Typography and the branding of culture: a methodological investigation into the way typography is used to brand cultural festivals in Australia

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Typography and the branding of culture: a systemic functional analysis of typography’s performance in branding cultural festivals in Australia.

Tonya Meyrick
Abstract

This paper offers a social semiotic analysis of logotypes used to brand cultural festivals in 21st century Australia. A contemporary method is explored that suits the significant role typography performs within this context and offers a contribution to design research and the festival scape that not only engages with the artefacts of design but with the conceptualization of designed meaning in visual culture. Branding is a vital part of the festival space and relies on typography to establish the symbolic values and representations of urban freedoms; rich histories, cultured places, playfulness and stimulation that seek to subvert our daily existence while performing the task of engaging local, national, and international visitors and participants. However, professional practices demonstrated in the design, media and arts industries have far outpaced the extent to which this phenomenon has been written about in the academic or public realm. This paper addresses this shortfall and offers the foundation for a systemic functional method in the decoding of typography in visual culture.

1) INTRODUCTION

Exploratory in nature, this paper offers an interpretation of the cultural, social and pictorial dynamics of typography used in brand logotypes of cultural festival. This is achieved by providing a background to the impact and importance of festivals and a semiotic analysis of two festival identities from the dynamic medium and practices of communication design. Skaggs and Shank state that semiotics is the explicit heart of graphic design theory, just as it is the implicit (subconscious) engine in communication design practice (1997, p. 54). Defined as the study of meaning making, semiotics is a framework for understanding meaningful communication practices. In the 1970’s Halliday described language as a semiotic system, not in the sense of a system of signs but a systemic resource for meaning (Skaggs & Shank, 1997, p. 5). In social semiotics the process of communication is not reduced to the linear pathway with the single accuracy of reproducing the message, rather communication is an open dialogue that allows for meaning exchanges within the site of cultural production and the social context (Halliday, 1978). K. O'Halloran, Tan,
Smith, and Podlasov (2009, p. 1) state that scholars in the science of semiotics have identified the need to develop holistic and comprehensive theories and descriptions of semiosis, applicable to all signs and sign systems but also capable of taking into account the specific characteristics of different semiotic phenomena. Indeed, as Jenks states (2003 p. 15) semiotics depends on a cultural network that established the uniformity of responses to/reading of the sign. Communication design is the cultural network at play here, and this paper addresses the cultural production and social context of typographic artefacts.

The social semiotic framework offered here is drawn from Michael Halliday’s (1994) *Systemic Functional Grammar of the English Language* and is informed by Kay O’Halloran’s work, in particular the work *Visual Semiosis in Film* (2004) and *Digital Semiotics* (K. O’Halloran et al., 2009) and Hodge, Kress and van Leeuwen’s work in the area (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; T Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2008). Preliminary in its approach, the paper offers a starting point in crafting a social semiotic method for evaluating and interpreting the pictorial, social and cultural context within which design operates. In attempting this, the challenging nature of such an enterprise becomes evident and potential future research strategies are suggested.

2) BACKGROUND

Cultural festivals are ubiquitous across the world stage. Demonstrating a rich contribution to the fabric of contemporary society in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. Festivals are seen as a major source of income and tourism at local and national levels (Pessoa & Deloumeaux, 2015, p. 7) with governments investing over 12% of possible world investments into tourism-related industries and infrastructure; receiving revenues of an average of 10% of the world GDP (Balakrishnan, Nekhili, & Lewis, 2011, p. 4). There is an abundance of research into many aspects of the festival scape, including the tourism, marketing, event management, event design and the social, cultural and environmental impacts of festivals, however there is paucity in academic and industry based research examining the performance of the primary brand driver in the promotion, design and
marketing of these events - the branding identity or logotype. Considering the key role an identity contributes – this is surprising.

In the global marketplace and the digital economy typography is inescapable. Type is consumed each day through newspapers, books, and timetables, and on clothes, signs and billboards as well as read through digital applications on smart phones, tablets and computers. The term ‘typography’ is used to describe the appearance and arrangement of letterforms. McLean states, ‘typography is the art, or skill, of designing visual material which communicates to others by means of words’ (1980, p. 8). ‘99% of brand communication focuses on two of the key senses – sight and sound’ (Kay, 2006, p. 742). Considering this, it is critical to understand the semiotic implications of text and image components of branding. Clow and Baack maintain (2007, p. 39) that the concept of branding is immaterial, physically branding is expressed through tangible visual elements such as symbols, type and colour and intangible elements such as personal and social values, positioning and culture.

