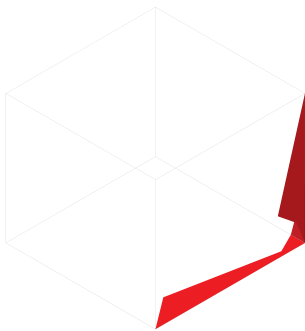


# Studies in Material Thinking



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VOLUME 13

VISUAL / TEXTUAL: DOCUMENTING THE REALITIES  
OF RESEARCH THROUGH DESIGN PRACTICE.

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PAPER 05

**Synchronous agents: modeling communication  
design as rhetorical and resonant interaction.**

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**Veronika Kelly**

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ABSTRACT

*The design of any model involves making choices as to what is included and excluded and this is central to what makes the visual representation of any model rhetorical. The language and metaphors used in modeling human activity can also serve to predispose thinking towards a particular framework of understanding. These aspects have relevance for models of communication design in which a reader's degree of agency is positioned in relation to the way that communication itself is conceptualized. Furthermore, while the relationship between communication design and rhetoric has been discussed in academic circles over a number of decades, these discussions have tended to emphasize design(er) intent and rhetorical appeal. In this paper the author sets out aspects of her research journey into the concept of 'resonance' to propose a model for communication design as both rhetorical and resonant interaction in which a human subject (reader) and design(er) are synchronous agents. In conceptualizing communication design as an activity that heightens both the visibility of readers and a reflexive and empathic approach to designing, the model draws attention to other possible ways of acting and a potential for improved relations in design practice.*

KEYWORDS

*Communication design, model, rhetoric, resonance, metaphor, language, design practice*

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**STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING**

[www.materialthinking.org](http://www.materialthinking.org)

ISSN: 1177-6234

Auckland University of Technology

First published in April 2007,

Auckland, New Zealand.

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**STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING**

is a peer-reviewed research journal supported by an International Editorial Advisory Group.

The journal is listed in the Australian ERA 2012 Journal List (Excellence in Research for Australia) and in the Norwegian register of approved scientific journals, series and publishers.

## Synchronous agents: modeling communication design as rhetorical and resonant interaction.

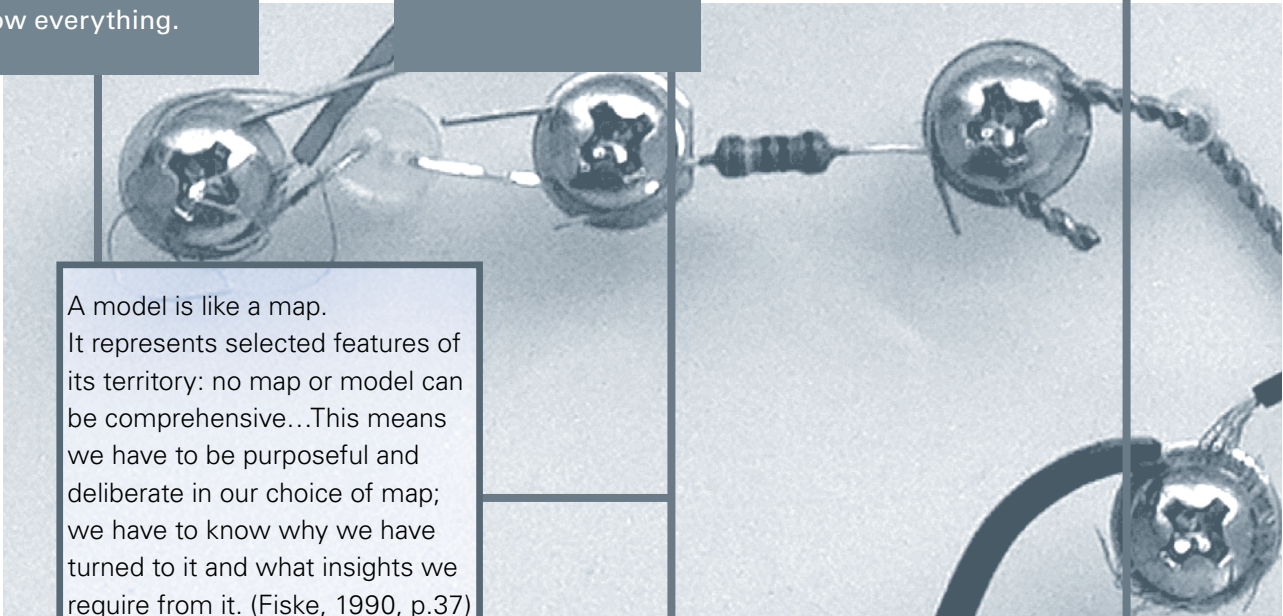
Models and diagrams are a way of mapping activity through time and space.

