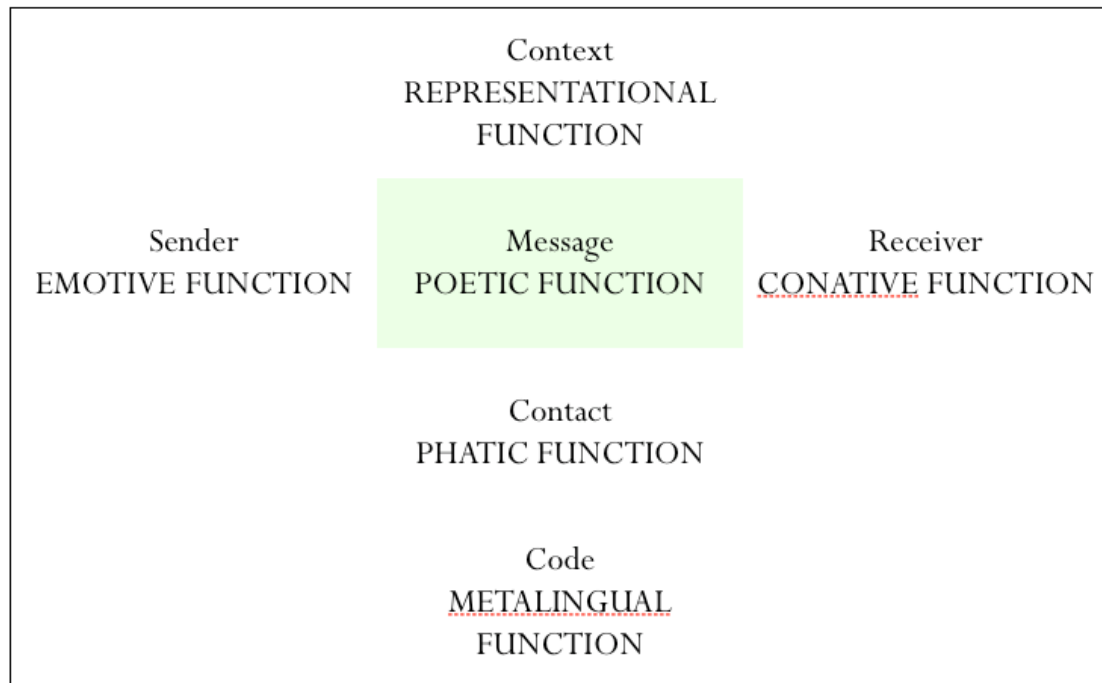


Figure 2 Roman Jakobson 1958 *Model of Communication*

For the purposes of visual artists,, the Sender becomes the *Artist*, the Receiver becomes the *Viewer*, and the Message becomes the *Artwork*.

3.1. Systems and Functions in Semiotics

Systemic-functional linguistics is a theory of language derived and refined from Jakobson's model by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday (1978) in the 1960s and 1970s. Essentially, Halliday noted that the Emotive function and the Conative function might be combined into an *Interpersonal* function. Jakobson's Representational function is re-named the *Experiential*, since what is represented are our experiences of the world,

and Halliday recognised that the crucial function for any analysis of the arts – Jakobson's Poetic function – is actually about drawing attention to the formal qualities of the work, so although Halliday, working with language and written text, termed this function 'Textual', we shall retain Jakobson's original term, *Poetic*, for the model presented as Figure 3.

The term *system* in systemic-functional semiotics stands for the ranges of compositional choices available to us. It is a term introduced by Halliday's teacher, linguist John Rupert Firth (1957) who also introduced the term *sociological linguistics* to locate the study of language within its social perspective, suggesting that social context and language are *interdependent* : social context influences use of language; language-use influences social context. This interdependency is referred to by linguists as *register*, a concept equally applicable when visual artists consider how to compose a drawing suitable for a particular age-group, for example, or viewers from a specialist discipline. Firth followed the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (Holquist 1981) and members of his circle formed around 1917, who had recognised that communication in all its aspects was always *dialogical*, Bakhtin's term to explain the context of situation between the participants in any act of communication.

