

Communication, image and aesthetics in web design: a hermeneutical approach. Case study: aesthetic meanings of black in web design¹.

Iasmina PETROVICI, PhD

Assistant Lecturer

Department of Philosophy and Communication Sciences

West University of Timișoara

E-mail: iasmipetrovici@yahoo.com

Mihaela Meral AHMED, PhD

E-mail: mihaelameral_ahmed@yahoo.com

Abstract. *In this study we intend to start an interdisciplinary analysis concerning the aspects of artistic communication presented at the level of web design. We intend to analyze the type of artistic communication specific for web design via qualitative research methods specific for communication, hermeneutic and aesthetic fields of research. In the first part of this study we will discuss the specific of the image as a symbolic form of communication taking into consideration the web design as a postmodern variety of applied art, and then we will underline some aspects concerning aesthetic components of web design. In the third part, we will present a qualitative research, interpreting the aesthetic meanings of the use of black in web design and finally we will draw some conclusions.*

Keywords: *web design, postmodern culture, communication, image, aesthetics, black in web design.*

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We mention that the reason for the selection of this subject is the important role that image plays as a form of symbolic communication in the context of web design, especially the various aesthetic pertains of black. The symbolic meanings of image, in particular the ones associated with the use of black in web design, may draw the attention of receptor. These can make web design more expressive and can generate a special type of aesthetic experience. The elements that compose the image at the level of web design, as symbols, signs, colors, graphic effects, the structure of composition, characters, have a definite role. First, this role is to capture the attention of the receptor. Secondly, it is to communicate ideas or messages about the specific of the web page or the site involved. Then, it is to produce a certain type of experience or aesthetic emotion for a certain time period, degree and intensity.

1. The specific of image is a form of symbolic communication in web design. The image is a form of communication, because in order to transmit a message we do not only use words, but also images. The relation between words, text and image is a complicated one. Different philosophical and linguistically orientations analyze this relation in different manners, for example, the written text can also be considered an image, according to Derrida. The sentence is, according to Wittgenstein, an image of events. If we take into consideration the image in a broad sense, there is not only the visual image involved, we can observe that literature also operates with images. The concept of *image* has a very wide meaning. That is the reason why we have to underline that here we take into consideration the meaning of image as a visual image, and, that is the reason why, the examples are from the field of visual arts focused on web design as a form of art. It is clearly that the web design in not the purest form of visual art because we cannot set aside the functional aspects of web pages or sites: any form of design is the design of an object. On the other hand, web design is not only a tool, meaning that it does not only have functional purposes.

We must classify the fast dissemination of web design as a postmodern phenomenon, the web design itself being a sort of postmodern form of art. We think that web design is a postmodern form of art for the following three reasons. First, it uses art trends from all sorts of time periods and cultures, it is well known that postmodernism celebrates a return to different cultures and trends. Postmodern art is designing the future by recovering the past. Secondly, web design, as all forms of postmodern art, represents a collage, a mixture. The third reason is that the postmodern art represents a mixture of aesthetic values with economic values, and web design is also a form of art dictated mainly by the desire to promote a service or a product in order to sale it. As Jobling and Crowley underline: "a business, for example, is not valued by the things that its workers produce but by the way it is *represented* on the stock exchange and the confidence that shareholders have in its image" (Jobling and Crowley 1996, p. 273). The representation of a product is its capital of image. The consumption of images is an extreme form of symbolic communication specific for a postmodern approach. This experience is not a pure

negative one. The consumption of images can be extreme and alienating, but can also be an educative and enriching experience

The computer art² is in full cultural, social and economical expansion. Couchot and Hillaire observe that even if we do not know, and we cannot fully understand what exactly characterizes the innovative element of this sort of images without understanding what made it possible. They call this innovative element *le numérique* (2003). This is the element which determined deep and radical changes introduced by the means of production, dissemination and observation of works, and especially the rapport between art and science. There are also limits of this great development. The development of graphic in web design encountered also, of course, a great amount of criticism even from some innovative and quite eccentric theoreticians (not only from more traditional theoreticians). Computer art in general is characterized as “a flat terrain where all things *as images* are treated equally” (Jobling and Crowley 1996, p. 276). Baudrillard extends these considerations upon images at the scale of modern and postmodern culture. His critique is addressed to image and its means of dissemination³. The media is indistinct of the images that it promotes. As a result, the image is affected and transformed by the media. The impossibility of distinction between the images and the media combined in these images makes from computer arts, like web design, “a pastiche and a kaleidoscope of style” (Jobling and Crowley 1996, p. 276)⁴. But in all this chaos must also exist a kind of order, and it does exist. As we will illustrate in the second part of this study, the colors and shapes and other graphic elements are not chosen random, but according to some well known aesthetic principles mastered by graphic designers.