No map or model can show everything.

Designing models and maps is rhetorical; choices are made as to what is included or excluded and the way these manifest visually.

A model is like a map. It represents selected features of its territory: no map or model can be comprehensive...This means we have to be purposeful and deliberate in our choice of map; we have to know why we have turned to it and what insights we require from it. (Fiske, 1990, p.37)

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 112) discuss how concepts that are elusive or less clearly delineated (such as emotions, time and ideas) tend to be grounded in more concrete terms, such as spatial and physical orientations (e.g. happiness is 'up', love is a journey) and physical objects and substances. In models of human activity, the language and metaphors used can predispose thinking towards a particular framework of understanding. Examples of this can be seen in models of communication, including design-specific ones, that utilize a linear, mechanistic approach. Human communication is presented as ordered and logical, suggesting a world that can be, in principle, understood rationally as it is human made (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 52-53). Kinross (1989, p. 140) also argues that concepts from engineering and computing have filtered into everyday use: 'notions such as "message," "feedback," "redundancy"...could become part of anyone's mental baggage—in particular any designer's.'



For example, Reddy's (1993) widely known analysis of a conduit metaphor of communication shows how a preferred framework for conceptualizing communication can bias thought processes toward this framework. In particular, that a metaphor of human communication as a conduit or channel is ubiquitous and pervades everyday language.

^the basic principles of effective communication and design are the same across all media and mediums, even though each communications channel of the media mix requires a specific understanding and skills set.' (Emery & Nicols, n.d.).

A conduit metaphor emphasizes a linear, sender-receiver model of communication where meaning is a preformed object and communication is sending, contributing to the idea that readers are 'passive receivers'. The model is concerned with the efficiency of a transmitted (pre-packaged) message and the degree of efficiency is gauged by the accuracy of the reproduced (unpackaged) message at its destination. In other words, meaning is a constant that is contained in the object or artefact itself. The major framework of the conduit metaphor is primarily related to language expression, however it can still easily be applied to visual communication, as these examples indicate: **'It's very hard to get that idea across...Your concepts come across beautifully... It is very difficult to put this concept into words [visual form]...'** (Reddy, 1993, pp. 189-190).

## In a conduit metaphor of visual communication,



These statements are adapted from Lakoff and Johnson's summary (1980, p.10) of Reddy's major framework of the conduit metaphor of communication:

**Ideas (or meanings) are objects.**

**Linguistic expressions are containers.**

**Communication is sending.**

**Ideas (or meanings) are objects;**

**Visual forms and expressions are**

**containers for meaning;**

**Communication is sending.**

Although it is widely understood that communication design is a social practice bound to context, and reading/interacting with design is not passive, the framework of communication as a channel along which messages are conveyed persists in everyday language. ^

In communication design there are a number of terms given to human subjects who are the intended recipients of designed visual communications. They may be termed viewers, observers, readers, consumers, users, members of an audience, or clients. To view or observe suggests scrutinising without taking part, and being a member of an audience implies being one of a larger (somewhat homogeneous) group of people. The term 'target audience' denotes a body of people who are receivers of preformed meaning that is conceived 'like an arrow, or a bullet... which exists before the communication takes place and which does not change as it is transported to its "target", or destination' (Barnard, 2005, p. 23). The term also perpetuates a sender-receiver communication model. For Lupton (2006, p. 23) the term 'user', adopted from human-computer interaction, places more importance on the way a text is used than what it means. A user is 'a figure to be protected and cared for but also scrutinized and controlled, submitted to research and testing.'

The motivation for a study into the concept of resonance came about from a desire to better understand the characteristics and contexts of 'resonant' communication design. In the literature from design and advertising, resonance is a desired quality and a contributing factor to effective and affective communication (Clow & Baack, 2005; McCoy, 2002; McCoy [interview] in Poynor, 1998; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Meggs, 1989). As a designer and educator, I wanted to examine the idea that resonant design 'cuts through', has greater impact or is more memorable and the potential relevance of this for contemporary design practice. From the outset I was also interested in how to model such a concept so that it might be a means of reflecting upon the positions made available for readers (as well as designers) to take up through a communication activity. This process drew attention to the complexity of modelling human communication, and the metaphors that are used in the process.