4. A Systemic-Functional Semiotic Model of Communication applied to Drawing

Finally, in this potted provenance of semiotic theory, during the 1980s and up to the present, Michael O'Toole (2011), a pioneer of visual semiotics working at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, has argued that Halliday's model for language is equally potent when adapted for the analysis of visual codes of communication, and

demonstrated this by analysing examples of painting, sculpture and architecture. In general terms, humans have devised visual codes of communication expressed through a variety of media and processes – for example, drawing, painting, photography, film - which function to make tangible to others our moods and attitudes towards the experiences represented. Specifically, in illustrative terms, we compose images which represent our experiences, or simply tell stories, and the processes of composition – our selection and combination of visual elements – affect the viewers’ attitudes towards what is represented.

In terms of drawing practices, Firth’s notion of *system* includes the range of mark-making media, the range of grounds, the range of compositional formats and sizes, the range of line qualities, textures, colours, in other words the elements of visual language available for selection and combination into a visual means of communication. Such choices carry the potential for meaning, *where there is choice, there is meaning*: for instance, the mark of a 6B pencil carries more potential for gestural connotations than the mark of a 2H pencil. Their potential for meaning comes from their differences.

Figure 3 represents a model of communication, adapted by the present author and research student Amanda Roberts (Riley 2014; Roberts and Riley 2012; 2012a) for the study of drawing from O’Toole’s own adaptation of Halliday’s model for language. In this model, the three functions are arranged horizontally, and the varying degrees of attention at which any work may be scrutinised are here arranged vertically and labelled *Levels of Engagement*, from the level of detailed scrutiny of individual marks within a work, right up to the work in its wider social context, where systems relating to display - of framing, lighting, or the placement of the work within a print format or on screen -

might be studied. The matrix thus formed by these two axes contains the systems – ranges of choices – appropriate to each level of engagement:

Function Level of Engagement	EXPERIENTIAL (<i>what</i> is represented: experiences of the world)	INTERPERSONAL (<i>how</i> the viewer is <i>positioned</i> in terms of <i>mood and attitude</i>)	POETIC (<i>how</i> perceptual and emotional experiences are represented)
Drawing as Displayed	<i>Proximal</i> Perceptual Values. Theme Narrative Genre Representational/abstract Interplay of Episodes.	Attitude, Modality: Intimate/Monumental Public/Private Active/Passive Rhythm/focal points: Dynamic/Static Calm/Agitated	Overall format and size. Gestalt relations: horizontals, verticals, <u>diagonals</u> . Framing devices. <u>Colour palette</u> . Systems of Geometry: <u>persp. ortho. axo. etc.</u>
Episodes of the Drawing	<i>Distal</i> Perceptual Values Primary Geometry (layout of surfaces and edges) Actions, events central to narrative. Distance between Surfaces in the Scene.	Position relative to scene, (Orientation of viewer). <u>Gaze/eyework</u> . Modality: happy/gloomy, calm/excited etc.	Secondary Geometry: (perspective/non perspective projections). Interplay of figures/passages Contrast of tone/texture
Combinations of Marks (sub-assemblies)	<u>Haptic</u> Perceptual Values Edges: occlusion of surfaces Direction Transparency/opacity Atmosphere Time of day	Sense of 'affordances' in the scene. Heavy/lightweight Flatness/illusions of depth	Textural Qualities of Media/Ground. Relative Positions of Marks. Relative Sizes of Marks. Division of Picture- Plane: ratios, angles. Overlap of shapes/tones
Individual Marks	Effects of light on surfaces in the environment. Spatial Depth. Scene Primitives.	Sense of textural differences. Indices of mark- maker's movements: speed, pressure.	Position and Size of Marks within Picture Plane. Interaction between Medium and Surface. Picture Primitives.

