# FireSigns: a semiotic theory for graphic design




Semiotics is the study of signs and significations, and as graphic designers we create visual signs (dubbed in the book as “FireSigns”) that are meant to elicit a certain effect in the mind.

From the preface:

> *“A sign of fire: smoke over a tree line, a charred smell in the air, a glow over the meadow at night far from the city. But there is also this: a petroglyph scratched into a rock in New Mexico, a graphic emblem on a grill starter, a warning label on a fuel truck. Or metaphorically further: a website that excites you, a poster that enflames the imagination, and*

*advertisement that really makes you want to buy that dress, a book whose typography and composition so ennoble its contents that you display it in your entryway. This kind of fire sign is a piece of graphic communication that stirs heat in your soul. That's the kind of fire sign this book is about: something in a visual display that ignites memory, intellect, engagement. How does this happen?"*

The author has spent 25 years among people from two professions – graphic design and semiology. Designers manipulate visual elements in order to prompt a response, and semioticians study how things are able to influence people. The books content is much broader than logos, and is heavily theoretical rather than practical, but there are some interesting points on the cultural associations attached to letterforms and symbology.

The following story is shared about a rejected logo proposal.

*"I was once part of a team that designed a corporate identity program for a family-owned auto-servicing business. The company was having difficulty being visible in the marketplace, and our design research pointed to a solution that was minimal, bold, and (at the time) distinctive: a white "M" in a red diamond. The presentation of this proposed logo design was going fine until the youngest member of the family – a twenty-something Texan the matriarch introduced as "Baby Bill" – arrived (late) at the meeting, saw the proposed logo, and pronounced, "Them's the Devil's horns" to a stunned room."*


and went back to the office to attempt to revise the mark. These were all conceptual connotations for Baby Bill, whose particular life experiences no doubt paved the way for his impressions. The point of this story is that it doesn't matter how or why someone becomes primed for associative meanings or whether the connotations are logical or not. If a receiver interprets a display and has certain connotations, the connotations are real. There are no false connotations.

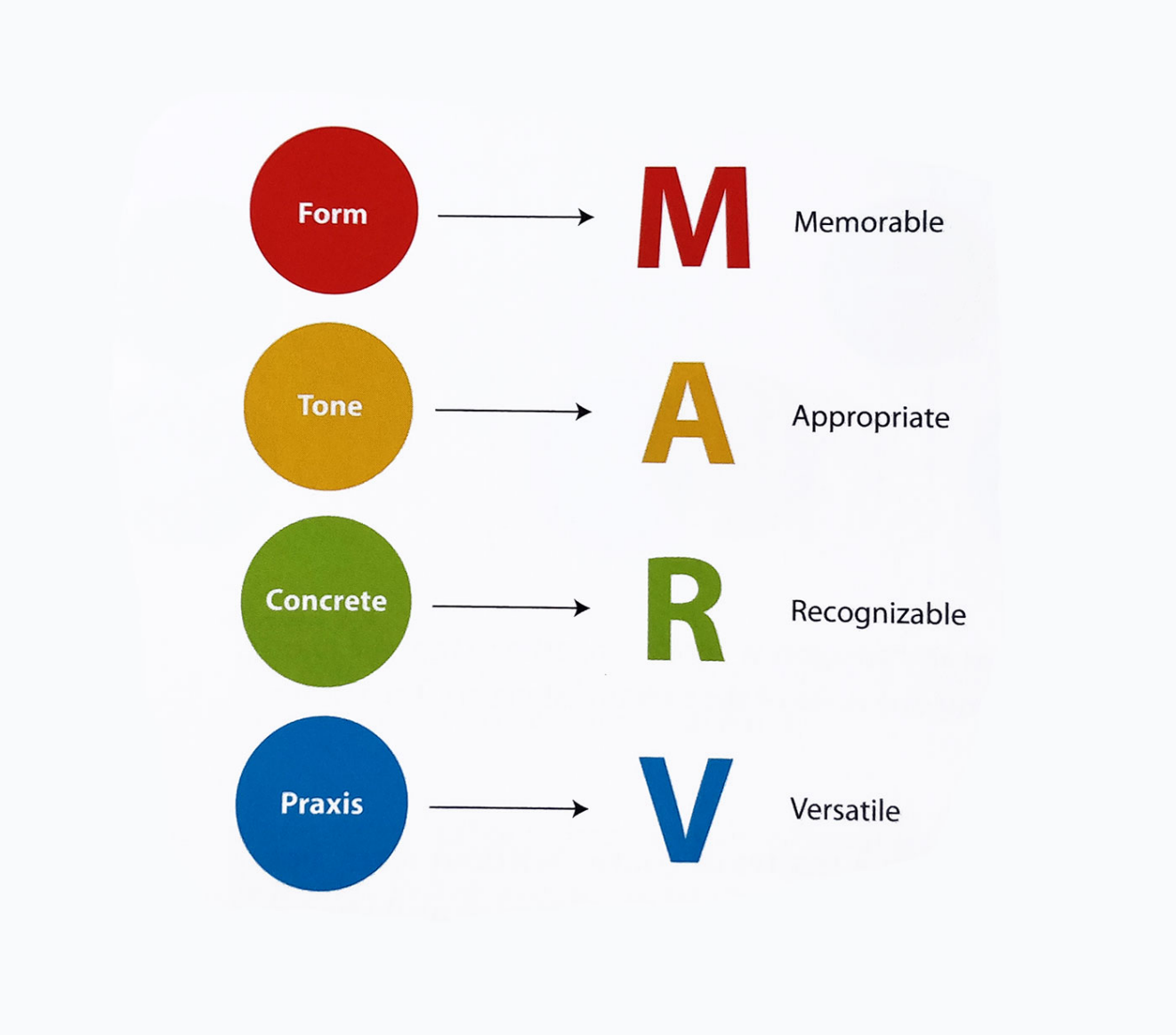
**Figure 5.11**
An "M" by any other name … is this simply a highly recognizable letter M in a diamond, or is it a sly sign of evil?