Consequently, my interest here is also to (re)draw attention to language use about communication when considering how the concept of resonance could potentially heighten the visibility of readers and what they bring to a design interaction. I use the term 'reader' here following the thought of Michel de Certeau. For instance, de Certeau (1984, p. 169) says that reading is one form of consumption and is a kind of 'silent production'. A reader 'invents in texts something different from what they "intended"' actively reappropriating a text to make sense for her/his self. De Certeau argues against consumers as passive and the claim that 'producers' inform or shape social practices—a 'misunderstanding' which 'assumes that "assimilating" necessarily means "becoming similar to" what one absorbs, and not "making something similar to" what one is, making it one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it' (p. 166).

Taking de Certeau's thought about reading to design brings us to consider that the idea of assimilation as making something one's own is more about what a reader brings to visual communication than a force imposed upon them. A 'text' becomes a play of spaces, highlighting the significance of a reader's purpose and lived experience when mapping the territory for a model of communication design as rhetorical and resonant interaction.

**A human subject (as a reader) is a mobile agent who assimilates and navigates through a play of spaces, inhabiting and reappropriating a 'text' for her/his self.**

## If we also consider that designed communications are imposed texts—a kind of deliberate intervention

**persuade** (such as a brand, event, or experience) in which the intent is to direct or influence the behaviour, values and attitudes of human subjects—  
**inform** then it can be argued that design proposes to exercise some aspect of control or change to a reader's reality. And it is because design is purposeful and aims to influence a reader's behaviour, attitudes and beliefs that it has been argued that all visual communication design is rhetorical: that like rhetoric itself, design is deliberate and is applicable to any subject matter. In academic discourse the relationship between graphic/communication design and rhetoric has developed over the past fifty years to describe the communication process and as a means of constructing and analyzing design artifacts.

**motivate**  
**educate**  
**advocate**  
**influence**  
**direct** For example, Kinross (1989) has argued that neutrality in visual manifestation is not possible and Ehses (1984) rejects the idea that graphic communication can be free from rhetorical infiltration as it is a form of human communication. The designer's role is therefore one of facilitating social action; designers are 'involved in shaping communication processes as well as the resulting products' (Ehses, 2009, p. 6).  
**reason** Rhetoric is also situation specific; a work of rhetoric 'comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality' (Bitzer, 1968, pp. 3-4).  
**delight**  
**invite**  
**stimulate**  
**encourage**

Translating the idea that a work of rhetoric exists for a purpose beyond itself into a design context, designers design on behalf of clients in order to reach, influence, appeal to and effect some change in the 'client's clients' i.e. the 'target audience'—in other words, the 'fixed' purpose for the design itself. In a rhetorical model of design, readers are seen as active participants in reaching conclusions, whose values and beliefs are challenged with the purpose of being persuaded to adopt a new belief (Buchanan, 1989; Tyler, 1995).

**induce** In the following model, **design rhetoric is conceived as a fixed point, where the emphasis is on design purpose and the rhetorical appeal.**

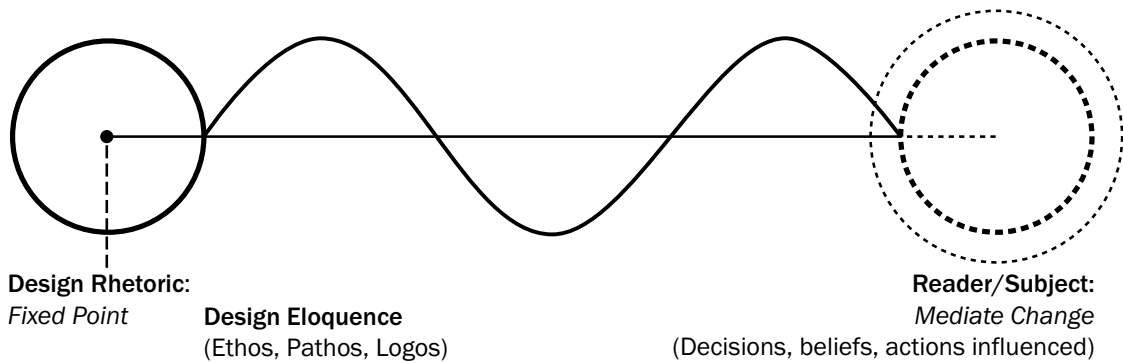
**dissuade**  
**deter**  
**protect**

**confront**

**provoke**

**sway**

**enlist**



## Model of communication design rhetoric

**Figure 1:** The model is inspired by Helmholtz's (1954, pp. 21, 23) diagram of a vibration that shows the path, intensity, and duration of a vibration from its originating point.