2. The use of some aesthetic aspects of the image at the level of web design, in a very broad sense represents the submission of some artistic styles, which attract the attention generating a certain disposition at the level of the receptor. Beside the function of sending of a certain message corresponding to the theme of the site, aesthetic communication in web design can influence psychical and affective states. The most important aspect in this context is the enrichment of human experience. In order to be more efficient and successful, web design aesthetics must accomplish not only an information transmission based function, but also a social function, meaning that it determines a certain reaction at the level of receptor, it facilitates a better relation with the receptor, with the different categories of public. It facilitates the relation between the web designer and the public by means of image. The web image can have an educative-formative function, raising the sensitivity and refining public’s taste.

2 *Art numérique* in the original text (Couchot, Hillaire 2003).

3 i. e. the media.

4 We will describe later the mix of styles as a major trend in web design that uses graffiti, street art and all sort of collages.

In general, the creation team is composed from at least two specialists, the web designer and the copywriter. Both have to be connoisseurs not only of the issues of the main tendencies in design, but also of the most important artistic styles in digital art and in some tendencies in modern and in postmodern art. The web designer is a specialist in the aesthetics of images, as an author of visual messages, he does not only have to offer a graphic form of messages and containments, but also an attractive form. The aesthetic creativity is essential for the efficiency of web design. When aesthetic creativity is destined for a large variety of public, it has to be connected with the principle of aesthetic accessibility. According to this principle, one of the qualities of web design is the material and spiritual accessibility for the public, the ability to be easy to receive and appreciate. The aesthetical aspects of web design are accessible to the public when these correspond to the average cultural level of the general public. As a form of applied art, web design is also characterized by the combination of some aesthetic aspects with some technical-functional particularities. Originality, quality, attractiveness and expressivity of web images are caused by applying some aesthetic values. On the other hand, the web designer must know the expectations of public, a segment of this public having high expectations. The fact that from one year to another, from a season to another the tendencies in web design tend to be modified, to stumble upon changes, is an argument for the above sustained idea. When the stylistic element of web design makes a strong impression, and involves emotions, the web design reached its purpose. Quality web design is characterized by an well constructed visual strategy, generating a strong lasting impact for the public, opening the possibility of changes in public preferences and aesthetic attitudes. Written and spoken messages, melodic tones or sounds, which accompany web design are also important but are not the topic of this study.

We can identify four general aesthetic trends in web design: first, minimalist artistic styles; the second, artistic styles with a predominant decorative component; the third, various types of urban art; the fourth, a stylistic syncretism. We will try to describe here a couple of definitely aspects for each and every of these stylistic tendencies using also some examples.

Stylistic minimalism applied in web design (McNeil 2010, pp. 145-146) can be considered a derived form of abstractionism and of abstract impressionism, two of the most significant trends of postmodern art. The artistic message is composed based on abstraction of forms and colors. This leads to the use of the essential in an image. The aesthetic principle that initiated it is that the abstraction of forms and colors, the lack of definite forms and the presence of very strong contrasts and colors. This process can generate strong emotions and can also be easy to receive. One of the fundamental principles of stylistic minimalism in web design consists in the simplicity of shapes. Images that contain complex stylistic elements can distract the attention of the receptor, can be tedious and even misinterpreted in some situation. These can also create the impression of over-saturation of image and of hidden message. Web design represents a manner of mass artistic communication, that is

why the language used must be simple, accessible and agreed to by the majority of the public. There are also more refined manners of apply stylistic minimalism in web design, especially if is set for a artistic cultivated and demanding public. One of these modalities is represented by the recovery of supremacist, especially concerning the lack of representation of objects in web images. This image is filled with elements, geometrical shapes being used very often (the circle, the triangle, the theme of the chess board etc.).



Figure 1. Stylistic minimalism; <http://whyinteractive.com/>

The aesthetic tendencies that use frequently *decorative components* express very often revivals of some styles as baroque and neo-baroque, neo-gothic, post-impressionism, art-deco and art-nouveau. These are some themes that belong to the artistic styles mentioned above, themes that can be found in web design: curb and irregular shapes (spirals, curls), exuberant decorations, asymmetry, irregularity in general, centrifugal lines, compositional schemes in diagonal, photographicical effects, light effects, flamboyant effects, chromatic superposes, arabesques, elongate shapes, vegetal decorations, floral themes, sinusitis and symbolic elements. The use of these tendencies at the level of web design requires knowledge of some technical and aesthetic principles, in the opposite case, we can obtain a overload web image.



Figure 2: Elements of art-nouveau; <http://blogsolid.com/>

A third stylistic trend in web design consists in the add of *urban art* elements (McNeil 2010, pp. 154-155), as collage, graffiti, pop art, street art. The often use of collage, of typed characters, of combine-paintings or combine-images, of some forms of applied art as posters and labels are just a few of these examples.