Figure 3 A Systemic-Functional Semiotic Model for Drawing.

Having introduced the systemic-functional model and indicated its provenance, it is time to demonstrate how it might be used to facilitate the negotiation of meanings available in drawing practices. This in part entails the identification of the formal compositional means through which an artist positions the viewer; "...to lay bare the device," as the leading Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1929: 147) advocated¹. Examples of the author's drawings are used as case studies.

In practice, the application of the semiotic chart is more fluid than its rigid format implies. Interpretation and their implications need not occur in an ordered or linear way. While the chart offers a structure within which to separate and categorise these connections, images examined can offer several different interlinked observations, associations and responses simultaneously. Materialist or denotative readings of how and what the drawing communicates are necessarily combined with connotative understandings of what is negotiated.

5. Case Study: *Drawing Precedes Writing*

In the sequence of oil pastel drawings, Figures 4,5,6 and 7, little of what we experience and recognize in the physical world appears to be represented. Of course the drawings themselves (and, incidentally, the reproductions presented here) are a part of our physical world: the very textures produced through the combination of oil pastel and paper, scratched and rubbed,

indicating their maker's involvement, may evoke in the viewer similar previous experiences of texture, and perhaps volume.

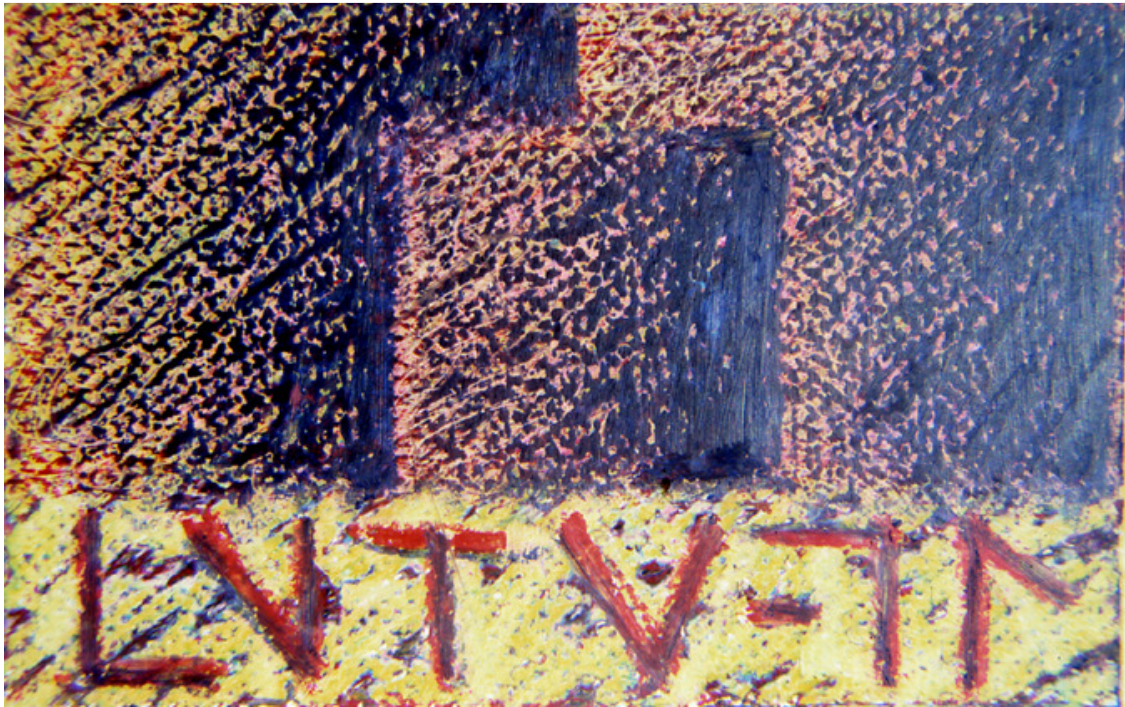


Figure 4 Howard Riley *Depiction Precedes Writing 1*. Oil pastel on paper. 16x10cms