In the context of communication design a fixed or originating point can be seen as the design intent or purpose (the fixed point of rhetoric) directed towards and intended to reach a reader/human subject. The eloquence of a design (indicated by the curve of the vibration) describes the rhetorical appeals identified by Aristotle as ethos, pathos and logos (Aristotle, 1991), shown here as:

### **Design Eloquence (rhetorical appeals/ means of persuasion):**

**Ethos (Character):** Convincing by the character and credibility of the 'speaker' (client, designer), the design 'voice'—the extent to which it is believable and to be trusted

**Pathos (Emotion):** Persuading by appealing to an audience's emotion/disposition—to what extent a design argument fits with a reader's beliefs, values, attitudes

**Logos (Reason):** Persuading by the use of logic and reasoning of the design argument—the rationality of the design and the extent to which it makes sense.

Additionally, as rhetoric and design are both situation specific, any change that is effected is particular to a situation. In other words, where the design purpose is to effect some change or alteration of reality for the reader, the reader's purpose in the communication activity is to mediate the change (to elect to act upon her/his self), as it is the reader's actions, decisions and beliefs that are being influenced.



Those things really hit me on different waves that resonated in a very meaningful sort of way. (Designer G, female)

I remember I was *affected* by it ... Ah, well, it moved me. (Designer B, male)

It isn't screaming at you; it's just sort of placing you in an environment—something that you'll remember and go back to and want to see and touch and feel and turn over and be in. (Designer H, female)

But where it really gets magical is where the communication goes to a more immersive experience:

It's what I would call 'stickiness', or the ability to reside in the mind of the audience... What do we actually mean when we say 'resonance'? So to me it's around the stickiness, the ability to be gripped in the memory. (Designer D, male)

What is sort of the residual effect that one would get from design... whether, how that affects both culturally—I would imagine—as well as physically, the way you're reacting to what is being communicated. (Designer G, female)

Engaging on a deep level is one that is not strictly superficial and perhaps it reaches beyond the barriers, the buffer zone, around individuals. (Designer B, male)

In order to find out what design practitioners think 'resonance' is or could be about, individual interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of internationally recognized designers on the topic of resonance in visual communication. There were 5 women and 7 men interviewed and at the time of interview each designer had practised for a minimum of 20 years, predominantly in western countries.

## Design that resonates is akin to a physical force that makes contact and reverberates with a person's physical, cultural and lived experience.

The interview results showed that these designers readily used metaphors to interpret resonance for visual communication design. Design interactions that resonated were described mainly as physical forces and contacts experienced by the human body (e.g. touch, impact, stickiness, immersion, depth), exemplified by their comments. These metaphors were primarily about the idea of connection and drawn from bodily experiences, interactions with environments and with other people, illustrating Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) thought on elusive concepts being grounded in more 'concrete' terms as discussed above. Although the interviews showed that these connections took a range of forms there was also coherence; each of the designers interviewed discussed resonance as making connections (physical, cultural, and social) with the person that the communication was intended for (Kelly, 2014).

In addition to reiterating design's rhetorical dimensions, bringing resonance into the conversation revealed a 'slippage' between designer and reader, highlighting a reflexive and empathic approach to designing. In their discussions, designers turned to both their own lived experiences and tacit design knowledge developed over many years in practice, pivoting in position between designer and reader.

## Resonance was described as the degree of connection and assimilation between reader and design in a given context.



For me, what [resonance] would mean is that there's impact and memorability...in any form of communication it's not emulating, but creating something within who you're communicating to that there's integrity, honesty and something that they relate to. There's an echo there. (Designer I, female)

I think that [resonance] has to have something to do with humanity, in some form—even in its most remote way that connects to some level of humanity...it doesn't have to hit you over the head; but it's a way of getting someone to feel, when they're looking at it, that they're not intimidated by it and that they can feel invited to feel something. (Designer J, female)

So it's pushing different emotive or mental buttons with you. (Designer I, female)

If we don't talk about resonance, then what are we talking about in design? How you select things and how you deliver the kind of data which you organise into information for people to receive? You're seeking for a connection, you're seeking people's responses. Without resonance they will not respond. (Designer A, male)

The comments above and design examples below (Figures 2-7) are interpretations of what resonance is (or could be about) according to the designers interviewed.