Figure 3: Elements of urban art; <http://www.erguvanplatin.com/>

The more or less vivid assimilation of dissimilar artistic trends takes, in the context of web design, the form of *stylistic syncretism*: the juxtapositions of some stylistic elements, the excessive use of symbolism, supra-realistic elements, visual fragmentation, the overuse of synesthesia, and the symbolic compatibilities, at the chromatic level, the pale-overlays of shades with strong contrasts. If aesthetic trends in which have predominated decorative elements, mainly having an aesthetic function, we can appreciate that stylistic syncretism is an aesthetics tendency in close proximity to hermetism, especially in terms of a very concentrated artistic language, over-symbolic, as well as in the complexity of forms. From this point of view, the web design at the level, which is hard to find applications of syncretism style, is obviously addressed to an more restrained audience, unfamiliar with the meanings and with the aesthetic themes exposed.



Figure 4: Stylistic syncretism; <http://www.chateau-fontainebleau.fr/>

3. Along with other artistic elements, the chromatic elements are the most commonly applied in web design. They are carrying multiple and complex meanings, primarily because of their symbolic value, and secondly due to the ability to generate intense emotions (Joannès 2009, p. 16). We can appreciate that, as well in aesthetics as in web design, the creative use of color can spark some new aesthetic attributes. The use of color in web design may fulfill multiple functions, but if in advertising communication, the most important of these function is «to contribute to a realistic reproduction of what is represented» (Petre and Iliescu 2004, p. 77) in web design colors are chosen based on their ability to attract and maintain a relatively constant, and, last but not least, to produce aesthetic satisfaction.

In general, the use of color in web design may induce to receivers certain primary affective states, as surprise, joy, excitement, fear or sadness; but at the same time, they can generate some aesthetic emotions. In web design, colors have an expressive function. Their main physical proprieties are brightness and saturation (Beaird 2010, p. 51). The brightness of a color is determined by the quantity of light radiation, where lighter or darker shades result, while saturation is the purity of a color. Any mixture of colors can cause a lowering in saturation. Of course, the colors can communicate symbolic messages – cultural, social, and ideological. The web design employ a wide range of colors, with the aim of magnetizing the attention of the public, to communicate psychological messages, and, last but not least, to engender certain aesthetic requirements. A fundamental element applied in web design is black. We mention that in web design, black is applied mainly for its positive aspects, associated with symbolical aesthetic meanings. Black represents the application in web design of all of the four previously discussed stylistic tendencies in different forms and proportions. For instance, in association with the stylistic minimalism, black expresses aesthetic values as slenderness, sophistication, elegance; associated with abstract expressionism, it conveys emotional tension, the conceptualization of the message; associated with strong chromatic contrasts, black can sustain graphic expressive lines, large/wide range backgrounds.

There is a similarity between the manner in which used black in advertising and how it is used in web design. On symbolic aspect, as in advertisement creation, all four types of colors are applied in web design: *fashionable colors*, *social colors*, *cultural* and *archetypal colors* (Dan and Iliescu 2004, p. 80). It is known that black is considered a non-color that designers always consider fashionable, thanks to its capacity to express a stylistic elegance, refinement and slenderness. Moreover, its meaning is associated with social values such as non-conformity, authority, power. The cultural significance is in relation with different traditions, customs and rituals. The significance of archetypal symbolic representations connects it to the sacred.

Often in web design black is associated with an eclectic style, first and foremost with the accents and details of Baroque, neo-Gothic, art-nouveau, grunge, vintage, retro. The aesthetic effects of black in the image sent to mysterious meanings, expressing at the same time elegant sophistication, mystery, opulence, prestige. Black



Figure 5: Chromatic contrast on black background; <http://www.vivascom.com.br/>



Figure 6: Black-white contrast; <http://floatingworld.com.au/>



Figure 7: Black-white contrast and elements of art nouveau; <http://www.faciodesign.co.uk/>

in web design has a strong expressive function, having the ability to complement other colors. One of the most frequent combinations in web design is the combination of black and white, its use has several advantages, such as: the creation of a special photographic effects due to the strong contrast, transmitting a essential message,

graphic minimalism easy to receive. Because of its aesthetic expressive function, in web design black appears not only in combination with white, but also with all colors (Vit and Gomez-Palacio 2012, p. 42). A combination of very contrasting colors used in web design is that of the black-yellow, black-red, black-green. Also, due to the powerful contrast effect between black and white, is the most often used color for the background image of the web.

4. Artistic styles applied in web design are multiple. They represent the element that make it more pleasant and extra spectacular. In addition, depending on the way they are expressed and compound is opened the possibility to operate on us, retaining and focusing our attention, and on the other hand changing and educating our taste and shaping our culture. In the end, we add that the study of aesthetic meanings of black in web design is not very developed in this segment of literature, theoretical approaches being quite restricted and fragmentary. It is indubitable that but for web designers the constant use of black is a important and already established task, as well as a good knowledge of the principal artistic styles and stylistic postmodern trends. Thus, the present work that wanted to be a preliminary applied this thematic.

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