Figure 5 Howard Riley *Drawing Precedes Writing 2*. Oil pastel on paper. 16x10cms

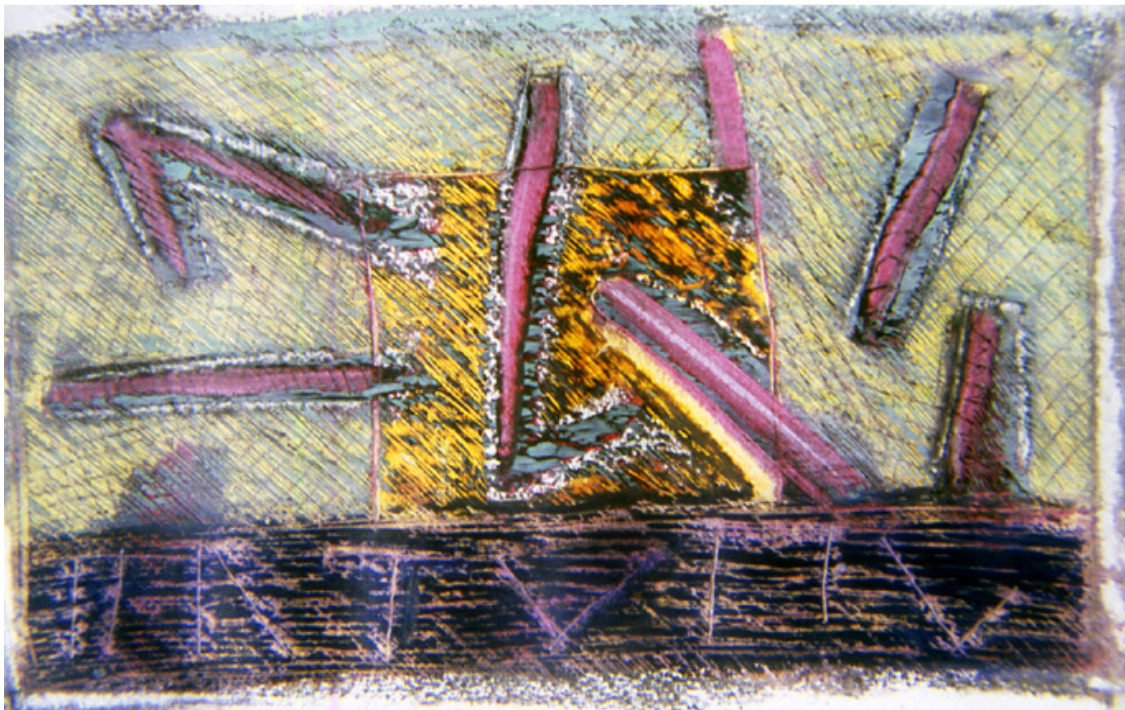


Figure 6 Howard Riley *Drawing Precedes Writing 3*. Oil pastel on paper. 16x10cms



Figure 7 Howard Riley *Drawing Precedes Writing 4*. Oil pastel on paper. 16x10cms

When the viewer engages with these drawings at the level of the *Combinations of Drawn Marks* then a pattern emerges which is common to all the drawings. The central position of the square, resting in each drawing on a horizontal base line, symbolises stability and epitomises visual balance, attributes associated with our facility for structuring order from chaos, metonymically representing our capacity for language. Against this constant compositional structure, change within the series is more easily recognized. At the level of engagement *Individual Marks*, through the choice of high-contrast boundaries between shapes of saturated colour, and the selection of textural gradients and tonal gradients, illusions of depth are produced. As the sequence of drawings progresses, contrast is reduced and colours desaturated with the effect that depth illusion is diminished. Colour

combinations progress from warm to cool, thus altering the mood.

