Critical & Speculative Design Practice and Semiotics: Meaning-Crafting for Futures Ready Brands

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Abstract

This article concerns the use of critical design practices within the context of commercial semiotics, arguing that incorporating practices from a critical design approach is valuable for client brands, but also an important means with which to incite brands to consider more deeply their role in shaping the future. As an alternative to the oppositional approach frequently taken by critical design practitioners, working through design practices collaboratively alongside client brands creates potential for the radical changes sought by many of the movement's vanguard. A case study of recent work with a corporate client demonstrates the practical effects of using critical design practice within a commercial setting, proving the complementarity between critical design practice and commercial semiotics – where the confluence of the thinking brought new value to improve product design for example – and points to the value of using current leading edge thinking within the design community.

Keywords: commercial semiotics, critical design, product design, innovation, brands

Commercial Semiotics and Design

As a commercial semiotics agency, we bring many tools to bear in order to help brands better understand themselves in order to better express themselves. We contend that the best approach to solving questions of communication is to look at the problem through the lens of semiotics, and we further contend that everything communicates. At root, semiotics is the discipline that studies 'signs' and 'sign systems'. Eco (Eco 1976, 7) offers one of the broadest definition:

"Semiotics is concerned about everything that can be taken as a sign". A sign is anything that holds meaning, from a single word to a colour or the feel of a material choice, through to an abstract concept, but it will be interpreted in drastically different ways depending on the context in which it's received. Mirroring Stuart Hall's work in theorizing television—stipulating that there are multiple readings of television broadcasts based on a subject's personal and political standpoint—commercial semiotics takes brand communications to be as susceptible to multiplicities of interpretation subject to context as any other media. As Hall argues, however broadcasts are 'encoded', the disseminator does not have the ultimate power to dictate how they are received. They will be 'decoded' in differing ways dependent on context (Hall 1979). In just the same way, people love or hate brands depending on how they

interplay with the wider stories of these individuals' lives, because of how they reflect these individuals' personalities, because of what they *mean*.

We investigate the current state of culture, as expressed through mass media, through art, and through commerce, to give a deeper understanding of these social and cultural contexts and the stories they form. We establish the broad trajectories of people's understandings of key concepts—how the ideal form and expression of masculinity has changed and will change, for example—to help brands stay abreast of emergent culture, to keep their eye focused firmly on the future, and to help them understand that as brands, not only does their meaning depend on people's understandings of broader culture and of other brands, but they themselves take a key role as meaning-*makers.*

Brands are enmeshed in a complex relationship with mass culture, creating messages that themselves become pop culture monuments ("Wassup?!") and iconic design elements which are laden with the weight of the brand's meanings both intended and accidental (Dove's latest "body shape" bottles, intending to communicate "real beauty" and actually delivering "off the shelve" simplified beauty types. (Jones, 2017). Sudden, seismic shifts in the political climate have recently brought this even more clearly to light. Brands can no longer afford to remain neutral and apolitical, as this in itself can be read as a tacit endorsement of the incumbent government or a weak lack of open support for fear of alienating consumers from the opposition, depending on the stance of the interpreter.

Not just 'messages' from brands, but also their material products and artifacts are decoded within social and cultural contexts that deeply affect the meanings attributed to them. The mindset of a designer brings "a designerly way of thinking" (Archer 1979, 17) to bear to answer questions of how objects are understood and how it is they express their meaning, with specialist knowledge of material culture from ergonomics to the latent symbolism of a particular typeface, depending on their areas of interest and expertise. Located at the interface of industry, the market, technology and culture, design is eminently suited for engaging in culturally critical exercises that focus on the symbolic function of products (Bonsiepe 2007, 30-31).

Through understanding the nuances of how shape, texture, material, and so on feed into a product's meaning, brands are better placed to shape their products to express the meanings they intend rather than take a punt on having them mean what they will. Design and semiotics interplay (as Design Semiotics) to give the deepest understanding of a brand and its artifacts possible, and help brands think about how in crafting their material output they are also crafting the meaning of these products and their brand as a whole.

