Aesthetics, semiotics & design.

0.1 Preambel

... KHiB shall contribute to the fostering of a critical perspective in the general public on art, design and aesthetic values. With a basic in a humanistic tradition, its paramount aims are academic and ethical integrity, freedom of expression and critical reflection.

Strategy plan KHiB, Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2004-2008
Community mandate.

0.2 Aim and objective

The profession of Visual Communication Design is facing fundamental changes due to technological and social development. This process implements the need to reconsider the theoretical background and to take an active role in steering those changes.

The ongoing development is a global process. It is essential to analyse on international scale and adapt the insights to national and regional requirements.

The aim of this paper is to analyse and reconsider the philosophy and theoretical background of Viscom at the Bergen National Academy of the Arts and prepare necessary decisions to further develop the education.

1. Aesthetics

What means “aesthetics”?

And what is the relation between aesthetics and design?
1.1 Definition

Aesthetic, philosophy of the arts, gr. αισθεσις, perception, sensation) philosophical discipline dealing with beauty, its perception and arts.

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1.2 History

The term “aesthetics” was introduced in our languages in 1750, when the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten wrote a book with the title “aesthetica”. Following academic rules of that time he wrote in Latin, using many Greek words. 624 pages in two issues, 904 paragraphs, logically connected.

In the first paragraph Baumgarten defined “aesthetica”:

“Aesthetic (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae”.

Aesthetics is the science of sensual perception.

αισθεσις [aisthesis], gr. perception.
Baumgarten was neither the first nor the only one who tried to set up a science of sensual perception. Plato and Aristotle had dealt with perception long before in relation with philosophical research about semiotics.

“All our knowledge is building on perception” said Leonardo da Vinci in the 15th century.

Influenced by John Locke, the English philosopher David Hume used the English term ‘perception’ in his book the standard of taste in 1748. Hume stated: “each mind perceives a different beauty”. But he still believed it would be possible to develop rational argumentations within the perception. He tried to give evidence to the thesis that one can argue about taste in a philosophical way.

“It is natural for us to seek a standard of taste; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another” (Hume, Standard of Taste, 268).

“Taste” in philosophical sense is defined as
“capability to judge about beauty”.

A judgement of taste is, like every judgement, a judgement of quality, quantity, relation and modality. But aesthetic judgement differs from the judgement of recognition.

Aesthetic judgement is neither private nor common. It is subjective common sense. In quantity those judgements are single judgements, not common judgements. An aesthetical judgement does not demand everybody’s agreement, it only invites to such an agreement. It permits other opinions.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German philosopher, dealt with aesthetics in his “Kritik der reinen Vernunft” 1781, asking about the intention of aesthetic judgement.
“All one wants to know is if the pure imagining of an object goes along with delight, no matter how uninterested I am about the existence of the object of my imagination. “

Kant did not only define art analogue to nature but puts both in equality by content. Art has to repeat the capabilities of nature in relation to men, stimulate his mind in the execution of moral ideas. Perfect art is perfect imitation of nature and gets its effect in the way that aesthetic of art is perceived as aesthetic of nature.

With this point of view about arts Kant went along with the undisputed and leading theory of this time: “*ars imitatur naturam*”, [art shall imitate nature].

2,000 years before Kant, Plato (428-348 B.C.) critiqued the attempt to imitate nature. In his theories and ideas about a perfect community he blamed the fine artists as people without own creativity, faking aesthetics by imitating nature. As a copy always follows the original and it never creates innovation.

Aristotle tried to define the relation between the artist, the artwork and the art-consumer. He understood sensual perception as the interaction between order, balance and limitation.

He used the terms Poiesis, Mimesis and Katharsis.
\emph{Poiesis} described the subjective input of the artist in the art production. 
\emph{Mimesis} means the expression of the artwork itself, detached from the artist. 
\emph{Katharsis} is dealing with the effect, how the artwork is perceived by the public.

This is also visualises to the principal structure of semiotics.