The two examples below show the way that representing or evoking a human subject has rhetorical appeal and resonates. Both designers describe resonant design as producing a strong physical response and evoking a connection with humanity. The first talks about happiness, the second describes a strong visceral reaction:

**There's an individual, who's obviously an individual, they're silhouetted, you can't see their face, they're obviously enjoying [something], it's an enjoyable experience, they're dancing around: we're drawn to it, we're drawn to the experience that they're having. We connect with it. We can all see ourselves listening to that music in our own rooms with the door closed and just going nuts. So what we're seeing is a fulfilment of a basic human need, so it's got that relevance to us...The experience that we're seeing there is happiness. So, to put it in the most basic terms, iPod=happiness, and that's a message that's very difficult to forget. It's one thing that we all crave.** (Designer D, male)

*Eudaimonia* (happiness) or 'virtuous welfare' and well-being, is central to Aristotle's ethical theory and is the 'supreme goal of all human action'—for him, every work of rhetoric that focuses on urging or dissuading a belief, behavior, or action is concerned 'with happiness and things conducive and contrary to it' (1991, p.87).

**Jodie Foster's face with the cicada, the moth thing...it's also just that heart-stopping thing of something strange or unaccustomed being in the mouth, and you don't get what it's all about and the sinister aspect of it until you actually see the movie, and that's okay. That's okay that you don't understand it; it's actually intriguing...In a way she was being gagged herself, you know? That whole movie, she was keeping herself on a leash.** (Designer I, female)

From a semiotic perspective these examples could also be viewed in the way that Umberto Eco describes an 'open text' as one in which a 'reader as an active principal of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text. An open work calls for a reader's cooperation

and also for them 'to make a series of interpretive choices which even though not infinite are, however, more than one' (Eco, 1979, p. 4).

Apple iPod Silhouette campaign video/ad, 2003

The Silence of the Lambs movie poster, 1991

Each designer was asked to identify a design that characterises resonance. The images that have been selected here demonstrate the ways in which evoking a human subject or the human condition, lived experience (physical, cultural, social), and the idea of an open text are central to the way these designers saw resonance operating. The inference in each case is that resonant design effects a sense of being-in-the-world.

The selected examples also show how respondents took up a pivoting position as designer-reader: slipping between the role of a designer drawing on practice knowledge to describe the design into the place of an experiencing subject. This slippage can be observed in the discussions of the following designs.

So how do you feel when you go into a beautiful space and you sit and you listen to music? How you feel one day is very different to how you feel the next day, and how the performer feels when they're presenting the music to you changes also. So the visual related to the idea of no moment is ever repeated, so especially in performance and your interpretation of that performance.  
(Designer L, female)

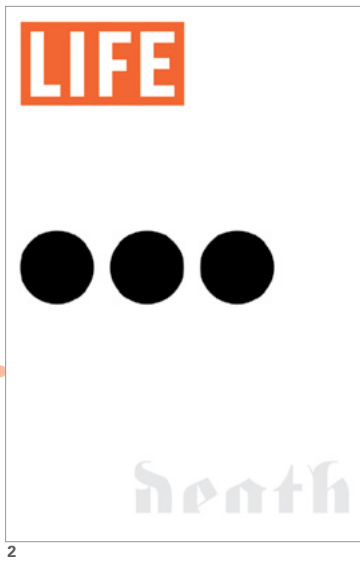
A design that is accessible, that does not intimidate or estrange, can make space for a reader to contemplate and respond. In the following example, familiarity with the visual language and making space align with design that transcends the literal to the figurative (as a rhetorical operation). Designer J saw resonance operationalized through a shift in the context of familiar visual elements to evoke pathos. For her, the poster 'Life...Death' resonated with the visual reader because 'it's left for them to interpret and there's again a kind of humour' (Figure 2).

