

Question 5: From the series of Thinking Making research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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BA Surface Pattern Design

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How artists / designers use semiotics in their work to convey Emotion, Desire and Need, and how this can be received in diverse ways by their audiences. Can it also be done purely positively?.

In this piece of writing, I will assess how three artists and designers use the theme of Emotion, Desire and Need within their work, and how they use semiotics to convey these meanings to their audiences. I will also investigate what ways this can be received by the viewer. These are: a pleasant way, along with what has already been discussed about this theme, - being jealousy and guilt. To do this, I will refer to the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan's book *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II* and Design critic, Alice Rawsthorn's article *What is good design?* Additionally, I will refer to the article *Color meanings and the art of using color symbolism* by Anna Lundberg; Your Art Path's article *5 Types of Line in Art, Their Meaning And When To Use Them*; New Design Group's article *The Psychology of Colour in Advertising*; The Guardian's article *Life and death in Apple's forbidden city*; *Can Art Really Make You Happier* by Rachel Gould; TV Tropes' article *Rays from Heaven* as well as the article *Fog Symbolism* by Lynley. These will allow me to gather information about how they explain the theme of emotion, desire and need as well as how one may respond. Another area I will look into is semiotics, its definition, what they are and how they can make people think. Additionally, I will also investigate the artwork of three artists and companies I have chosen. These are, firstly *KISS OF PASSION* by artist Leonid Afremov, a series of current digital advertisements by the popular technology brand Apple and *Forest Light* by artist Graham Gercken.

What is semiotics and how do they work?

The Collins Dictionary definition of semiotics is "the academic study of the relationship of language and other signs to their meanings". (2021, [Semiotics definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary \(collinsdictionary.com\)](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/en/english-dictionary/semiotics-definition-and-meaning)). Semiotics works through the connotations a signifier carries, to get to the signified - the meaning. These meanings can be identified by what are close associations to the signifier, for example: rain could imply sadness. It is important to note that the signified may not be the same to everyone, as this can depend on many diverse representations in different cultures, like how it says here in the article *Color meanings and the art of using color symbolism*:

Cultural differences—Red represents good luck in China but in South Africa it's the color of mourning. Americans associate green with money as that's the color of dollar bills but that isn't the case globally. Black is the color of mourning in Western countries, while in some East Asian countries it's white. In the US green is the color of envy, while in Germany it's yellow. You'll need to be sensitive to these differences depending on where you are operating.

(Lundberg, 2019, [Color Meanings and the Art of Using Color Symbolism \(99designs.co.uk\)](https://99designs.co.uk/color-meanings-and-the-art-of-using-color-symbolism/))

KISS OF PASSION - Leonid Afremov:

KISS OF PASSION is an oil painting by modern artist Leonid Afremov, that depicts two lovers, as seen in figure 1. The artist uses semiotics in order to convey the theme of Emotion, Desire and Need here through the subject and choice of colour as well as the brushstrokes. The couple are touching each other gently, revealing that they do not wish to hurt each other in any way. Using diagonal brushstrokes surrounding the couple also adds to the meaning of the piece as diagonal lines “suggest movement or lack of stability”, according to the article 5 Types of Line in Art, Their Meaning And When To Use Them. (YOUR ART PATH, 2020, [5 Types of Line in Art, Their Meaning And When To Use Them \(yourartpath.com\)](https://yourartpath.com/5-types-of-line-in-art-their-meaning-and-when-to-use-them/)). This is effective as it communicates that the couple have so much love for one another, they can handle the unexpectedness of life as long as they’re together. The main colours, blue and orange, are a particularly viable choice for this painting as blue can stand for commitment and orange, cheer. Lundberg (2019). We know these are symbolised by these colours, as it says “orange combines the warmth and heat of red with the playfulness and joy of yellow”, “Blue is a serene and calming color” and blue has an “association with trust and dependability” in the article Color meanings and the art of using color symbolism. (Lundberg, 2019, [Color Meanings and the Art of Using Color Symbolism \(99designs.co.uk\)](https://99designs.co.uk/color-meanings-and-the-art-of-using-color-symbolism/)). The reason this is such a clever choice of colours for this piece is because these are all qualities wanted in a relationship.



(Figure 1; KISS OF PASSION) (Afremov)

As this painting visually communicates the happy relationship of these lovers so clearly, it is easy for the viewer to notice this emotion and desire. Jacques Lacan, in his book *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II* says “Desire is a relation of being to lack”, meaning one desires what they don’t have, that other’s do. (1954-1955, quoted in Hewitson, 2010, [What Does Lacan Say About... Desire? | LACANONLINE.COM](#)). This can be true here as some may feel the emotion and desire in this painting and become envious, as they do not have it themselves.