Typography it is the principal constituent in the logotype of a brands identity. As a critical brand component, typography is both an optical phenomenon with visual properties and a communication device that transmits messages from producers to consumers through a range of mediums. Here, the linguistic and pictorial significance of typography can be manipulated to contain meaning on a multitude of levels. The precise communication of brand values to recipients is paramount for the success of a brand message (Kay, 2006) and the role typography performs is crucial in communicating and establishing these values (McCarthy & Mothersbaugh, 2002). There has been much work investigating typography from a range of perspectives including focus on the historical evaluations of type, print and form (McLean, 1980; Meggs & Purvis, 2012) and the pictorial significance of typography has concerned Baines (Baines & Haslam, 2002) and Meggs (Meggs, 1992) among others. Typeface classification and behaviour has been an important contribution (Bringhurst, 2004; Brownie, 2012, 2015; T. Childers, Griscti, & Leben, 2013; Dixon, 2002; Tomiša, Vusić, & Milković, 2013) to our theorization of typography yet there are shortfalls in
academic research regarding the necessary and powerful role typography performs in branding and the logotype.

3. CULTURAL FESTIVALS
In the field of cultural production, cultural festivals are a form of cultural capital in an objectified state and an increasingly important aspect of our contemporary experience. Branding is a vital part of this festival space presenting impressions of urban freedoms, rich histories, and cultured places. Festivals seek to subvert our daily existence while performing the task of engaging local, national, and international visitors and participants. There is prestige in holding culturally relevant and socially acceptable festivals that serve the discourses of “city branding” and the “creative industries” in a competitive global context. Festivals have become a central figure of not only the political economy of tourism but also of urban regeneration and cultural tourism (van der Pol, 2005, p. 2). A key dimension of human cultures (Phipps & Slater, 2010, p. 10), there are many reasons for holding a festival. Ceremonial exchanges or agricultural celebration of the seasons or harvest have occurred for a very long time here in Australia and can be traced to medieval times in Europe. Festivals are important to indigenous communities for their contribution to community wellbeing and resilience (Phipps & Slater, 2010, p. 9). These events are often the lifeblood of communities in regional and remote locations such as the Garma Festival of Traditional Cultures in Arnhem Land. This festival brings together five regional clan groups to support indigenous cultures, maintain community ties and celebrate artistic and cultural practices among clan members ("Garma Festival," 2015). In rural and regional NSW, Victoria and Tasmania over 2,500 festivals occur every year (Gibson & Stewart, 2009). Gibson and Stewart (2009, p. 2) state that it is ‘against a backdrop of rural decline, that many places have sought to reinvigorate community and stimulate economic development, through staging festivals. Pessoa and Deloumeau state (Pessoa & Deloumeaux, 2015, p. 7) that cultural festivals are a major source of income and tourism at local and national levels and with over 74 trillion hits returned from a Google search on the term ‘cultural festivals’ it is extraordinary that an examination of the primary brand driver and most visible aspect of these events has not just been neglected in academic or industry literature.
– it is non-existent. It is a challenging task to bundle and embed the interests and identities of a culture, cultural group, place or sound into typography’s letterforms for a festival brand identity. To then ensure such a representation is accurately communicated to an audience who might not belong to the same cultural group, social group or history is an even greater challenge. This highlights the practical challenges and possible theoretical implications involved in designing the brand identity and logotype for cultural festivals. As such, this challenge requires theorization cognizant of how to encapsulate these experiences and histories within the proposed design artefacts.

4) BRANDING CULTURAL FESTIVALS = DESTINATION BRANDING

Many disciplines influence the branding of cultural festivals and this sees the phenomena positioned within communication design, business and marketing, cultural studies, geography, advertising, psychology and place branding. Esu and Arrey argue that branding cultural festivals is complex due to the combination of peculiarities of cultural festivals when compared to conventional services such as banking, telecommunications, education, or healthcare (Esu & Arrey, 2009, p. 182). Cultural festivals possess the hallmarks of destination branding and inadvertently share some of the attributes that influence visitors’ decisions to visit such destinations (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Cooper, 2005; Esu & Arrey, 2009; Jayswal, 2008). The destination is the place where the attractions are found (Blain et al., 2005; Cooper, 2005; Jayswal, 2008). When an event is properly branded it has the potential of contributing to the host destination as a feature attraction (Esu & Arrey, 2009, p. 182). South-by-South West Festival in Austin Texas, Deniliquin Ute Muster, in NSW, Edinburgh Festival in Scotland and Dark MOFO in the Tasmanian winter are all substantiation of this claim.