Kant came to the conclusion that a \textit{philosophical aesthetic} is not possible. Common rules of the art – rules for judgement and production – cannot be set up. Contradicting Hume, Kant concluded: “one cannot dispute about taste” and refused the whole idea of aesthetics:

“It the Germans are the only ones which use the word “aesthetics” to describe, what others call “the critics of taste”. It is basing on the false hope, taken by the exceptional analyst Baumgarten, to bring the critical evaluation of the beauty under rational criteria, and lifting them up to become a science. But yet this attempt is in vain. Because the imagined rules and criteria are (...) only empirical and can never serve as stated laws a priori, to which our judgement of taste has to follow.” (Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, §1.70.B36)

1.3 \textbf{Aesthetics and the role of the artist}

Like Baumgarten and Hume, Kant was convinced that only “a community of experts” would be able to make objective judgements about aesthetics.

Baumgarten called a person who could judge and create arts “felix aestheticus”, [felix = lucky, happy]. Following Baumgarten, an artist needed a number of talents. To be able to understand beauty (pulchre cogitare), a “felix aestheticus” needs a fine and elegant spirit, an “ingenium” which is capable to imagine something, enrich and memorise this sensual impression (§30). An artist needs the talent to look into the future, like the antique fortune-tellers (vates). It takes “aesthetical temper”, combined with ethical mind, gladly equipped with external values (money, power, labour, delight, health etc.). In a way, an artist had to be rich, educated, spoiled.
The idea of aesthetics was exclusive and elite thinking. The competence of aesthetic judgement in Hume’s and Baumgarten’s opinion is attached to individuals who distinguish from the masses by richness of knowledge and educated taste.

Both Baumgarten and Hume believed that it takes special education to get to a higher state of perception.

The expert has to be educated in mind and sentiment: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this value character; and joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is true standard of taste and beauty” (Hume, SoT278)

Baumgarten and Kant used the word “ingenium” to describe the role of the artist in the process of creating art.

“As the talent as native productive power of the artist is part of the nature, you could say that genius is the native state of mind (ingenium) by which the nature gives the rule to the art.” (KdU 235§46).

This flattering description of an artist being a genius is still very popular among artists. “I am genius so I am an artist” is a very arrogant attitude in itself but does not at all permit the conclusion “I am an artist so I am genius”.

Should the term artist not be a title for exceptional quality and talent following Walter Gropius who stated that art should be the superlative of craft?
1.4 From *ars imitatur naturam* to the theory of expression

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, (1770-1831) German philosopher, issued 21 books “Vorlesungen über Ästhetik” [lectures about aesthetics]. Critical about the analogy between nature and arts he discussed the relation between content and form.

The human spirit should have priority for nature:

“We [art receivers] are delighted by a manifestation which must appear as if produced by nature, while it is a production of the human spirit without the means of nature; these objects don’t delight us because they are so natural, but because they are made so naturally”.

Hegel exposed the fantasy as common capability to artistic production.

“The beauty, the manifestation of art, has to be defined as the sensual appearance of an idea.”

He began to introduce the *theory of expression* against the theory of “*ars imitatur naturam*”. The conflict between the two theories became exemplifying visible in the critical reactions on William Turners late work.

Hegel was visionary in his thinking. He predicted the end of the arts. In his last lecture about aesthetics in 1825 he emphasises that art will surpass itself as the only cultural orientation power:

“The art as explication of the truth transforms into something higher, and this determines the position of art, as it is for our time, by surpassing the art”.

Hegel believed that as soon as the humans will live in the modern state, art will loose its universal meaning, but not the meaning as such. Art will gain a new function of critics for the development of social alternatives as critics with utopian importance.
Hegels visions inspired Adorno in his thesis, art shall be critics of the society and also Marcuse in his programmatically reflections about art in the sense of the utopian function of critics.

Applied arts and architecture were in most reflections excluded from aesthetics being not autonomous arts. This would mean that design as not autonomous art is not part of the aesthetic discussion.

Yet in the publications Elementargesetze der Bildenden Kunst (Elementary Law of Fine Arts, Hans Cornelius 1908), advertisement art was also researched due to “sensual intensity of their design principles”.

Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) defined psychology as the “basic science of the logic, ethic and aesthetic”. In his “Ästhetik” (1903 and 1905, two books, 1. Fundamentals of Aesthetics, 2. The aesthetical reflection and the fine arts) Lipps puts the ‘understanding’ in the centre of the reflections.

“Task of aesthetics is not to prescribe what or how has to be judged as aesthetics, but to understand aesthetical judgement”.

But this should again aim at recognising principles:

“[...] because if once it can be stated how the kind and the conditions of aesthetical evaluation are shaped and under what conditions the artistic reason - that’s to say the reason to create a beauty - can be achieved and by its nature will only be achieved, so I also know, how it can be judged aesthetical and how in a given case an artist shall proceed.”

Lipps developed a research model, independent from contents, topics or sujets. He reduced the image to basic shapes and elementary forms. He tried to analyse empirically the elementary feelings as reactions on these forms. Lipps believed that he had found the hypothesis of the existence of a ‘unit of multitude’. But this was an old idea, set up by Charles Batteux (1713-1780) in his publication ‘les beaux arts réduits à un même principe’ (Paris 1746).
Lipps developed a theory of symbols to be applied in communication, later used in semiotics. This was by far not the first time that someone tried to find a grammar of the visual language.

1.5 Shifting paradigm:

During the 20th century the word aesthetic became part of the common language-use along with a semantic transformation. It changed from the subject to the object. Instead of “I aesthetic” one says: “something is aesthetic”. The meaning of the word became more and more imprecise. Aesthetic describes the total of designed or created objects, neutralising the word beauty.

The German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch asks the question, if the polysemantic use of the word aesthetic does not make it a “passepartout-word” which fits everywhere because it does not mean anything. (Wolfgang Welsch, Grenzgänge der Ästhetik 1996).

Aesthetics today has three major fields of meanings:

Aesthetic = Artistic (cultural)
Aesthetic = Aisthetic (perceptive)
Aesthetic = Callistic (beautiful).

All the three have again subgroups of meanings:

Aesthetics = Sensuality
Aesthetics = Perception
Aesthetics = Elite
Aesthetics = Proportion, form
Aesthetics = Subjectivity
Aesthetics = Harmony
Aesthetics = Cosmetical
Aesthetics = Poietics
Aesthetics = Conformity
Aesthetics = Sensitivity
Aesthetics = Virtuality
Question: Does it make sense to use the Greek word furthermore? The consequence of the semantic transformation of the word aesthetic made it misunderstood, misinterpreted and misused. Should not therefore the modern art and design education avoid the pretentious and misleading word ‘aesthetic’ and replace it by ‘sensual perception’, going back to the beginning of Baumgarten who did not mean anything but this?

1.6  Aesthetics and Ethics

Since the time of Plato, truth and aesthetics were seen in relation to each other: “If it is good and honest, it is aesthetic”.

G.W.F. Hegel took up this hypothesis and stated:
“As the idea is equal to truth, the beauty has to be seen equal to truth”.

This combination of aesthetics and ethics is a dangerous point of view.

We have to be aware that idealistic philosophies run extreme risk to become immediately capitalised in our today’s materialistic world.

Following Jan Mukarovsky, (1891 – 1975), aesthetics has three aspects:

* Aesthetic function,
* aesthetic value and
* aesthetic norm.

Aesthetic function describes the aim to reach aesthetic pleasing. The carrier of this function can be any object. Mukarovsky gave evidence that the aesthetic function often follows non-aesthetical aims.

The aesthetic value describes the capability of an object to serve in reaching the aim. It is in the interest of the profiteer of this value to find a way of exact measuring.
The *aesthetic norm* represents the expectations of the receiver. Knowledge of the aesthetic norm can shape the aesthetic function to increase the aesthetic value.

Kant had stated: “An object, which pleases the senses, is perceived as delightful and provokes interest in the existence of the object.”

This aspect attracted the modern marketing to make a consumer buy without thinking. Dictators have also used it as tool to make people believe in their ideas.

