

# An interview with EVRIPIDES ZANTIDES on Semiotics and Graphic Design

Interviewed by  
Siiri Tarrikas

Evrripides Zantides, professor of graphic communication and dean of the School of Fine and Applied Arts at Cyprus University of Technology, recently visited the University of Tartu to lecture in a workshop titled “Collaborative Workshop: Semiotics Meets Graphic Design”. I took Zantides’ visit as a time to initiate a small correspondence with him, in which I posed some brief questions about his views on semiotics, current and past experiences and scholarship, as well as a few more theoretical topics. Zantides has found semiotics to extend beyond theory into the practical and has demonstrated this with his own work in the field of visual communication within and outside of academia. He has authored numerous semiotic papers and is editor of the *Semiotics and Visual Communication* book series, with the most recent titles being *Semiotics and Visual Communication III: Cultures and Branding* (2019) and *Semiotics and Visual Communication IV: Myths of Today* (2024) which was co-edited with Sonia Andreou. I am excited to present our small discussion below, and I would like to thank Zantides for this interview and his fascinating and inspiring thoughts.

## Interview

**Siiri Tarrikas:** Would you like to start with a short introduction of your background? How did you develop an interest in semiotics and use it in visual communication?

**Evrripides Zantides:** The story goes back to when, in one of the courses during my bachelor studies in graphic communication at the University of Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom, I picked up the word ‘semiotics’ from a basket filled up with different terms, with which we were supposed to respond in the form of an experimental slideshow with sound. Having researched the term back in the early nineties, with only a few sources found when compared to current days, I was fascinated to discover this theory, which aims to understand how meaning is constructed and interpreted within a system of signs. The idea has inspired me since

then and was also the major framework of my work produced during my master's program in graphic fine arts at the University of Kent in the UK (supported by a full university scholarship). During my MA program, I explored graphic symbols' design and cultural meaning in everyday life through a fine-art graphic installation in space. Furthermore, semiotics, typography, graphic design, and national identity were the major areas of my PhD research and thesis that followed at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece. Mainly, through content and semiotic analysis, I looked at the construction of national identity in a corpus of advertisements published in Cyprus over the period of fifty years since its state independence in 1960. At the moment, I am a professor of graphic communication and dean of the School of Fine and Applied Arts of the Cyprus University of Technology, completing 27 years in tertiary education with much graphic design practice aside as well.

**ST:** Many students are interested in learning how to use semiotics in practice. In your opinion, how can semiotics be helpful in the work of a graphic designer or marketer?

**EZ:** Inevitably, the graphic design process is a semiotic process by default. While designers choose typefaces to visualise their verbal texts with appropriate colours, size, placement, orientation, and images, either for digital or print, they visualise an idea and produce meaningful outcomes. In the work of graphic designers, all actions are semiotic. Graphic designers deal mainly with text/typography, images, sound, and motion, each of these four elements is a separate field study on its own, with many lectures on their semiotic aspects and fascinating examples to explore. In the work of a marketer, semiotics is very useful in understanding consumer behaviour, culture, residual, dominant, or emergent codes from specific audiences, as well as in analysing and comparing the rhetoric of market competitors.

**ST:** Your works in semiotics and design have covered a wide range of topics. From national identity, visual metaphor, typography and tourism (Zantides 2020; 2016a) to Children's representation in advertisements (Zantides, Kourdis 2013; Zantides, Zapiti 2011), visual metaphors (Zantides 2016b) and so on. What projects are you currently working on? What are the models or concepts you find most useful in your work?

**EZ:** Aside from the demanding administrative workload at the university, my work focuses on two main pillars: the theoretical research of semiotics and graphic design practice. Combining the two is exceptional, as one can observe how theory is implemented into practice and vice versa. The most useful concepts in my work deal with reasoning, meaning, argumentation, interpretation, and creativity in any decision-making, both in theoretical research and practice-based work. At the

moment, I am researching how linguistic functions of language are aligned with typographic renderings in the making of graphic design posters and logotypes.

**ST:** Would you say that your knowledge of concepts, theories, and semiotic models helped you discover new layers of meaning in visual communication?

**EZ:** Absolutely, yes. After contextualizing and looking at the design process from concrete and theoretical semiotic perspectives, new compiled models emerge that not only provide systematic tools for making meaning in visual communication but also in understanding secondary levels of messages, and ideological formations, encoded in both verbal and nonverbal signs.

**ST:** Different types of signs are combined in marketing and advertisements functioning in synergy. You have been using the concept of 'plastic signs' (Zantides, Kourdis 2013), which could be an example of such synergy; could you please explain this to our readers?