The Changing Role of Brands and Design

We live in 'exciting times', and commercial clients are acutely aware of the uncertainty of our collective future. In recent years, it has become ever more clear that very few brands can survive based on a model of simply selling products. Similarly, the idea that brands can provide 'consumers' with meaningful identities simply through the consumption of their products is outmoded, and brands attempting to offer identity without substance are quickly rejected. Instead, brands need to learn how to embody a purpose—a higher meaning that

recognizes the brands interplay with culture writ large. Take, for example, Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign (Figure 1)—a prototypical example of how a communications campaign flipped expectations on their head to underline the brand's progressive conservatism and align themselves with a resurgent interest in ethical consumerism.

(Figure 1: Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" advertising campaign, 2015)

Of course, it isn't just the words Patagonia use that form the story they tell. Every element of the brand—the smell of a jacket's lining through to the shape of the hangers used in stores—feeds into the narratives built around the brand. Patagonia have managed to forge a compelling narrative that chimes with prevalent concerns around ecology, catastrophe, and the anthropocene. Patagonia's wares may appear very functional—the brand creates clothing lauded for its practicality—but also embody how design has moved beyond older modernist assumptions that "form follows function" (Sullivan 1896) to a more constructivist stance wherein an object is taken to have "meaningful presence" (Malpass 2017), a presence onto which observer's and users project their own wider meanings based on their context.

As the role of brands is changing rapidly, we need to keep our approach nimble. At present, the practice of 'affirmative design' is prevalent within industrial and commercial circles, directed at solving identified problems and providing iterative progress (more blades, less weight, cheaper materials, etc.). As brand consultants, we are experts in helping brands to tell their stories, and a vital part of this is a willingness to draw attention to areas of tension—to elements in campaigns that jar or pull against a brand's established identity. As designers, we are already adept at taking a client's stated aims and providing the products they desire, but these may not be the products they, or the world, need. We need to be less afraid to critique, and as such are incorporating methodologies drawn from critical design practice into our hybrid of design semiotics. It can be difficult to work up fine-grained methodological distinctions between critical/'uncritical' design—it is, after all, "more of an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a method" (Dunne & Raby 2017). We believe that it is the focus on engagement rather than optimization, on broadening thinking rather than solely providing solutions, that marks out a critical practice, and it is this we are bringing to bear in our commercial work.

Critical design practices widen the scope of application of design thinking we provide our clients, including (but not limited to) practices of provocation—ideas of 'broken futures'

clients may need to prepare for—of introducing multiple speculative futures, and of building, or better yet helping to inspire the building of, 'diegetic prototypes' for these potential futures. That is, we help clients design for futures they would otherwise never have imagined, and help them see their place within them.

Diegetic prototypes are a valuable means with which to demonstrate that designed products are far more than merely functional objects. Though they may be created for some particular use or to provide some discrete function, objects have a symbolic function beyond the utilitarian. Artifacts are instilled with moral values and norms, or have these values attached to them by patterns of use. The plastic six-pack holder is eminently useful, but is now taken by many as a microcosm for industrial- scale waste, plastic pollution, and humanity's impact on the animal kingdom. Running leggings and yoga pants are worn perhaps more often in casual social circumstances than at the gym or studio. Athleisure fashion rides on the explicit function of these garments, attempting to connote a wider lifestyle of radiant good health and holistic mental wellbeing, without requiring the products be used as initially intended. Of course, a brand can't control exactly how users decode their output, whether communicative or material, but they can take steps to promote favorable interpretations and usage that sit in line with the trajectories of a culture.

