

Theo van Leeuwen, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

The Semiotics of Decoration

In the age of modernist, functionalist architecture and design, 'ornament' and 'decoration' acquired a bad name. Today, in the postmodern age, they have returned from their relative obscurity and are of interest again to designers and design theorists.

In this paper I will explore the idea of 'decoration' from a social-semiotic point of view. After a brief sketch of the rich history of decoration, and the functions and meanings that have traditionally attached to it, I will explore three key aspects of contemporary decoration: (1) the semiotic interpretation of its abstract and figurative motifs, (2) the placement of decorative elements in texts (including those produced in and for digital media), on objects, and in the environment, and (3) the role of repetition and parallelism in decoration.

I will end by drawing parallels between ambient music and 'ambient design', speculating on the reasons for their (re-)introduction into the semiotic landscape of contemporary society.