> *"The red diamond also reminded him of the deadly sin of gambling (playing cards), and this was confirmed for him by a red arrow that unmistakably pointed the way to Hell. There was no recovery: we packed up our materials and went back to the office to attempt to revise the mark. These were all conceptual connotations for Baby Bill, whose particular life experiences no doubt paved the way for his impressions. The point of this story is that it doesn't matter how or why someone becomes primed for associate meanings or whether the connotations are logical or not. If a receiver interprets a display and has certain connotations, the connotations are real. There are no false connotations."*

There's no telling what feedback our clients will give, and how that might affect the eventual outcome – one of those things that helps keep every project different. I've worked on

plenty of designs where client feedback has led to a stronger result, so although your initial idea mightn't hit the mark, sometimes going back to the drawing board is a necessary part of the job.

And speaking of appropriate results, that's one of four considerations Steven applies to the design of a logo.




MARVelous identity design.

I've only had a chance to skim the content (as with most books I'm sent), but it's clear from the theoretical writing that I'd need to take it in small chunks – it's like a course in semiotics for designers. There could well be a few topics to help persuade during a client presentation, and I'll highlight a summary if that's the case.

Meanwhile…





**Figure 9.1**
A word that is difficult to see as a word because its markness is so pronounced. The graphic spectrum provides infinite choices for melting from mark to word.

must be drawn in all capitals, perfectly letterspaced. We admire the transparent, legible word and its applicability for a king.

Only after the class has labored to draw a very fine word is the second portion of the assignment given. The king has regrettably died. But the new king is jealous of the accomplishments of the old king and will have nothing in the realm that is associated with the former ruler. The edict is given that the students must now destroy the word they have just created. Indeed, they must destroy each letter in a different way.

A few of the results are shown in figure 9.2. To the students' amazement, the act of destroying their hard work becomes enjoyable and creative. The finished projects have an innate rhythm (because they are based on letterspaced capitals) and surprising energy.

Several situations tend to emerge from the exercise:

1. The student makes a vain attempt to destroy the letters, and the word is still legible through the modifications (a and b). In such a case, the relationship between the original word's denotation and the connotations of the obvious attempt to destroy it make a very powerful statement. Is the "destruction" an act of violence—or of decoration?
2. The word is obliterated; verbal content is lost (c).





**Figure 9.2**
The "word for a king" exercise reveals the dance between word and marking. The word is sometimes semilegible even after clear attempts at obliteration. Even when the verbal content is completely dead, the visual qualities live: indeed, they are often enhanced.

something that, from a visual standpoint at least, is unambiguously writing, even when it is completely nonverbal.

As it happens, virtually all language systems use character marks as the basis for their graphically written forms. Even when transformed by technology and adapted to different means of construction, the characters of our alphabet still hold the vestigial memory of their gestured and calligraphed forebears.

Whether the character marks serve a language by being part of a linguistic graphical notational code (such as the alphabet) or are independent of any language system is irrelevant to the nature of handwriting per se.[3] Figure 9.9 shows a series of thirty-two iterations of a character mark. These characters were written in the sequence presented here, and no characters were made in between these iterations (that is, nothing has been edited out of the sequence). It illustrates how a single gestural movement can evolve through subtle manipulations of angle, brush pressure, and speed.