A deterrent example is the 3rd Reich in Germany between 1933 and 1945 where aesthetics was used as tool to brainwash people. The discussion is still on: “*Was Leni Riefenstahl just an innocent artist?*” I think she was. She had a naive aesthetic dream and she was an outstanding artist. Seeing aesthetics as a symbol of the pure, good and honest made blind to see the non-aesthetic aims and objectives behind it.

Artists and designer need fundamental knowledge about ethic issues to avoid unwanted misuse. But only few of the rules are already known. Prof. Paul Mijksenaar from Delft, teaching and researching design and engineering demanded recently:

> “It is the task of scientists and designers to uncover the many still hidden but unmistakably operative laws of design and to develop tools designers can use to shape their ideas”.

The traditional philosophy of aesthetics does not give suitable answers. There is a mistake in the approach that avoided successful solutions: Instead of talking about the phenomenons of human perception, the discourse concentrated on art and beauty. While philosophers and artists assumed that aesthetics is equal ethics they failed to see their responsibility in making arts available for people without ethics.

**Question:** How can we avoid unethical misuse of aesthetics?
1.7 Does aesthetics in the traditional philosophical meaning have further right of existing in arts?


He refuses the hedonistic idea that aesthetic has to please. Goodman tried to elaborate what symbolises art, how does this happen and how symbolising creates new visions.

Goodman sees art as a system similar to science. He did not question what art is but from when on one can speak of art. This thinking goes along with Walter Gropius who speaks about the superlative of crafts. Both are against the esoteric (self-) isolation of arts and traditional hierarchic spheres of values. Using the language of semiotics he separated the three fields art, beauty and perception from each other.

Goodman was influenced by John Dewey (1859 – 1952), who published his ideas about aesthetics “Art as Experience” in 1934. He critiqued the European attitude to imprison art in a reserve and the gap between the ‘high art’, only understood by an esoteric elite, and the daily aesthetical practise of the ‘normal’ people.

The American Philosopher Arthur Coleman Danto came 10 years ago to the conclusion that the idea behind the philosophy of aesthetics was finally to make art unfree and undermine the autonomy of the artist.

**Question:** Is respecting aesthetics rules not a contradiction to the freedom and autonomy of art?
2. **Semiotics**

It is only consequent of philosophers like Goodman and Danto to shift from aesthetics to semiotics.

Semiotics came into the discussion in the 60th, considered to be a brand new science. But it is actually much older than the philosophy of aesthetics. As long as we know written languages we have evidence that the human beings dealt with the question of semiotics. In many cases the protagonists of aesthetics and semiotics were the same like for example Baumgarten or Goodman.

> "So the spoken sounds (φωνη) are symbols (συμβολα) of sentiments (παθηματα) evoked in the soul (ψυχη) and script again is a symbol of the sounds. And as all don’t have the same script, the sounds are not equal for all either.

> But for what they are first of all signs (σημεια) for, namely sentiments of the soul, are equal for all human beings; and what those sentiments are images of, namely the actual things (πραγματα), are equal as well”.

Aristotle defined the areas of semiotics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soul</th>
<th>[ψυχη]</th>
<th><em>psychi</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentiments</td>
<td>[παθηματα]</td>
<td><em>pathimata</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things</td>
<td>[πραγματα]</td>
<td><em>pragmata</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbols</td>
<td>[συμβολα]</td>
<td><em>symbola</em> sounds or signs/script</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Aristotle (384-322 b.C)*

*peri χερμενειας peri hermeneias* (about interpretation;16a 3-8)

Magritte’s famous picture “ceci n’est pas une pipe” is a very useful example to explain Aristotle’s idea.
Why does he say, this is not a pipe?

Magritte shows a symbol for a pipe, not a pipe. Only a pipe is a pipe. Even the word `pipe` is not a pipe; word and image are symbols for a pipe.

2.1 Definition

Semiotics

[Greek σημειον »sign«] the science of the signs. The emphasis of semiotic research lies in philosophy and linguistics; in general semiotics is subdivided in syntactics (the relation of the signs) semantics (the relation between the significant and the sign) and pragmatics (the relation between the significant, the sign and the user)
2.2 History

The catholic church played an important role in the philosophical discussion of semiotics. St. Augustinus defined a sign as “aliquid stat pro aliquo”, [something standing for something].