The ways in which typography is deployed to potential audiences to establish the symbolic values and representations of cultures, places, spaces and events for cultural festival branding is relatively unknown. Typography is not neutral, it is value laden and loaded with meaning, it is a semiotic mode; (T. Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 30) encoded and decoded in a similar manner to that of text or film. What has been
determined is that typeface characteristics influence and have an effect on consumer motivation, behaviours and advertising processing ability (L. Childers, T. & Jass, 2002; Heller, 2014; Hyndman, 2016; McCarthy & Mothersbaugh, 2002). With this established how can we break down the influencing typeface characteristics to expose the symbolic values and cultural representations of letterforms?

5) SEMIOSIS

O’Halloran, Tan, Smith, and Podlasov, (2009, p. 1) identify that ‘from the infancy of the science of semiotics, scholars have identified the need to develop holistic and comprehensive theories and descriptions of semiosis, applicable to all signs and sign systems but also taking into account the specific characteristics of different semiotic phenomena’. Graphic design or the more contemporary term communication design is one such semiotic phenomenon where holistic and comprehensive theories and descriptions of semiosis are needed. Our understanding of typography as it emerges from this discipline and its capacity to be interpreted, as a semiotic resource is a relatively recent development however Messaris maintains that any mode of communication can be understood in terms of either semantic or syntactic properties (1997, p. 141). It is the semantic properties or various modes that are central concerns of semiotics. When understood as a semiotic resource typography can be understood as a ‘social and culturally shaped mode used in representation and communication to make meaning within our environment’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 115). Conceptualizing typography as a semiotic resource with its own actions and modes presents a rich palette for a rigorous analysis to evaluate typography’s role in branding cultural festivals.

Indeed uncovering the ways typography performs beyond the linguistic signification and primary function of the words it represents naturally leads to semiotics. Van Leeuwen (T. Van Leeuwen, 2006) states that it is at ‘the moment typography is read pictorially that it can be treated as a semiotic mode in its own right’. Van Leeuwen (2006) Stöckl (2005) and Brownie (2009) have contributed exploratory material in this area presenting primers of how typography may be understood semiotically and
here I contribute an effort towards this understanding. Noble and Bestley state (2016, p 90) that:

…what visual communication designers understand by key concepts such as semiotics, deconstruction, or communication theory - relate in large part to the context of their practice - may differ from wider academic discourse that utilizes similar terms. This is common practice in other areas of study and the increasing maturity of the subject of design, as both an academic and professional activity, should see these terms become more embedded and formalized within the discipline.

As design research is a relatively new field of critical enquiry, its practices outweigh its theory. Those involved with theorisation of the field have often sought to fill gaps with a view to other more established disciplines in the search for ways to frame the field. In making visible methods of interpreting typography used in branding logotypes for cultural festivals, semiotics, as well as social semiotics and theories multimodality are imperfect in offering an ‘off the shelf’ solution for interpreting the repertoire and diversity of design artefacts and associated applications with its pre-existing terminology and codifications in the 21st century. Such modes of analysis were never meant to service visual communication design. However, by reconfiguring the scaffold or frameworks and lexicon of these fields, it is possible to offer a theoretical and practical method for understanding the construction of meaning making in design and typography that builds on the history of semiotics, social semiotics and multimodality.