The question of whether each iteration shown here is a single character or two or three characters placed close together cannot be resolved. That depends on many contextual factors, including how closely spaced these characters are to other visents, whether or not the characters here are recognizable as members of a notational system (for example, you might be inclined to see letters Z, V, and perhaps R in these marks), and even the orientation (try looking at them from a 90-degree angle and your interpretation of them changes). But unlike cross-hatching, character marks maintain a sense of individuality; they require simplicity and unity in order to achieve this. Their wholeness also depends upon the relative proximity of their elements. All characters are "logoesque" in that they seem to have an individual sense of identity and personality.

As in every gestural mark, characters carry the sense of speed, confidence, emotion, and power of the individual who has written them. In other words, a character mark has individual expression, something an inanimately made mark doesn't have, and something cross-hatching has but sublimates to a pictorial end.

Unlike accidentally generated marks such as a scuff mark, character marks also imply intentionality. A character is assumed to have been intentionally made by someone whose attention was entirely focused on the making of the mark. The absolute attention of the writer increases the power of the expression through the strengthening of the intentionality, which is then conveyed in the characters. Because we sense intentionality, we see an individual character mark as a signal, a message, a display.

This infusion of concentrated attention into the making of the written form is a universal trait of calligraphy throughout the world.[4] In calligraphy, expression of the handwriting conveys deep engagement and focused unselfconsciousness. Even in a



**Figure 9.9**
Following a character mark through modifications made in quick succession with the same tool. These thirty-two marks evolve through different expressions, breaking into roughly four groups: 1–4 (getting started); 5–19 (carefully made); 20–27 (rapid script); and 28–32 (interlocking). The viewer may easily see various letters of the alphabet in these marks, even though that was not my intent. When you see letters, you are feeling yourself move from state II to state III.



**Figure 9.11**
Iteration 29 is taken through a process of "stylization." Stylization edits the raw gestural mark while retaining the gestural movement (a). The resulting stylized mark (b) is then explored through several more iterations (c-g). The rotated versions (f) and (g) begin to lose the association with the letters z and v and therefore slip from state III back into state II, more abstract readings.



that effort. In state III, the requirements of letter recognition restrain the writer's freedom. Whereas state II can be as wild and expressively effusive as the writer desires, if one wishes the receiver to see a mark in state III, recognizing it as belonging to the alphabet, then scribbles must be harnessed; constraints on form come into play—the letter "A" must look something like an "A." Emotional and expressive constraints must also be accepted; the hand that writes the "A" must remain under a certain degree of emotional restraint.

When all of these factors come together in a hand-lettered title block or logotype (figure 9.12), the viewer is able to easily read the words while at the same time sensing connotations that have to do with history, culture, style, or other aspects that are associative and expressive. Unlike the smooth stylization that occurs in figure 9.11, here the edges of the calligraphy are left rough to emphasize the hand-written quality of the mark. The denotative portion of this mark consists of the words Fournier & Shaw; every other aspect of the "feel" of this mark can be attributed to expression and cultural connotations of the visual form.

Let me remark that one of the hallmarks of the great calligraphers is that they make these constraints *seem* to vanish; their expressiveness feels effortless despite the need for great discipline. They operate under severe constraints but suggest limitless possibilities.[6] Throughout history, the world's great calligraphers, if they have worked at state III and higher, have always achieved this formal and expressive balance. In the march from mark to word, each successive state of writing requires more constraint on the expressivity of the writer, while providing a new set of connotations and verbal




**Figure 9.12**
In this title block for an article comparing attitudes on bookmaking by early French printer Pierre Simon Fournier and author George Bernard Shaw, historically evocative hand lettering intertwines the surnames. The edges of the lettering retain the roughness of the paper, reflecting the handwriting process.

imperceptibly, from the handwritten to the hand-drawn and finally to the mechanically assisted construction.

*Further observations*

Before leaving the topic of the five states of writing, let me make a couple of additional observations. First, we seem to be quite good at discerning mechanical and human gestural marks. As with the first two examples of marks in figure 9.15, it seems quite apparent when an abstract mark is made by some gestural human movement, rather than by some mechanical or mindless physical process. We immediately interpret the mechanical mark at top as nongestural. The mark below it, however, even though it is still quite abstract and unlikely to be seen as characters, is read as a human gesture.