The Scholastic (e.g. Thomas v. Aquin) distinguished three sciences: Philosophia Moralis, Philosophia Naturalis and Scientia de signis.

Scientia de signis “design is scientia”.

The Scholastic theory of the “modi significandi” (signifying ways) came up in the late 13th, early 14th century in context with the “ars grammatica” (the art of grammar). They believed that all languages in the world are basing on a similar but not equal principal structure. In a way they had the same point of view as Aristotle.

Jean Poinsot (known as Johannes a Sancto Thoma, 1598-1644) defined signs as instruments of cognition and communication. [omnia instrumenta quibus at cognoscendum et loquendum utimus, signa sunt – 1632;25].

A sign represents in cognition something else than itself, but cognition is more than representation which again is more than signification. The science of signs understood itself not only as a science of communication but also a science of cognition.

In 1690 the English philosopher John Locke wrote about logics and semiotics (σημειωτικὴ - simeiotiki) and pointed out the close relation between signs, logics and ethics.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) was one of the important representatives of the history of semiotics.

“A sign is a perception which permits the conclusion of the existence of a nonperception. A sign can stand for a thing (res) or an idea (conceptio, idea, cagitatio).”
He defines as signs for example: Typefaces, graphical symbols, Chinese and Egyptian signs, etc.

Leibniz saw the importance of semiotics as theory of visual signs (to distinguish from verbal signs) and laid down the most advanced structures for a modern design education 200 years before the design-profession even was established as such.

The studies of the signs should include the following disciplines:

1. *Ars characteristic* (single elements)
2. *Rationales Kalkül* (combination of elements)
3. *Ars vivendi* (application and creative use of sign combinations).

One of Leibniz’s successors Christian Wolff (1679-1754) wrote about “de signo” (chapt.III, philosophia sive ontologica, 1720 §294) and defined in contrast to natural signs those signs which “please to bring two things together in one place which would as such not come together”, mentioning as examples amongst others “signs of craftsmen or artists” (meaning in our today’s understanding logotypes, signets, brands etc.)

A.G. Baumgarten dealt with the science of sign systems, including the spoken and written language, hieroglyphic, heraldic etc. (Metaphysica, 1739, §349, semiologia philosophica) [nine years before he wrote his famous Aesthetica].

In 1969 the International Association of Semiotic Studies decided about the use of the word Semiotics to describe this old science that is considered by some experts to be new.

Basing on the traditions of *philosophy*, (Plato and Aristotle, the Scholastic, Locke, Leibnitz, Wittgenstein, Peirce, Morris ...) and the modern European *linguistics* (Saussure, Hjelmslev), Semiotics established in a very short time as a dynamic scientific discipline. Since 1972 Visual Communication is a declared field of activity of semiotics.
Visual Communication Design means the application of the philosophy and science of semiotics. It is not meant to be another name for graphic design or graphic arts.

2.3 The sign as element of a sign system

Pierce defines the sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Pierce, 1931, 2.228) and expands the definition of St. Augustinus (aliquid stat pro aliquo) which disregards in its simplicity the complexity of a cognitive process.

The different schools of semiotics agree to the following classification that reminds of Aristotle’s structure of poiesis, mimesis and katharsis:

Every sign can be regarded out of three different angles:

**Semantic**
The sign in relation to what it means.

**Syntactic**
The sign in relation to how it stands in context with other signs

**Pragmatic**
The sign in relation to its origin, the effect it has on the viewer, the use one makes of it. (Morris 1949).
In his attempt to create a grammar of the spoken language, Aristotle researched the semantic of the verbal communication in his Poetic and Rhetoric and distinguishes between onoma, a designation of a thing, between rhema, putting a sign in a dating context and logos, which represents a complex sign such as a speech.

Pierce defined (2.243ff.) as signs in verbal and visual communication:

- The rhema the single expression
- The dicent the sentence
- The argument a complex thought (syllogism).

Aristotle, Leibnitz, Morris and Peirce came to the same conclusions out of different angles, times and perspectives.

