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ABSTRACT

In this age of proliferating visual communications, there is a permissiveness in subject matter, content, and meaning that is exhilarating, yet overwhelming to interpret in a meaningful or consensual way. By recognizing visual statements, whether a piece of sculpture, an advertisement, a video, or a building, as communication, one can approach their interpretation on different levels and in a number of different ways. The central thesis of this paper is that a visually literate approach to interpreting visual statements must be a flexible, context-relevant, ongoing reinterpretation, and reevaluation. Hence, visual literates have an obligation to explore a variety of perspectives such as art historical, mass communications, perception psychology, semiotics, and hermeneutics. There is a diagram that illustrates the systems for interpretation in communication theory is provided, as well as two lists that outline the various perspectives and categories of an eclectic, inclusive interpretation process. (Contains 35 references.) (DGM)

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From Iconic to Lingual: Interpreting Visual Statements

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In an age of proliferating visual communication we face a permissiveness in subject matter, content and meaning that is exhilarating, yet overwhelming to interpret in any meaningful or consensual way. By recognizing visual statements—whether a piece of sculpture, an advertisement, a video, or a building—as communication, we can approach their interpretation on different levels and in a number of different ways. In support of my central thesis—that a visually literate approach to interpreting visual statements must be a flexible, context-relevant, ongoing reinterpretation and reevaluation—we, as visual literates, have an obligation to explore a variety of perspectives: art historical, mass communications, perception psychology, semiotics, hermeneutics, etc.

At IVLA '93 I presented a summary of art historical approaches: pre-modern/connoisseurial, modern/structuralist and post-modern/deconstructionist/social.¹ In this, the second of a minimum of three papers that I envision to overview these multiple perspectives, I intended to investigate and summarize how mass communications theorists and perceptual psychologists navigate the transition from the iconic to the lingual to illuminate interpretation of visuals.

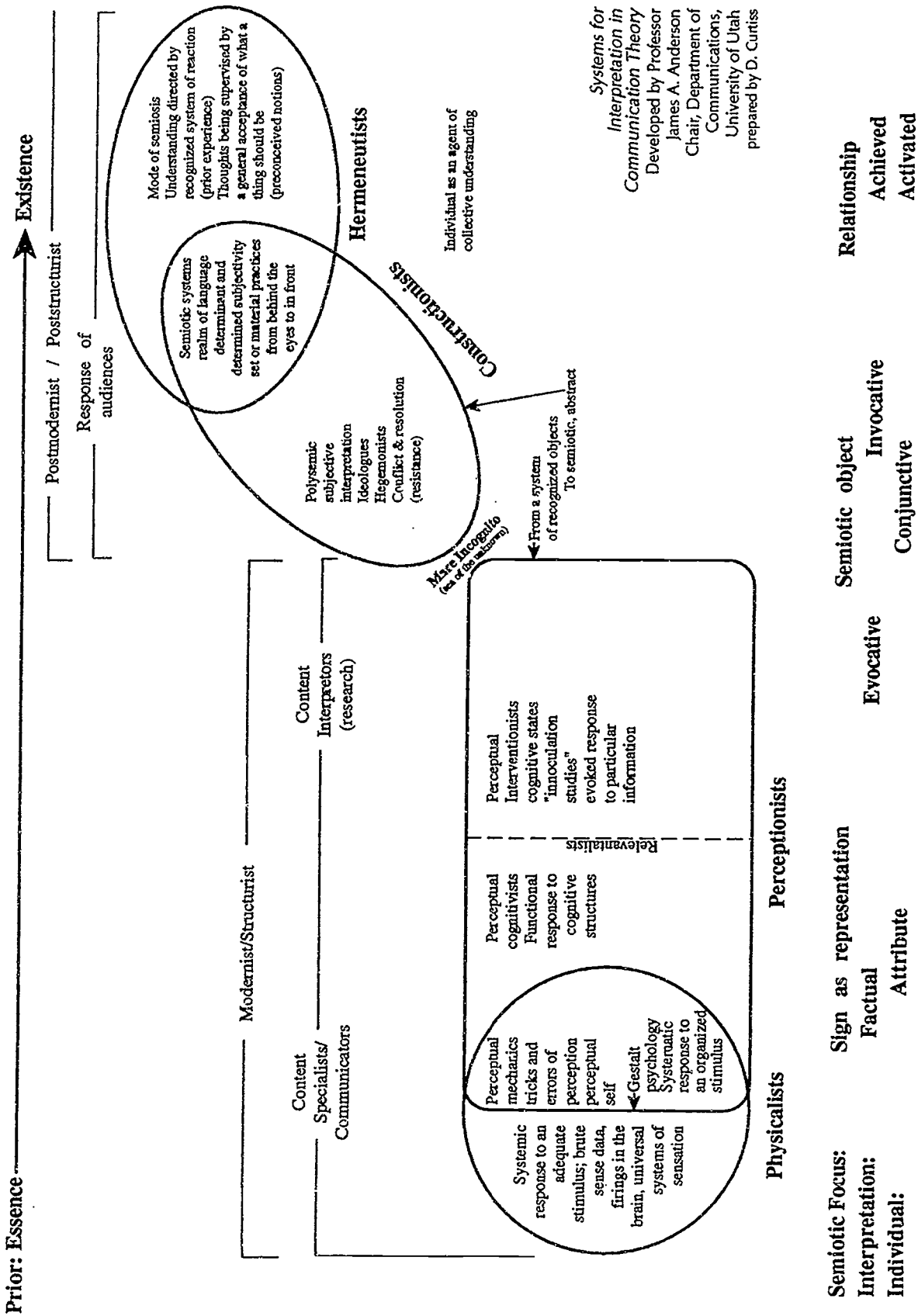
Upon undertaking this challenge, however, I bogged down in an overwhelming body of material. What business do I, a visual artist, have in taking the time from my work to become more than cursorily informed? I want interpretation of visuals to be vital, exciting, joyful. Would attempting a synopsis of this vast realm contribute anything, or burden the interpretation process?