As semioticians, we have long incorporated critical elements of thought regarding our current social, economic, and political conditions and asked what they mean for brands now, with an eye to building an image of the future. Now, with critical design semiotics, we can more thoroughly work through the implications of these changes and trajectories, fleshing out our understanding of what the future will bring and preparing for those circumstances. Of course, given that users generate their own wide array of meanings when confronted with 'meaningfully present' objects, we can't claim the ability to narrowly establish exactly what a given object means. We can, however, anticipate many of the meanings attributable and many of the techniques by which these meanings can be modified (e.g. by introducing anthropomorphic elements of textural design into gadgetry, we make it more likely it will appear 'friendly', but simultaneously widen the scope for sexually-charged 'decodings' of these products). It is by recognizing our inability to narrowly parse possible interpretations of a product that we can ensure we try to cover as broad a range as possible of plausible interpretations. We can use these limitations as a spur to broaden our thinking as much as possible to anticipate any and all potential users, going well beyond the narrow personas and idealized 'users' all too commonly seen in user experience design and associated fields.

The incorporation of design thinking—especially of modeling and prototyping—can make the themes and issues at play in projects tangible in a way that often inspires deeper meditation than theoretical critique. It foregrounds the meaningful presence of potential objects over and above their utility, and allows for deeper investigation of these products' symbolism and meaning within real life than a purely immaterial or conceptual form of speculation. Retaining the messiness and grit of the everyday in workshopping these ideas isn't just cheaper and easier; it's necessary for a realistic envisioning of the future. Technological accretion means all material culture develops along a continual path, and although technology may become obsolete, it doesn't vanish. Our cupboards are bursting with old cables, outmoded appliances, and so on, and this eventual obsolescence is an important part of a product's meaning through time. How will an object's meaning change across the time it exists? What will it come to

mean by the end of its lifespan? These might be impossible questions to answer with unwavering confidence, but they provide invaluable input into how quickly we can see an idea becoming passé or how an object might be coopted for a less utopian use than might be intended. Consideration of these questions can be an invaluable tool for future-proofing a brand against next year's clichés or an unfortunate confrontation with the lightning-quick satire of meme culture.

The materially speculative elements of critical design practice ask us how and why we engage with emerging technologies to critique our present use and think through the potential implications it brings. Design fictions, artifacts and products created for an imagined future, help us see the world how it might be. Just as speculative fiction is marked out by its plausibility, delineated from pure fiction by its possibility, strong ties to currents within culture and realism mark out good speculative design. It must incorporate elements of utopian dreaming and dystopian imagination, but remain tied to actual developments in attitudes and behaviors. Semiotics provides us with a valuable toolkit for laying out visions of the future for this speculative design process to work with, and as such a hybrid practice is mutually beneficial.

Critical design practices need to be applied to commercial projects in order to effect the radical changes envisioned by critical design practitioners. Too often, "critical design activity is not considered product design… in the majority of instances it is described as art" (Malpass 2017, 7). But using critical design practice within commercial semiotics offers the perfect opportunity to bridge this imagined gap between the rarified world of artistic practice and the much wider everyday. We can work with clients to demonstrate how social, political and cultural values affect their innovations and *vice versa*, how their innovations then feed back into society and spark their own changes. Designers can no longer "masquerade as radical because of the violence and shock in their propositions" (Malpass 2017, 3)—we must engage with the brands that create such a quantity of our material world, and drive so much of the meaning we make of it.

Case study

A recent case study may help illuminate the value of critical design mindset in a commercial context, and how it can lead to radical rethinking of a brand's function and status in multiple possible futures. We were asked to help a client understand the concepts of 'effective' and harmless' in both China and the US, and how they could resolve the tension between the two. How could their new product express itself as 'effective' while remaining 'harmless'?

Semiotic analysis of the root understandings of 'effectiveness' and 'harmlessness' in both markets enabled us to build four potent resolutions of the issue built around syntheses of burgeoning ideas of the two concepts set to become mainstream understandings. That is, we took emerging idea of 'effectiveness' informed by, amongst other things, new relationships with smart technology, and ideas of 'harmlessness' informed by nascent attitudes toward new forms of genetic engineering and collided these ideas to form hybrids that could communicate both ideas simultaneously.