The solid square in the centre of Figure 4 is set in ambiguous space, an illusion produced by the combination of light and dark tones arranged contrary to normal visual experience of the world illuminated by a single light source. In Figure 5, the central square is surrounded by angular linear elements with no apparent Gestalt relationship: a chaos of elements whose edges vary from sharp to blurry, indicating various distances in the illusory depth of the picture. The effect of such random placement of pictorial

elements within the subdivisions of the drawing's surface, together with the ambiguous readings of pictorial space, may well unsettle the viewer whose eye-paths are being jerked around, having no definite focus point.

Simultaneously, the viewer attempts to decode the ambiguous symbols - arbitrary signs emerging at the base of the pictures, an operation rather like word-captions anchoring images in more conventional codes of communication.

At this stage, viewers may pick up allusions to their visual experiences of the world – not least, allusions to illusions. This play between the drawer and the viewer, and the tensions induced in the viewer, is the essence of the *Interpersonal function* of drawing, made visible through the selection and combination of choices from the compositional, or *poetic* systems: specifically, systems of choices to do with the degree of sharpness or blurriness of contrast boundaries in the drawings, and to do with the tension between the static stability of the drawings' Gestalt structure (central square on horizontal line) and the dynamic instability of the randomly placed floating elements.

In Figure 6, by appropriate selection of compositional choices from

the systems of tonal grading, tonal contrast (at boundaries) and the relative positioning of marks, the tubular elements appear to occlude, or be occluded by, the now less-than-solid central square. Thus the illusion of penetration is evident: the visual elements occupying the chaotic background are becoming ordered through interaction with the central square, representing our capacity for structuring *via* language. With no more resolution of the quasi-alphabetic anchor-block (relay-block?) and no obvious representation of their physical experiences, viewers may resort to metaphoric interpretations. The sequence may be understood as the gradual dissipation of the central square, representing our capacity for language, from solid volume in Figure 4 to tissue-like insubstantiality in Figure 7. However, the tubular elements themselves become dissolved in the fabric of the picture plane in Figure 7, even as the ‘caption’ becomes, temptingly, almost meaningful. This sequence of drawings illustrates the proposition that our ability to write comes from our prior ability to depict. Depiction precedes writing.

Writing itself has emerged from a background of visual ambiguity, metaphorically representing the chaos of our unstructured world, and has pierced and penetrated our observations of the material world to such an extent that the two have become one: language is interwoven with our perception of the fabric of the material world, we see the world through the filter of language yet its visible form remains forever arbitrary, forever open to negotiation.

6. Conclusion

An application of the systemic-functional semiotic model is shown to facilitate the negotiation of meanings generated from the drawings. Subsequently it is concluded that no drawing practice is beyond the realm of the semiotic, and semiotic analysis is applicable across the whole domain of visual imagery as a method of generating meaning. This article has demonstrated specifically the rich potential of gestural drawing as a means of illustrating social relations at the heart of all representational art: the relations between subject-matter, artist and viewer. A model of systemic-functional semiotics such as the one featured in this article might well inform the future practice of those interested in extending the potential meanings of drawing in particular, and those of visual imagery in general.

Note

1. In his seminal history of the Russian Formalists, Victor Erlich (1965:182) explains:

“It is worth noting that this typically Formalist phrase (*laying bare the device*) is a free translation of a passage from William James’ *Psychology*, dealing with the impact of verbal repetition on the perception of individual words. The passage was quoted by Lev Jakubinski in his essay on ‘The Sounds of Poetic Language’, *Poetica*, 1919. The original text reads as follows: ‘...it (the repeated word) is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity.’ (William James 1928 *Psychology* New York p. 315). The Russian translation of James’ work, Jakubinski’s direct source of reference, actually anticipates the Formalist terminology: ‘...having thus looked at the word from a new viewpoint, we have laid bare (*obnazili*) its purely phonetic aspect”.

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