**EZ:** While in visual signs, 'plastic signs,' as introduced by Group  $\mu$ <sup>1</sup>, relate to colour, form, or texture and have a connotative function, additional parameters contribute to the secondary and third level of readings, for example, placement and orientation. In his famous essay on the rhetoric of the image of a pasta advertisement, Barthes<sup>2</sup> argues how colours contribute to "Italianicity"; however, he also discusses how settings and proximity of objects portray "freshness" and the "return from the market." Art directors, graphic designers, and marketing experts often withdraw their concepts from cultural research. They work together to design visual trajectories, on-screen or print, with meaning. By combining verbal and nonverbal signs, they suggest reading paths and a story is told. We, as designers, tell the readers how and what specific messages are communicated. A synergy among marketers, art directors, and designers can only be beneficial and successful, for example, in advertising campaigns. If we think about the making of "cultural myths", as selling appeals assigned to products or services, we understand that is the outcome of the synergy of the aforementioned two. After marketing research, designers use different types of signs in advertisements and adopt cultural norms; they visualise trends, colours, or popular beliefs to sell an idea.

**ST:** In what direction do you think visual communication will develop, and what is the role of semiotics in those new developments?

---

<sup>1</sup> For further readings on Group  $\mu$  see: Groupe  $\mu$  1981; Groupe  $\mu$  2015; Delahaye, 2022

<sup>2</sup> See Barthes 1997: 153

**EZ:** Visual communication seems to develop in more technological, virtual, and artificial intelligence-based environments. Cinema, graphic design, and multimedia are becoming more interactive and immersive, with viewers or users being more participatory in the process of meaning. The role of semiotics in these new developments is crucial as, with new technologies, the virtual space becomes more multisensory. Therefore, semiosis is far more multimodal than before. The rise of artificial intelligence is also influencing the way we think and produce visual outcomes. However, it can never substitute human taste or aesthetics and produce something new; rather, it remains a useful tool for gathering and editing information from what exists already.

**ST:** How were your experiences with the “Collaborative Workshop: Semiotics Meets Graphic Design” in Tartu?

**EZ:** Tartu is a semioheaven in all aspects. The energy of the place, the city, the people, the students, the tutors, and the University itself are just ideal for finding meaning into meaning-research. The workshop initiated by Ulla Juske, Eleni Alexandri, Maarja Ojamaa, Katre Pärn, Tiit Remm, and Ott Kagovere was an amazing idea that brought together students from semiotics and graphic design to collaborate and work together on a live project for Tartu 2024, European Cultural Capital<sup>3</sup>. The whole experience, exchange of knowledge, discussions, analysis, and the making of concepts into visual significations at the end, was an academic experiment that proved how useful, necessary, and fruitful the collaboration between the two disciplines is.

**ST:** Is there anything further you would like to add?

**EZ:** Yes, never stop exploring and wondering “why” and “how” about everything; search for meaning and enjoy the process of trying to get the answers. As we are born and raised within specific cultural texts, we must remember that while these texts have their own syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of “infinite” signs, we as individuals have the final control and say in making the sentences. As such, we need to dare and question, provoke, take risks, and move on in search of the truth.

---

<sup>3</sup> See <https://tartu2024.ee/en/> for more information on Tartu 2024.

## References

- Zantides, Evripides 2020. Signs of national identity in the graphic design of Cypriot print advertisements. *The American Journal of Semiotics* 36(3-4): 315-349.
- Zantides, Evripides (ed.) 2019. *Semiotics and Visual Communication III: Cultures and Branding*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Zantides, Evripides 2016a. Looking inwards, designing outwards: National identity and print advertisements of the Cyprus tourism organization. *Visual Studies* 31(3): 248-259.
- Zantides, Evripides 2016b. Visual metaphors in communication: Intertextual semiosis and déjà vu in print advertising. *Romanian Journal of Communication & Public Relations* 18(3): 65- 74.
- Zantides, Evripides; Andreou, Sonia (eds.) 2024. *Semiotics and Visual Communication IV: Myths of Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Zantides, Evripides; Kourdis, Evangelos 2013. Representations of children in food advertisements in Cyprus: A sociosemiotic perspective. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics* 1: 25-45.
- Zantides, Evripides, Zapiti, Anna 2011. Children's representation in advertising: A content analytic look. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1(20): 48-54.

## References for footnotes:

- Barthes, Roland 1977. *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Delahaye, Pauline 2022. The world, the body and the sign: Group  $\mu$  at the sources of meaning. *Sign Systems Studies* 50(2/3): 453-457.
- Groupe  $\mu$  (Dubois, Jacques; Édeline, Francis; Klinkenberg, Jean-Marie; Minguet, Philippe; Pire, Francis; Trinon, Hadelin) 1981. *A General Rhetoric*. (Burrell, Paul; Slotkin, Edgar, trans.) Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Groupe  $\mu$  (Édeline, Francis; Klinkenberg, Jean-Marie) 2015. *Principia semiotica: Aux sources du sens*. Brussels: Les impressions nouvelles.