### 2.4 Semiotic function

Analysing the communicational function of the different levels of complexity of a sign one can identify three tasks:
1. **Orientation**  
the single expression Pierce  
the sign in relation to what it means Morris  
the single element Leibnitz  
the designation of a thing (word) Aristotle

2. **Information**  
the sentence Peirce  
sign in context with other signs Morris  
the combination of signs Leibnitz  
the sign in a context (sentence) Aristotle

3. **Inspiration**  
the complex thought Peirce  
the sign in relation to Morris  
the effect on the viewer,  
the use one makes of it.  
creative use of sign combinations Leibnitz  
a complex sign system, (a speech) Aristotle

### 2.5 Designation tools

The science of semiotics differentiates within visual communication between image- or picturebased and script- or typebased signs.

### 2.5.1 Picturesemiotics

Within the dynamic development of semiotics as a science, image semiotics became known as *Iconics* or *Iconology*.

Among the topics discussed in this specific field, questions of psychology of perception take an important space.
How do we perceive images, how does the brain select relevant images and how much is the brain influenced in this selection process by empirical conventions or natural instincts? (e.g. Ernst Gombrich, Image and code, scope and limits of conventionalism in pictorial representation. 1981)

It is important to know that our eyes see the total of the visually perceivable messages around us like a lens of a camera. But there is a hidden filter in the brain that scans the content of the image as relevant or not relevant.

The research in this field also deals with the relation between image and language. How far is our language influenced by symbols and how far are symbol shaping our language?

An exceptional personality in the research of an explicit Semiotics of the image is the French author Roland Barthes [*"Cherbourg 12.11. 1915, ü’Paris 26.3. 1980;]. Barthes was convinced that there is a relation between language and image. Language and image depend on each other and the linguistic component has priority in the perception. While he is proclaiming a heteronomy of the image, others see images as autonomous.

Basing on results of the psychology of cognition Hubert Zimmer (Sprache und Bildwahrnehmung 1983) developed a model of the pictorial sign.
Analogue to words Zimmer sees semiotic units \[\[Bildmarken]\]. They represent visual prototypes of things that can be designated \[\text{bezeichenbare Dinge}\]. These pictorial units are made of smaller visual components, named as \textit{pictogenes}, comparable to linguistic phonemes.

Irving Biedermann researched those minimal units of the pictorial perception and published about the results in the Psychological Review 94.2 in 1987 under the title “Recognition by components, a theory of human image understanding”. His research shows that the visual recognition of an object is basing on a repertoire of 36 visual minimal units, volumetric components he calls \textit{geons}. The semiotic approach to this question was obviously more successful as the same approach from an aesthetic point of view, undertaken by Theodor Lipps.

The metaphor of a “language of a picture”, (or a picture says more than 1.000 words) raises the question if there is a structure in the visual language analogue to the verbal language.

\textbf{Question:} Is there a grammar of the visual language? And if so, is it not one of our major tasks in Visual Communication Design to participate in detecting, identifying and visualising such a grammar.

\subsection{2.5.2 Scriptsemiotics}

It is paradox that the theory of signs and sign systems with its long written tradition discovered the sign system itself so late as object of semiotic reflection.

Is script an autonomous sign-system in itself or is it only a secondary code to represent the sound language (phonetics)? Are there semiotic relations between phonetics and typography?

The theorists are split in two groups.
Saussure and his followers define script as secondary in relation to the spoken language but others like Derrida see script as an autonomous system. Some even see script as a parallel system to the spoken language and in fact they have some interesting arguments on their side.

The graphical expression of a typeface in relation to the style of the spoken word is a relevant consequence of such a theory in visual communication design.

The word ‘language’ comes from the word tongue and shows the phonetic origin. Plato was against writing and script because he had doubts about the quality of the poetical and aesthetic function.

But with all respect about Plato’s intellectual genius he totally underestimated a number of other functions of the written language:

- Memorising, archiving
- Transport, storage
- Social control
- Interaction
- Poetical (aesthetical) function
- ...