In another example, anthropomorphising the subject matter by drawing analogies between visual form and human characteristics that reference culture and personal history to trigger memory creates resonance. This was in the design of packaging in which cauliflowers have been given names such as 'Shirl' and 'Bob' and personified (also a rhetorical operation) (Figure 3). For Designer H, this packaging exemplified the way a design can evoke fond memories of a return to childhood, to the country and 'a simpler life' (albeit via a supermarket product). The name Shirl was seen as familial and unpretentious—the design 'was just letting the cauliflower speak for itself, with a name.'

The resonance of the movie poster for *The Silence of the Lambs* was described as more physical; 'sticky' with a residual effect (Figure 4). For Designer I, the effect was sinister, evocative and corporeal: 'heart-stopping' and suffocating, described as operating on more than one level of signification, 'actually trying to interact on a multiplicity of levels' (see excerpt above). The implication here is that each 'level' enables possibilities for making meaning (Barthes, 2006) and that levels of meaning are a factor in the potential for design resonance.

Resonance as embodied experience was also evoked by the designs for the Melbourne Recital Centre, described akin to 'an emotional experience that you have when you watch music, listen to music. So it's obviously connecting' (Designer L) (Figures 5, 6). These images capture a split second, 'like things moving through air, things moving through water' evoking 'that one feeling that you have and when you see that picture and it's not going to be the same again.' In this way she framed resonance as an aesthetic experience, bound to a moment in time, to place and context:

For Designer B, the openness of an image of a glass half-full/empty in the design for a personal and professional development consultant was described as resonant because it provided the reader with an opportunity for contemplation and agency relevant to that purpose (Figure 7).



touch

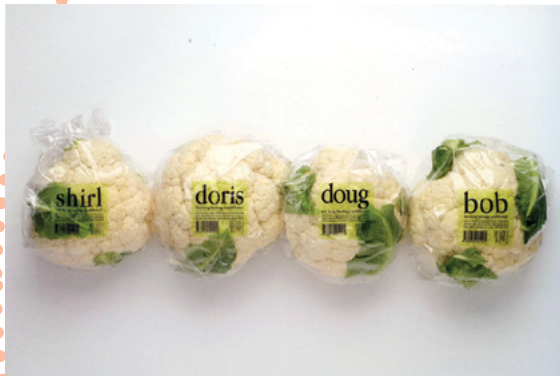
click

stick

grip

move

2



3

place

reach

pull

push

hit (the right spot)

cut through

immerse



5



4

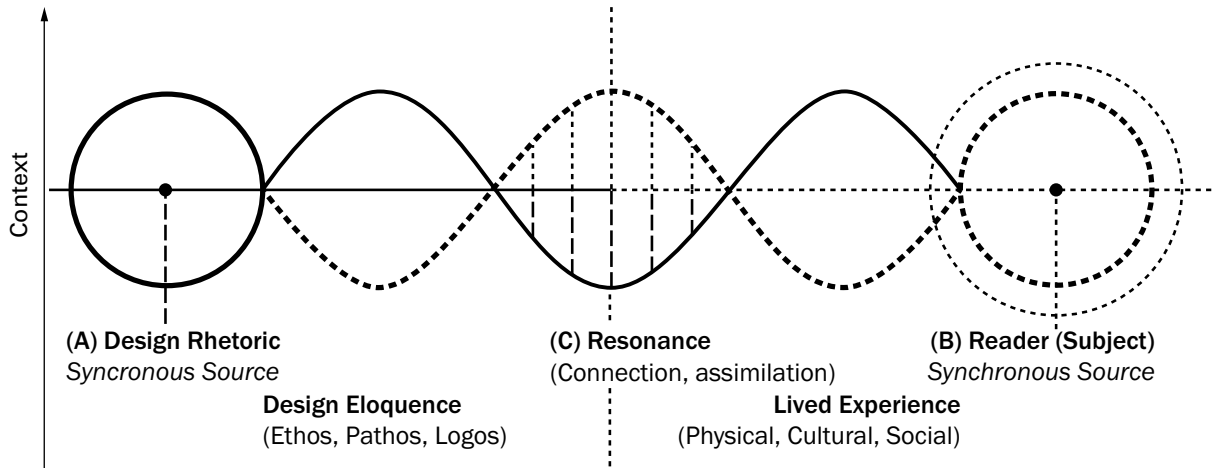


6



7

**Figure 2:** *Ellipses* poster, 2004. Design: Carin Goldberg, New York; **Figure 3:** *Bob, Shirl, Doris & Doug* packaging design, 2011. Design: Black Squid Design, Adelaide, SA; **Figure 4:** *The Silence of the Lambs* movie poster, 1991. Courtesy of MGM Media Licensing. Design: BLT Communications, California; **Figure 5:** *Melbourne Recital Centre Opening Festival* program, 2009. Design: ERD, Photography: Maikka Trupp, Melbourne, Vic.; **Figure 6:** *Melbourne Recital Centre, May-August Opus '09 No2* program, 2009. Design: ERD, Photography: Maikka Trupp, Melbourne, Vic.; **Figure 7:** *Don Adlam Personal and Professional Development* postcard, 2008. Design and concept: Working Images, Illustration: Dan Tomkins, Adelaide, SA. All images reproduced with permission.