While I mulled these questions, I turned to see what people in mass communications have to say about interpretation. Initially, I found little, and most relied upon cognitive psychology. Considering my limited proclivities, cognitive theory threatened to cast more shadow than light on my quest. When I consider that the leap from iconic to lingual has been a central part of my professional life for more than 30 years, the last thing I wanted is for the dynamic process to become engulfed by concepts and theory.

Pressed to have something to offer at the conference, I remembered a presentation at the 1993 International Visual Literacy Symposium on Verbo-Visual Literacy in Delphi, Greece. Professor James Anderson, Chair, Department of Communications at the University of Utah, addressed interpretation in communication theory. The proceedings of the conference were still in production, so I had not seen his paper, but I remembered his quickly dashed on the chalk board diagram. It depicted the historical development of the topic from early theorists to the present.² From a sketch of his sketch, I prepared the diagram which, having passed his review, is reproduced herewith. It schematically represents the development of physical, perceptual, constructionist and hermeneutic theories, and illuminates the complexity of the issues and process. While Anderson makes no distinction for visual rather than verbal communications, I refer the reader to his article for a synopsis of multiple theories.³

Probably no one can arrive at a concise, definitive statement about how we navigate

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"Images do not make meanings. Social action changes the way groups experience the world, and therefore, the way they make sense of the world. Social actors make meanings and change meanings. All learners are social actors and the invitations they accept or reject have consequences for themselves and other social actors. What often appears to be a simple 'decoding' of media is really a complex process that involves the acceptance of one set of invitations to construct particular meanings and the rejection of alternatives."⁸

Inspired by these quotations, I conclude that the interpretation of visuals is a rich and rewarding multilevel process in which one will often arrive somewhere that is impossible to anticipate. Like any journey to an exotic place, the effort is its own reward.

¹ Curtiss, D. (1994) An Eclectic Approach to the Interpretation of Visual Statements. *Visual Literacy in the Digital Age*, J. Clark-Baca, D. G. Beauchamp & R. A. Braden, eds.

² Anderson, J. A. (1994) The Role of Interpretation in Communication Theory. *Verbo-Visual Literacy: Understanding and Applying New Educational Communication Media Technologies*, Metallinos, N., ed. Concordia University, Montreal.

³ Anderson, op. cit.

⁴ Feinstein, H. (1993) Visual Literacy in General Education at the University of Cincinnati. *Journal of Visual Literacy* 13:2.

⁵ Anderson, op. cit., p. 220.

⁶ Miller, H. B. and Burton, J. K. (1994). Images and Imagery Theory. In D. M. Moore and F. M. Dwyer (Eds.), *Visual Literacy, a Spectrum of Visual Learning*, p. 77. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

⁷ Couch, R. A. and Caropresso, E.J. with Miller, H. B. (1994). Making Meaning from Visuals: Creative Thinking and Interpretation of Visual Information. In D. M. Moore and F. M. Dwyer (Eds.), *Visual Literacy, a Spectrum of Visual Learning*, p. 278. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

⁸ Ellsworth, E. (1988). Media Interpretation As a Social and Political Act, *Journal of Visual Literacy* 8:2, p. 36.

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