



A brief introduction to Signography

by Andreas Stötzner

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I define Signography as the study of graphic signs. The subject of signographics is graphic signage of every kind, of whatever field of application.

In summer 2000 the first issue of the periodical SIGNA was launched at my instigation. A concept of the subject was presented here under the name of Signography at the very first time.¹

Another five issues featuring articles on signographic topics have been published since then, evoking increasing response among scientific and communication professionals. To provide an easy comprehensible point to start here I give some explanatory notes upon the subject, its content and objectives.

What is a sign?

Those doing semiotics have been occupied by this question for quite a long time (semiotics or semiology, teaching of signs in a most general sense). A sign may be a letter, a brand, an object, a gesture, a sound, an image, whatsoever. In his handbook of semiotics Winfried Nöth states: “Any object, anything what happens or any behaviour is [...] potentially a sign. Even silence, which seems to involve just absence of materiality and signing, may function as a sign [...]”.² For just everything may accordingly count as a sign in the end, a differentiation between *something regarded significant* and *something not regarded significant* has to be made. To put it just more simply: a sign is considered either a mere (physical) bearer of a meaning (a signpost, e.g.), or it’s the entirety of bearer, meaning and context. This connection does usually function as a kind of agreement between communicator and recipient.

Strangely enough, semiologists have hardly considered so far what is most commonly regarded a sign: the graphic sign.

What is ‘graphical’?

The greek term γραφειν means to draw, to write, to carve or engrave something. It points to a marking which is produced by the trace of a tool’s movement on a surface. This tool may be any pen-like instrument or even the finger itself. In opposition to imprinting techniques (e.g. stencilling, stamping) which reproduce an image out of a pre-modelled form the sign which is created by a graphing technique just originates from the very moment of the pen’s movement.

What is a graphic sign?

Among the entirety of all visual signs the graphic ones take up a particular position since their peculiarity (their graphical nature) does meet their actual use as an information means to a much greater extent than this is the case with other kinds of signs. The whole body of informational signs consists mainly of simple graphic structures. To draw something is to draw somebody's attention. Graphic signs are visible markings consisting of simple rather than intricate graphic forms, serving for the saving of informations as well as for their transmission.

To sum it up one can say, graphic signs are a partial set of visual signs, those are a partial set of all signs in general, supposed that a reasonable definition for this seems feasible.

Why signographics as a subject in its own right?

The actual reason for establishing this subject on its own is the naturalness of *the graphical* alongside with its inherent laws necessarily ruling graphic structures. This is it what has not yet been embarked on by other subjects. Although there are several of them dealing with graphic expressions in some respect, none of them has focussed so far on *the graphical as such*. If we go to compare graphic means of various kind we'll find something that is common to all of them. This 'core of graphicness' is a principal subject of signographic investigation.

What about the term 'signography'?

I choose this term after careful consideration and discussion with colleagues. The problem was, that a term pointing on the actual graphical might have led to a term like *graphics*, *graphemics*, *grammar* or *graphology* – all of which are already occupied. Even *grammatology* has been used in semiologic context,³ *semiography* was rejected in respect to semiotics/semiology. Since *grammatography* seemed inappropriate as well, *signography* came out finally, although being a latin-greek chimera. However, this choice might be justified by the fact that *not only* graphical signs in a most strict sense are to be dealt with here. Many signs in visual communication which owe their form not to graphical procedures exclusively (in a real physical sense) are also subject of signographics. (Letters, e.g., result from a range of different reproduction processes.)

What is signography?

The teaching of graphic signs. Subject are signs and signage of whatever kind and field of application, from ancient and recent scripts up to marks, brands and logotypes as well as signage systems of electronics or music. In signography we identify and describe signs and connect a sign's form with its use. Anatomy and metamorphosis of signs are to be discussed in detail. This is necessary if we want to understand changes of signs properly.

Why doing signographics?

The reason of signographics is to get profound knowledge about the emergence, development and utilization of signs. It's about to know something of sign's occurrences, learning to understand a sign's essence and proper depiction. Misunderstanding becomes more unlikely as we learn to see a sign's essence behind its appearance. Communication becomes more effective and more reliable if we know, what signs are appropriate in a certain context, how they have to look – or how they *may* look.

Today rapid increase of information interchange urges us to get used to new signage cultures. Networking causes regional sign conventions affecting each other more than ever. Who wants to participate profitably in this developments ought to have some knowledge about the business of signs.

Putting signographics on the map

Signography may be regarded a subject of the humanities, neighbour to linguistics, semiology or design theory. Signography can be perceived as the *semiology of the graphical* as well as a basic research subject related to visual communication.

By the definition given above a range of subjects happen to be in the scope of the signographers perspective, some of them should be mentioned here: semiology, linguistics, script history, typography, palæography, epigraphy, ornamentics, heraldry; the study of seals, monograms or marks and brands. Further, archæology, geometry as well as graphic design are disciplines of some importance to signographic concern. Although many points of contact between those subjects are well-known, they are not considered sufficiently by these subjects which we find to be rather separated from each other by tradition. – However, if we want to understand signographics as a science we should not fail to take into account the fact that the actual matter of signographic scholarship in many cases is the result of determinedly artistic effort. Art and science, in signographics they belong together inseparably.