## Model of communication design as rhetorical and resonant interaction

**Figure 8:** The revised model above extends the previous by introducing resonance as the degree of connection and assimilation between reader and design in a given context.

In this context, resonance as a connection is the degree of match or assimilation between what a reader brings to a situation in which a design is experienced and the situation itself. A model where the reader and design are synchronous sources in an interaction represents visual communication design as more dynamic and reflexive. The concept of resonance as a connection is both sympathetic and synchronous—an interaction afforded between two entities or bodies. The reframing of a reader’s purpose as a ‘synchronous source’ attempts to emphasize the interaction between reader and design in a rhetorical situation. This model proposes:

- 1. Design rhetoric as synchronous source (A);** this is the purpose and intent of a design, the aim of which is to connect with a reader and elicit a desired response or change in behaviour or belief;
- 2. The significance of the reader as a synchronous source (B);** whose purpose as a change mediator is directly related to her/his lived experience (giving form and purpose to a rhetorical situation);
- 3. The ‘vibration’ emanating from (A)** corresponds to the degree of persuasive appeal or design eloquence (ethos, pathos and logos) that makes up the design (as the product of designing);
- 4. The ‘vibration’ emanating from (B)** corresponds to a reader’s purpose and lived experience (how a person acts upon her or his self in the current situation based on physical, social and cultural experience); and
- 5. Resonance (C)** is conceptualized as the degree of connection and (following de Certeau) assimilation between a reader and design.



The purpose of this paper was to introduce a working model for communication design practice as rhetorical and resonant interaction in which a reader/subject and design(er) are synchronous agents in a reflexive and empathic approach to designing. As I pointed out at the start however, there are limitations to any model, and to devise a model of communication design as rhetorical and resonant interaction is to select features of its territory and exclude others. In discussing models of communication, the use of certain terms and ways of organising information through systems of representation (i.e. written and visual language) is itself rhetorical. My focus on a model where a design interaction is a play of spaces to be inhabited was to (re)draw attention to the nature of visual language and metaphors that are used to model human communication, and for designers to question the roots of those metaphors.

Both the design and the reading (navigation) of any communication is mediated socially, culturally and historically; it is temporal and spatial, the point and moment of contact with a reader is variable, and it is through this that meaning is made. The implication is that, as designing visual communication is context-dependent and human experience is mutable, it is not useful to take a reductionist view and reduce it to structural variables or a 'toolkit' for the creation of resonant design. In every situation that communication design (as rhetoric) is supposed to influence a behaviour, value or belief, the relation will vary depending on the way a person assimilates the information mediated by culture, time and place. Bringing the concept of resonance into the mix does however draw attention to willingness on the part of readers to participate or share in the designed communication in order for design to touch, reach into, to move them—to resonate.

I like the word 'practising', don't you? Means you're doing it over and over again, trying to get better. (Designer I, female)

There are two aspects to the combination of rhetoric and resonance that make a potential contribution to a model for communication design practice. Firstly, the combination provides a means of highlighting the communication designer's reflexivity in the design process and their empathetic role in designing visual communications (shifting position between designer and reader). Secondly, the combination makes readers more visible in a communication activity, further diminishing the idea that readers are passive and docile. Together these draw attention to possible modes of acting for designers that indicate a potential for 'more sensitive and attuned relations between persons and things' (Dilnot, 2009, p. 183) that have recourse to improved relations in design practice.

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Veronika Kelly is Program Director and lectures in Communication Design in the School of Art, Architecture and Design at the University of South Australia. Her key research interests are in the relationship between design and rhetoric, rhetoric as a framework for communication design, and the culture of design practice. Veronika's professional background is in graphic design in her own consultancy and prior to that for 11 years as broadcast and motion graphics designer with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.