6) METHOD
Drawn from Hallidays’ (1978) systemic functional method, whereby he uses the terms Ideational, Interpersonal and Textural as metafunctions to map linguistic discourse I use the terms -Form, Function, Context, and Concept to map categorical delineations in decoding meaning making within communication design. In the field of communication design these terms provide the foundations of design artefacts, practices and methods and are embedded with their own history – and the use of these terms as signposts makes logical sense to those in the field. Many authors
have also sought to re-configure Hallidays' original signifying terms, for example O'Toole (1994) Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and Lemke (2002). I incorporate the language and configurations of the semiotic lexis yet proceed with the history, knowledge and actions of the design field, its idiosyncrasies, and characteristics at the very centre of evaluations. I employing Noble and Bestley (2005) explanatory descriptors for the four metafunctions as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metafunctions</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Concept</th>
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<td></td>
<td>The shape or configuration of something, as against its location, context, or meaning. This could also indicate the pattern or structure of an object, letter-form or image. In visual communication design this relates to the physical and visual nature of the designed artefact, rather than the intention of designing or designer or any inherent message or communication.</td>
<td>The performance or role played by an object, letter-form or physical or virtual form. The service performed by a work or graphic design or visual communication.</td>
<td>The circumstances that are relevant to an event or situation. In graphic design terms, this would indicate a clear description of the purpose or intention of a brief alongside research into similar propositions or situations, historical or contemporary, together with audience expectations, the visual environment, and the background to the brief.</td>
<td>A hypothesis, theory or idea. The fundamental aspects of the brief and the intention of the designer, usually in relation to a specified context, audience, and media. A methodology or plan of action through which to test or pursue the idea. The message or communication or effect thereof.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identifying a lexicon applicable to the designated metadisciplines *Form, Function, Context, and Concept*; is important to feasibly encapsulate the reasonable descriptors one may encounter when framing any articulation of design. Sourcing a Australian Government festivals list (Government, 2016) a random sample method was applied to reduce the two lists of cultural festivals down to 2 sample festivals and these identities were then placed in a rubric. Baldry states (2004, p. 8) that descriptive practices including multimodal transcriptions and the structuring of queries for meaning making can be commenced through the use of a ‘table’ containing chronological sequences of frames or actions. ‘We are able to resolve some of the difficulties of taking linguistic, cultural, social, political and pictorial modes in to account’ (2004, p. 4). In achieving this Baldry states that in keeping with the systemic-functional tradition of multimodality, a multimodal transcription will also need to show how meaning is built up as a series of functional units – typically, sub phases, phases, but also macrophases, minigenres and genres (2004, p. 104). This is the recommended next phase of the social semiotic method and a major focal point for further work. The brand logotypes for cultural festivals analysed are the 2016 Darwin Festival, in Darwin and 2016 Tjungu Cultural Festival in Alice Spring, Australia.

![Figure 1. Cultural Festival Logotype, Darwin Festival, 2016](image)

**METAFUNCTIONS:**

**FORM:** Mixed Serif and Sans Serif typeface, with decorative effects. Diagonal colour banding with colours of blues, and greens - sky, sea and earth colours. Curved letterform elements with interesting, unusual serif typeface with illustrative ligatures and unusual mid length bracketed serifs. The letter S drops below the mean line,
similar to a descender. Negative space is utilised within the proximity of typeface elements. Composition made of scaled type, angular, curvaceous elements.

FUNCTION: Brand Identity for arts festival. Digital and print based. Designed to promote the event and to encapsulate the values and meaning of the organisation/company.

CONTEXT: Australia’s most northern and only tropical arts festival was born out of the destruction and devastation of a natural disaster over 40 years ago. Cyclone Tracy. Darwin Festival in remote Australia. In the 1990s the Festival shifted its focus toward community arts, celebrating multicultural aspects of the unique Darwin lifestyle, with a vision of becoming a cultural focus for the region. Darwin Festival is a vibrant arts and cultural event with an eclectic and substantial program that takes advantage of Darwin’s delightful dry season weather and spectacular outdoor venues. Darwin Festival reflects Darwin’s position at the Top End of Australia, its unique Indigenous and multicultural population and its close proximity to Asia while at the same time showcasing some of Australia’s finest arts performers. Darwin Festival is held over 18 days and nights, with local and touring performances and events including outdoor concerts, workshops, theatre, dance music, comedy and cabaret, film and visual arts. During the Festival, Darwin buzzes with performers, artists, locals and visitors enjoying the vibrant and colourful atmosphere and festivities of Darwin Festival. (Design, 2015)

CONCEPT: The cultural code in this festival logotype demonstrates a dual articulation that on the one hand offers a reading of the sans serif typeface which signifies a dominant ‘international style’ hegemonic of much 20th century typeface design. This presents cleanliness, readability and objectivity indicating seriousness, trust and business like features – it is at this point that the identity supports the notions and rationale of ‘city branding’ – signifying the government and political economic hand. This modality may be read as a paradigmatic analysis – the underlying structure of the identity, which conforms to social and cultural norms within the festival scape.
However, on the other hand the pictorial qualities of The Darwin Festival identity are positioned as referential to the festival location, the social construct. This is denoted through the aesthetic coding of colour as a signifier, in the banding of the text *festival*. Here our understanding of place and location - the destination of Darwin located on the top edge of Australia; is expressed indexically through colours - deep blue - water colour, coral reef - teal, light green tones of the flora and tropical greens from rainforests.