What is to be explored

Signographic discussion may focus on a sign as a frequently occurring *typus* as well as a certain token. The two most eminent aspects usually are a) what does the sign look like (what is to be seen)?, and b) what is the given message (what is the sign's meaning)? Or, to put it more briefly, the sign's form (*gestalt*) and the sign's use. This is essential because one and the same graphic form may bear different meanings, on the one hand, but a particular sign may happen to take on different graphic forms while retaining its very sense, on the other hand.

In addition, signographic *thematics* is of some importance.⁴ What signs at all are used in whatever fields? Is it possible to compile conclusive charts of, e.g., meteorological or cartographical characters? What signs are actually used by crystallographers or sinologists? Those questions are relevant to editorial efforts of the respective subjects.

Furthermore, *practics* is another field of signographic research. It's about the depiction and explanation of how signage is done practically and how this does affect form and use of signs.

Benefits of signographic research

A) General information on the signs of the world, made accessible by suitable forms of publication (papers, charts, encyclopædias, data banks).

B) Providing of methodological knowlegde for sign-using as well as sign-describing disciplines, e.g. typography, epigraphy, archæology, communication design).

C) Work out of strategies and methods for the development of new signage systems (wherever needed).

D) Development of criteria for the jugdement of signs drafted, e.g. brands and logotypes.

E) Basic research for the complex of encoding, data processing and font production.

What social aspects does signographic research embrace?

First of all, in general, to promote a wider and deeper understanding of the signs of the world, thereby promoting the understanding of what men want to express by producing signage. A parallel to the learning of languages is obvious here, of course. Even our western culture, heavily dominated by alphabetical signage, is found to contain a plenty of nonalphabetical signage conventions. Every day new signs are born, urged by needs of different social groups. Existing sings become redesigned or redesignated. Ideographical signs become increasingly important in visual communication, even beyond their classical applications. For public signage or tourism signs in a most universal sense are

indispensable. Last but not least, special notation concepts worked out recently for the particular needs of certain social groups (the deaf, e.g.) are not to overestimate.

Is it possible to study signography?

Yes, it is. Yet, as an official academic subject it still remains to become established. Meanwhile, I incorporate signographic aspects in my teaching of typography at the Burg Giebichenstein Institute of arts and design in Halle (Germany). Who is interested in signographic research should contact me. The subject of signography is just in the making.

The website *signographie.de* serves for the exchange of signographic issues.⁵ The periodical SIGNA⁶ is published since 2000 as a platform for ambitious signographic studies and is read by a steadily growing international community. Universities and art academies form a main part of the subscribers. SIGNA is published in German, yet some abstracts and additions to articles are also provided in English via the website. Participation is welcome.

Concrete tasks of signographic activities

A) Conceptual basics and a signographic terminology has to be developed. As a beginning towards this objectives SIGNA No. 1 was intended. (For my own part, I'm concerned for quite a long time with graphemics, i.e. the basic graphic forms⁷).

B) Signs of whatever kind are to be collected for we need to build up the actual body of research. Collecting and the work of organizing and describing which necessarily follows then are fundamental to signographics. Last but not least this efforts often lead to crucial questions on the form and use of signs, forced by compiling and comparing them.

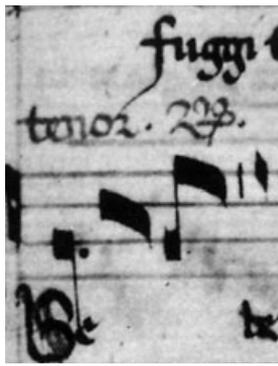
C) Suitable methods and a general terminology for the definition of signs is to be developed.

D) The results of investigation upon signs or sign systems are to be published, be it in print or by electronic media.

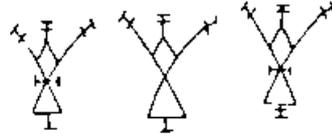
E) For a considerable range of other disciplines are connected to signography, there should be discussion about these connections to get those subjects closer to each other. The respective methods, terminologies and goals are to be brought into a closer relation.

F) To make signs processible for worldwide communication, they need to be encoded within the utilized technology (computers). Since Unicode⁸ is reaching out for embracing all scripts of the world by a single industry standard the total exploration of all living and dead signs of the world has definitely become the issue of the time. Facing this task it dawns on us that basic signographic research has not been undertaken up to now. The whole of signs is viewed and understand better by the universal signographic approach than by traditional points of view, which are usually restricted by concepts like “script”, “language” or “design”.

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Graphic signs

Notes

- 1) *Signa* Nr. 1, 2000. Grimma, Edition Wächterpappel, 2000. The article “Signography as a subject in its own right” by ANDREAS STÖTZNER appeared in *visual communication*, vol. 2, No. 3, 2003, Sage Publ.
- 2) WINFRIED NÖTH: *Handbuch der Semiotik*. 2. Auflage, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2000; p. 133.
- 3) JACQUES DERRIDA: *De la grammatologie*. Paris, Minuit, 1967. (cited after Nöth, p. 557)
- 4) See the actual list of signographic thematics in the document *SIGNA–Thematik–1.1* ; provided at www.signographie.de
- 5) www.signographie.de is currently run by Ingo Preuß (Heidelberg) and Andreas Stötzner (Leipzig) independently. It is not yet backed by any company or institution.
- 6) *Signa* is published about twice a year at Edition Wächterpappel, which is a label of Denkmalschmiede Höfgen gGmbH (see www.hoefgen.de).
- 7) Publication of this in *Signa* is forthcoming.
- 8) see www.unicode.org