Apple’s Advertising:

Next is a series of digital advertising, showing products of the high-end technology brand Apple. These images, by Apple's team, present the iPad, iPhone, and MacBook Pro in a very appealing way for the customers. This is due to the semiotics used here. The use of the light colours and curved shapes, in figures 2 and 3, evokes a feeling of comfort on the audience because these carry connotations of safety and softness. As it says in Your Art Path’s article *5 Types of Line in Art, Their Meaning And When To Use Them* when it says “**Curved lines** are lines that bend and change direction gradually. They can be simply wavy or spiral. Such lines convey the feelings of comfort and ease”. (2020, [5 Types of Line in Art, Their Meaning And When To Use Them \(yourartpath.com\)](#)).



(Figure 2) (Apple, 2021).



(Figure 3) (Apple, 2021).



(Figure 4) (Apple, 2021).

Using multiple colours, like they have here, conveys, like what is stated in the article *Colour meanings and the art of using colour symbolism* by Anna Lundberg “colorful branding can show that a brand is playful, informal and creative.” (2019, [Color Meanings and the Art of Using Color Symbolism \(99designs.co.uk\)](#)).

The deep purples and blues on the image of the MacBook Pro, as seen in figure 4, evokes a feeling that the owner can relax and be creative on a device that they trust. This is known as in the article *The Psychology of Colour in Advertising* it tells “suggests success, depth, loyalty, calmness and power” and “Purple is associated with luxury, royalty, dreams, mystery and elegance.” (New Design Group, 2021, [Psychology of Colour in Advertising | New Design Group](#)).

Overall Apple uses semiotics here in a highly effective way due to allowing the formal elements to influence the audience, by making them feel comfortable, trusting along with imaginative of all the possibilities they could do with their products. This is achieved through the well thought through colours and shapes, as well as the luxury, elegant but also playful atmosphere of the designs.

Unfortunately, Apple has a well-known dark history of the poor treatment of their workers in manufacturing factories in China. In *The Guardian's* article *Life and death in Apple's forbidden city* by Brian Merchant, he tells of the experiences he's seen after sneaking into the Foxconn factory, a place where Apple products are made. He says:

If you know of Foxconn, there's a good chance it's because you've heard of the suicides. In 2010, Longhua assembly-line workers began killing themselves. Worker after worker threw themselves off the towering dorm buildings, sometimes in broad daylight, in tragic displays of desperation – and in protest at the work conditions inside. There were 18 reported suicide attempts that year alone and 14 confirmed deaths. Twenty more workers were talked down by Foxconn officials.

(2017, [Life and death in Apple's forbidden city | Apple | The Guardian](#))

His article says there were “large nets installed outside many of the buildings to catch falling bodies”. (Merchant, 2017, [Life and death in Apple's forbidden city | Apple | The Guardian](#)).

Brian Merchant spoke to former employees of this factory when he goes on to say:

“It's not a good place for human beings,” says one of the young men, who goes by the name Xu. He'd worked in Longhua for about a year, until a couple of months ago, and he says the conditions inside are as bad as ever. “There is no improvement since the media coverage,” Xu says. The work is very high pressure and he and his colleagues regularly logged 12-hour shifts. Management is both aggressive and duplicitous, publicly scolding workers for being too slow and making them promises they don't keep, he says. His friend, who worked at the factory for two years and chooses to stay anonymous, says he was promised double pay for overtime hours but got only regular pay. They paint a bleak picture of a high-pressure working environment where exploitation is routine and where depression and suicide have become normalised.

(2017, [Life and death in Apple's forbidden city | Apple | The Guardian](#))

These accounts do not seem unusual as Merchant goes on, ‘Over several visits to different iPhone assembly factories in Shenzhen and Shanghai, we interviewed dozens of workers like these.’ He often tells us that ‘Workers are often expected to stay silent and may draw

rebukes from their bosses for asking to use the restroom.’ (2017, [Life and death in Apple’s forbidden city | Apple | The Guardian](#)).

This tragic news is extremely shocking, appalling and is unimaginable that the hugely successful brand has its workers suffering like this. Yet, after this news being widely known, Apple is still a major brand and one of the most popular. Because of how well their designs are, using semiotics to appeal to the audience, along with this awful news, the customers are faced with a strong attraction for the products, that it is quickly followed up by guilt of paying for these goods. This confirms that using Emotion, Desire and Need in art and advertising can be infused with guilt. As Alice Rawsthorn says in her article for The New York Times, “admiring beauty in things that are also useful, like Apple’s gorgeous digital products.” and “What’s the point of designing something gorgeous and useful if it makes us feel guilty, because we know that it’s ethically or environmentally irresponsible?” (2008, [What is good design? - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)).