We understood, however, that building these resolutions was not in itself enough. These could form the backbone of a communications campaign for the present, but these possibilities

needed stress testing against uncertain futures to provide the building material for effective innovation. It was imperative that the client be embedded in the process for it to have any lasting impact within the brand, so we undertook speculative design workshops with the client to involve them deeply in the design and storytelling process.

We started by sketching a map of four future scenarios, built around axes concerning the severity of the issue in question, and of consumer attitudes to this issue. These futures—as in Peter Frase's recent analysis of the future of capitalism, *Four Futures*—offer a set of 'possible distributive scenarios' rather than discrete realities. That is to say, they stood as four ideal types, but that any real future scenario is likely to fall somewhere in the blurred space between them.

As ideal types, they functioned as tools with which to test how products built around each of our four resolutions would react and respond. These tests helped us generate new ideas and possibilities, but perhaps more importantly they provided a concrete, interactive, and evocative picture of the world in which the client brand will operate in the near future, and the role the brand might take in this world. We incorporated elements of utopian dreaming and dystopian imagination into the process, and it called into question their whole approach to prototyping and projection for the future. Rather than a form of iterative progress, we saw the client deeply involved in a broader mode of thinking that encompassed scenarios from the extreme to the prosaic. We introduced 'wild card' scenarios—what if a heavy tax was levied on household waste? How would you adapt products to be refilled/reused? to ensure wider social issues were kept in play. We also foregrounded consideration of 'extreme users'—those who totally break the mold of the client's current base—to highlight how users change, how niche behaviors can easily become dominant, and how narrowing your scope to design solely for those you already appeal to can be a dangerous game.

Crucially, in asking the client to work with us to build models, we focused on rough and ready, lo-fi prototypes that were not supposed to be accurate representations of future products. Rather, they were built to act as tools for thinking. This is low-cost and carries no risk, and as such it's no surprise clients are happy to jump in with both feet. Clients weren't opposed to stretching their current models of thinking with the input of critical design methodologies; in fact, they were invigorated by the activity, and found the exploratory exercises profoundly informative. They were receptive to the fundamental claims that they are responsible for how they are understood both in terms of communications and product, and to the idea that we may need to overcome the marriage of design to purely utilitarian function and embrace a design for social function. We live in an era in which the benefits, indeed the necessity, of this type of process are clear, and we need to leverage opportunities to bring critical discourse into the commercial realm.

This workshop experience drove home how our role as designers can involve more than provision of simple problem-solution services to clients. We can, and indeed should, be provoking deeper thought about a client's purpose, both for their benefit and in order to inspire the progressive changes many of us would like to see from the commercial sphere, the very same progressive tendencies that lie at the heart of critical design's history. Critical design's affective rather than explanatory nature, opening dialogues rather than answering questions, is its real strength in building collective answers to client questions and design problems.

Conclusion

The value of critical practices applied commercially emerges clearly, and it seems equally clear that there are many potential wider societal benefits, too. Critical discourse has many inherently progressive elements as it is built on dissatisfaction with the status quo. Continuing to draw aspects of critical practice and applying them to the commercial sphere will be fundamental to our role in helping client brands shape the right meanings, tell the right stories, and create the right products. Of course, as critical discourse is accepted into the mainstream, it becomes harder to define it as 'critical', but we can rest assured that new forms of critique and new methodologies will come to light to test and question tomorrow's mainstream. We will be ready.

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Author Biography

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Malex leads UK Based Spaces Doctors' Design Insight offer and has been instrumental in shaping the role of the critical design and sensory thinking. She's a pioneer in the use of cultural insight and semiotic coding to directly and specifically guide design actionability. She has applied this proprietary methodology across multiple applications from food packaging, to appliance design, to corporate logos.

Malex developed her exceptional abilities over 20 years practising and teaching design, and over a decade working in commercial semiotics. Her CV lists employers and clients as well-known as Young & Rubicam, P&G and Mitsubishi, as well as her very own Caracas-based design studio The Brand Lab. Malex is a regular conference speaker and workshop facilitator, and has authored many published papers on Design Semiotics.