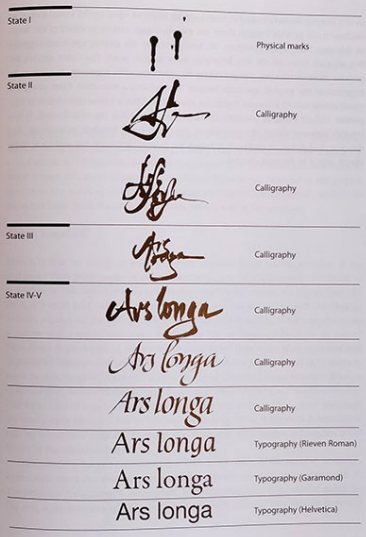
Another note is that the five states of writing act as if they are five magnetic centers. They tend to pull the interpretation to a comfortable home within one of the five states, making gradations between them less obvious and difficult to settle on. It is as if our understanding "wants" the visent to settle into the comparative stability of one of these five nodes and feels unsettled when encountering the uncertainty of situations between them. Is it possible to have a character mark that stays right on the cusp of becoming a letter of the alphabet? We seem to see it as either a letter (even a deformed one) or as an abstract gestural mark that is not a letter. If we stare at the mark, we soon decide that its home state is one or the other, and then we tend to stick with that interpretation.

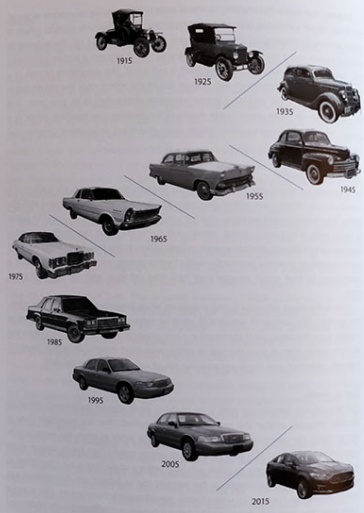
But it is also interesting to notice that these home nodes are not all equal. If we see something as occupying a higher node, it becomes very difficult to see it again at a lesser node. Look back at figure 9.9; once you see the mark as "z-v"—letters of the alphabet—see if you can manage to see it as anything but alphabetical. Once a higher state is arrived at, a mark tends to retain that position. It is difficult to regain the naiveté of seeing only an abstract figure.

**Figure 9.15**
Moving on the graphic spectrum through the five states of writing. Physical, nongestural marks comprise the first state, which is not writing proper. Calligraphy begins with gesturally made characters, state III when we detect alphabetical characters (here used in a string, but also as individual letters). The fourth state includes writing that you perceive is clearly understandable by others, although still opaque to yourself (if you don't read Latin for instance). State V in this example is only reached by people who understand Latin. Approaching the notational apex of the graphic spectrum, forms become increasingly legible within state V until reaching the maximal level of denotative clarity with carefully designed text typography.



States of Writing








strengthened and the style itself not only identifies the brand but deepens the penetration of the entire system of identity.

*Nonidentical identities*

The easiest way to achieve brand identity is the constant repetition of a single unique visent. However, using style to augment or even to establish identity is effective. Figure 11.12 shows an identity system that relies completely on the repetitive employment of a narrow set of color, form, and position relations. Such systems achieve identity through habitual use—the pattern of displays that, while not identical with each other, nevertheless have a principle, similar to the fuzzy template we saw in typography, running in the background. The potential to script such family resemblance patterns offers promise for a kind of metadesign that is partially driven by computer-aided conceptualization.

## Cliché

If we step back for a moment and think about system, especially when system becomes genre, we are confronted with the problem of cliché. In order to employ recognition to the genre, we must use the stylistic behaviors that are the symbols of the genre. But in order to do that, we are necessarily working ground that is already well plowed.

What is wrong with using clichés? A cliché is a way of displaying a certain content in a way that is normalized and made routine. The good news is that the very routine means the content will be quickly processed and absorbed. But it does not mean that the display will be noticed or remembered. Nor is it possible with a highly routinized display for it to connote smartness, alertness, creativity, or other positive attributes.

**Figure 11.11**
Style evolution in a brand. An automobile is part industrial design functional object and part visual design. Looking at the evolution of styles in one brand of auto over a century reveals that change does not occur in even increments (the blue lines show the large breaks in style). This chart shows the lineage of the main, full-sized Ford car from 1915 to 2015. Big Fords changed little in the thirty-year period between 1975 and 2005, becoming more rounded but retaining all of the stylistic motifs of proportion, grill work, headlights, and roofline. Compare that period to the preceding thirty years (1945–1975). Technological developments imperfectly explain the evolution: all these cars except the 2015 model shared body-on-frame, rear wheel drive construction. Socioeconomic factors seem to play a larger part: the postwar boom years account for much of the rapid development, and the Arab oil embargo in 1974 meant that more resources were devoted to developing new smaller cars rather than these fuel-guzzling V-8 models.




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