The decorative characteristics used in the text - *festival*, are visually, pictorially interesting. The use of ligatures between the letters ‘S’ and ‘T’ as well as the unusual link between ‘I’ and ‘V’ combine to symbolically create a prominent gestural expression, encoded to extend elegance and strong personality. The uncommon mid length bracketed serifs on the ‘A’ and ‘I’ in conjunction with the ‘S’ that drops below the mean line similar to a descender work together to offer an interpretative reading of the identity as vibrant plane of expression. It is through these pictorial icons that the identity seeks to break convention with the international style demonstrating a cultural irregularity of which pertains to performance, arts and multicultural dynamics.

![Tjungu](image)

**Figure 2. Cultural Festival Logotype, Darwin Festival, 2016**

**METAFUNCTIONS:**

**FORM:** Hand drawn letterforms with various decorative motifs, patterns, and with colourful, thick characters and curvaceous letterforms.

**FUNCTION:** Brand Identity for arts festival. Digital and print based. Designed to promote the event and to encapsulate the values and meaning of the organisation/company.
CONTEXT: Tjungu (pron. tjoo-ngoo), meaning meeting or coming together in Pitjantjatjara, celebrates the best of Australian Indigenous culture. During this four-day family friendly festival, a lively timetable of events features everything from culture to film and art, from sport to music, to food and fashion ensures Ayers Rock Resort will be humming ("Tjungu Festival," 2015).

CONCEPT: Semiotics features of iconicity and bricolage operate as conceptual metaphors for the Tjungu festival identity; these are employed as an aesthetic code for the Anangu culture that the festival celebrates. Demonstrated through the curvaceous letterforms of the word Tjungu in combination with hand drawn motifs contained therein, these semiotic features act as anchors for the indigenous culture. The amalgamation of letterforms presents an affable and accessible, friendly identity and combines pictorial elements showcasing the indigenous art, storytelling, narrative and activities one may anticipate from this festival. As such these exists an iconicity of these pictorial elements with the function and purpose of this identity. The bricolage of patterns used in the letterforms is informal and welcoming and showcases emerging or established local regional indigenous artists. Patterns such as circles, lines and pathways are reminiscent of contemporary indigenous art. The colours used in this identity operate referentially as signs; they are bright and engaging and may indicate the Australian country - such as the yellow of flowering gums, wattle and sunsets. Red of the earth, the dirt and cliffs, pink of flora and fauna, and green of trees and brushes and scrub. Illuru is the location for this event and the line up includes dance, art, food, fashion, and sport, each different letter-form pattern may be representative of each of these practices. These are the cultural dynamics represented in this identity; they are intertwined with the social purpose of the identity the festival seeks to promote.

In developing a systemic functional method of analysis of typography used in the branding of cultural festivals, it is key to offer that advertisers and designers differentiate similar products from each other through various uses of typography and other design elements and in doing this they associate a product with a specific set of values such as cultural, political or social. This can be evidenced in the
**Concept** metafunction illustrated above and Oswald maintains (2015, p. 117) ‘semiotics can be used to provide clarity and cultural context to a range of activities and argues that it is the semiotic assets that contribute to profitability by distinguishing brands from simple commodities, differentiating them from competitors and engaging consumers in the brand world’. Meggs (1992) writes of typographic resonance and how this is generated by the cultural, stylistic and connotative properties that typefaces possess, in addition to their function as alphabet signs. Such resonances have been illuminated above through descriptions of letterforms and typeface colours and characteristics. Although typeface designers’ fascination with resonance and expression of letterforms has seen an explosion of typefaces (Cahalan, 2007; Meggs, 1992, p. 120), it is the historical associations of the resonant qualities related to typical use and optical properties that cements resonances functions. Similarly Childers and Jass (2002) found that typefaces do more than communicate verbal material; they convey unique associations independent of the words they represent. The semantic associations were formed in three ways: through the consistent use of a specific font in a particular situation; the direct relationship with perceptual qualities of typography; and with abstract connotations.

6) CONCLUSION
As Chandler states, (2016) anything can be a signs as long as someone interprets it as signifying something – referring to standing for something other than itself. He maintains we ‘interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics’ (Chandler, 2016). As an endogenous researcher (Bonsiepe, 2012), my position originates from within the field of communication design. In developing a systemic function analysis of design specifically for my field, I am able to expand the ways design scholars can contribute to design research. This paper’s significance lies in its potential contributions to design and typography research and the festival scape. If we can translate the mechanisms where meaning is encoded by the sender or designer and decoded by a user or receiver then this will assist others in understanding the communication cycle and establish an effective model for meaning making in the logotype branding of cultural festivals.
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