Some of the great advantages and achievements of the written language and script are loosing importance today due to the new technologies. There are better ways to memorise, transport, store and archive thoughts. To some extend the human being reacts fairly slow on possible technical changes. Conventions are an important element within human communication and it takes time to change old rules. One example is the English orthography, which reflects the pronunciation of the 14th century.

Marshall McLuhan has drastically described the future of the medium script in our audiovisual and digital society. (Understanding Media, New York 1964). He predicted the end of the book, but this would mean the end of the script.
Many others contradict this scenario but there is no denying the advantages of hypertext and search systems, the comfortable recording and storing of knowledge and the speed of transport through the web. Sooner or later these new routines will change the traditional communication habits.

The visual communication designer needs a lot more theoretical knowledge about semiotics than the traditional graphic designer or graphic artist. There are new media and new dimensions. Signs and signs systems change from static to dynamic and interactive. The genuine task of a visual communication designer is process and not product related.

2.6 Universal language

The rapid development of the globalisation process as consequence of new communication media and new travelling facilities rises again the old question of a universal language. Overcoming the Babylonian confusion and finding a global tool to understand each other across cultural and geographical borders is an old dream of mankind.

In the course of history, hundreds of ideas to find a universal language have been investigated.

Two principal approaches can be identified:

a. The development of a universal language,
b. the development of a universal script.

Concerning a universal language there are two concepts :

A polylinguistic universal language is basing on elements of several languages. Esperanto is one of the most known concepts. It never became more than an academic game.
A monolingual concept bases one language. For a long time Latin and Greek were used as universal languages in the academic world while French was used as such in the political world. The development of English as universal language, supported by the use within the Internet permits the conclusion that the goal is about to be achieved.

The result is a Basic English (British American International Commercial), similar but not equal to Natural English. Basic English has an elementary grammar and a vocabulary of less than 1,000 words.

So far it functions as auxiliary language and is not meant to replace the approximately 5,000 languages spoken worldwide.

Concerning a universal script the problem is less impressive.

There are several different systems in use, from phonetic alphabetical to graphic pictogramatical. The biggest system by number is Chinese with more than 1 billion users.

The situation is not as static as one might assume.

Korea invented an own script to replace Chinese in the 15th century (Han Gul), finally implemented in the 20th century. The system consists of 10 vowels, 11 diphthongs and 19 consonants.

Vietnam changed the system from Chinese to Latin in the 40th, Russia changed from Cyrillic to Latin in 1925 and back again in 1938.

Turkey as Islamic country changed in 1923 from Arabic to Latin, but Arabic remained the script system for religion. If fundamentalists would take over the government it would be rather likely that they change back to Arabic.
More than 120 cases of alternative script systems have been developed to function as universal script but none of them had any chance to replace the different existing systems.

Alphabetical Latin is a system with numerous advantages in the use of the computer and the web, but it is not the system used by the computer itself.

Semiotics is more and more dealing with the effects of the modern technology on the global communication. There is no doubt that global communication will be totally different in 100 years from now, including the design of the visual communication. But it is impossible to imagine or predict the changes. All we know is that we will have to change.

3. Visual communication

3.1 Definition

Visual Communication
Exchange of information by visually perceivable signs or signals (Typography, image, gestures, …).
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3.2 A profession under development

Parallel to the renaissance of semiotics the professions of the design of visual communication went through several stages of rapid development.

In the Middle Ages the church was the guardian of science and knowledge. Handwritten books were produced in monasteries.

The miniator executed an early form of professional activity similar to what we understand today as visual communication design. He had his name from the colour that was used to make the predrawing: Minium.
The result was called *miniature painting*, later mistakably understood as small paintings, mixing up the words *minium* and *minimum*.

Around the time of the invention of the movable letter the profession got the name from the technique they used: Woodcutter, Copperplate Engraver, Typesetter. Later the product gave the name: Poster Painter, Sign Writer, Book Illustrator etc.

The industrialisation (*graphic-industry*) changed the term again: Graphic artist, Graphiker, Gebrauchsgraphiker, Grafische Ontwerpers or Graphiste. (The French still use the term until today).