Forest Light - Graham Gercken:

Last is the piece Forest Light, see figure 5, by landscape artist Graham Gercken. This oil painting displays a pleasant and peaceful environment, which is done through the subject of the light rays shining through the pink blossom trees. This then evokes an ethereal atmosphere on to their audience due to the semiotics within this artwork.

Firstly, this is carried out through the signifier of the colours used. The pink colours give the connotation of gentleness and sweetness. We know this as in the article Color meanings and the art of using color symbolism it states “Pink represents femininity and romance, sensitivity and tenderness. It’s inherently sweet, cute and charming.” (Lundberg, 2019, [Color Meanings and the Art of Using Color Symbolism \(99designs.co.uk\)](#)). The use of purples here also adds importance to the understanding of the artwork as it carries suggestions of fantasy and magic, as it is “associated with luxury, royalty, dreams, mystery and elegance. Light shades of purple are soothing and work well for beauty”. (New Design Group, 2021, [Psychology of Colour in Advertising | New Design Group](#)).

Another way meaning is conveyed in this painting is through the lighting and mist. The diagonal streams of light make the audience think of God, because of the strong religious connections. (TV Tropes) It is clear in tvtropes article Rays from Heaven when it says:

Crepuscular rays are a natural phenomenon in which sunlight appears to burst through clouds in distinct beams. They are known by many names, often religious ones like the "fingers of God", "Jesus rays", or "Jacob's Ladder" in reference to Jacob's famous dream from Genesis 28:12, where he dreamed of a stairway to Heaven.

(TV Tropes, [Rays from Heaven - TV Tropes](#))

As well as “symbolism is easy to decipher, with light used because Light Is Good and light from the sky used because the sky is associated with God, as per Heaven Above.” (TV Tropes, [Rays from Heaven - TV Tropes](#)).

For the mist, Lynley explains in their article [Fog Symbolism](#) here when they say, “In stories and in art, fog and mist symbolises a variety of related things: obfuscation, mystery, dreams, confusion and a blurring between reality and unreality.” (2016, [Fog Symbolism – SLAP HAPPY LARRY](#)). This is interesting as it suggests this lighting and mist add an ethereal quality to the oil painting, due to the religious associations, and create what could be seen as a portal between earth and heaven.

Altogether, the signified here lead the audience to feel happiness and peacefulness through the pieces’ calm, gentle and heavenly air. This relates to the theme of emotion, desire and need as it radiates the happy emotions on to the viewer. It becomes attractive to us due to the presence of desire and emotion together, creating attraction, a positive response in a way that does not come with jealousy or guilt.

(Figure 5: Forest Light) (Gercken)



It is thought that looking at art can have an effect of making one happier. In Rachel Gould’s article [Can Art Really Make You Happier](#) she tells us that “Studies show that art can make you happier – whether you’re creating you own art, or enjoying someone else’s.” (2017, [Can Art Really Make You Happier? \(theculturetrip.com\)](#)). She explains:

A study by neurobiologist and University College London professor Semir Zeki found that looking at a work of art can actually have the same psychological effect as the euphoric experience of romantic love.

Zeki found that the visual stimulation of looking at something the subject considered favorable resulted in increased levels of dopamine (“a neurotransmitter that helps control the brain’s reward and pleasure centers”) and heightened activity in the brain’s frontal cortex. In other words, looking at art triggered the same kind of

activity in the brain's pleasure center as the experience of being in love, and even recreational drug use.

(Gould, 2017, [Can Art Really Make You Happier? \(theculturetrip.com\)](https://theculturetrip.com/))

This study's findings are fascinating. To know that it has been proven by neurobiologists that looking at preferred artwork can boost dopamine in one's brain enough to make the comparisons of love and recreational drugs is amusing and highlights that art can have a purely positive effect on the viewer.

In conclusion, this paper is successful in proving the three separate ways the theme of Emotion, Desire and Need can be used and received in art. These ways were, as stated, with the accompanied envy or guilt. However, this paper also aimed to investigate whether Emotion, Desire and Need can be used and received in art in a way that did not encourage the feeling of jealousy or guilt, but a way that was simply purely positive. This was proved that it can be used in a purely positive way, with Graham Gercken's painting, as well as themes of religion. This topic can still be investigated in the future, to find any other ways of carrying out this theme in a joyful way, in art.

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