One of the worlds first professional societies in this field was founded in 1919, the German society for graphic artists *Bund Deutscher Grafiker* (*BDG*). Influenced by Max Bense, some progressive members like Otl Aicher, Herbert Kapitzky or Robert Sessler began to understand their field of activity as applied semiotics and decided to change the name to Bund Deutscher Graphik-Designer in 1973. Other design societies kept the traditional titles up until today. (*Société Nationale des Graphistes*) The Norwegian society GRAFILL added just recently the subtitle “*Organisation for Visual Communication*”.

![Graphical diagram showing the evolution of terms in graphic design](image)
The product designers had begun to use the term design long time before and the protagonists were aware of the beginning process of globalisation.

The idea was to look for an international title. The English term “design” was related to the old semiotic term “de signo” and gave the word a treble meaning:

Design drawing (in French dessiner)
Design planning (in French designer)
De sign about signs.

### 3.3 From Graphic Design to Visual Communication Design

Dealing with semiotics some design colleges saw the chances to widen the field of activity and break up the limitation of the printing industry and to move from a craft to an applied science. They began to use the semiotic term Visual Communication Design.

This change of terminology was far more than an adaptation of the wording, it indicated a change of content. The difference between Graphic Design and Visual Communication design is like the difference between literature and linguistics.

All educational contents have to be reviewed and adapted. What belongs to Graphic Design, what belongs to Visual Communication Design, what must be kept, what must be changed, what must be removed?

And of course the transition from the tradition to the new content is not at all a smooth process. This conflict is ongoing and as such important.

The first step we have made at Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen was to organise a structure for the research, development and education of visual communication.
The second step needs further research within the defined modules and a restructuring of the existing education system. Flexibility and additional learning of the participants and academic support from the leadership to transfer the theory into praxis is indispensable.

Instead for product oriented projects, the first three semesters will be used for basic learning of the semiotic elements image, type, single signs (orientation), sign systems (information) and sign system application (inspiration) and the communication process as such.
4. Conclusions and Recommendation

Visual Communication Design is the application of the science of semiotics.

The term ‘aesthetic’ has become a pass-par-tout word and due to imprecise public use not usable as qualified expression in Visual Communication.

The academic research, development and education of Visual Communication Design are different from Graphic Design.
The following decisions have to be made:

4.1 Do we want to educated Visual Communication?

If so we have to change the teaching contents from product to process orientation. We have to apply semiotics as basic science. We have to break with our successful and renowned tradition as school for editorial design and illustration.

There are a number of good arguments for this option:

The new technologies and the globalisation create a need for experts of visual communication. International research indicates that this will be one of the most important professions in the 21st century.

Also due to the technical development the field of activity of Graphic Design becomes less important and the market declines. Advanced design societies have identified this development since decades and the step towards Visual Communication Design is a reaction on this.

The globalisation generates new business especially in the field of communication. The functioning of a global democratic society depends on mutual communication.

Visual Communication is per se international. This implements in education students and teachers exchanges, international presence on conferences and global publication of our results.

One could argue that the size of the academy is optimal for such a more general specialisation and most of all: Norway has an international reputation of integrity in helping to solve communication problems.
4.2 Do we want to continue the education of Graphic-Design?

As first and immediate step we have to stop calling our education. Visual Communication and go back to the previous title ‘Graphic Design’.

There are good arguments for this option too.

First of all KHiB has a long and successful tradition in this field. Bergen is well known in Norway for excellent editorial designers and illustrators.

KHiB has an existing infrastructure and qualified teachers. The expectations of the public manifested in the expectations of the applicants and students, is clearly going in the direction of Graphic-Design and they have not accepted the content of the new name ‘Viscom’ and read it as a new name for an old thing.

Even in the global society there is a need for local specialities. There is a chance to develop an internationally recognised profile as the world’s finest school for editorial design and illustration – a branded quality and uniqueness.

I have been employed as expert for Visual Communication Design with international reputation and out of my professional experience I have a clear preference for solution 4.1 and I think KHiB has the potential for a Visual Communication Design education on highest level, not only in Norway. But we have to make up our mind and make a clear decision.