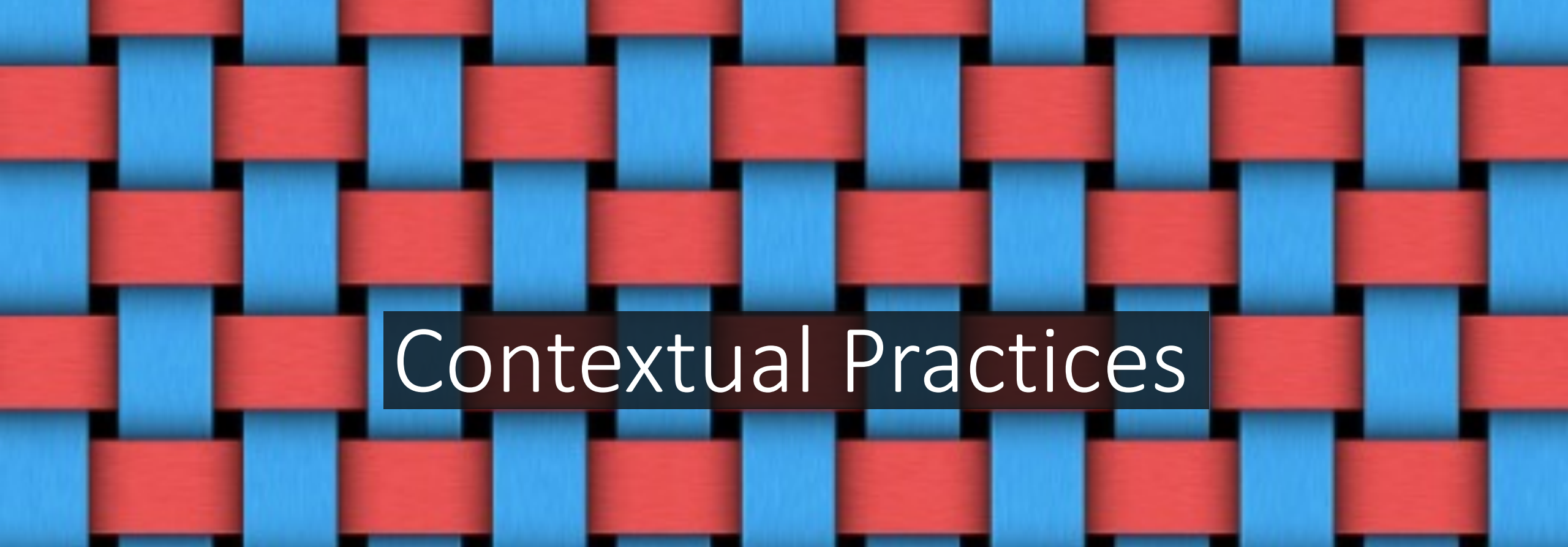




Contextual Practices

TASK 2: Analyse an Image

Lecture 6: Deconstruction

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For discussion this week:

- Choose an image and think about how you could analyse it using semiotics.

Think about ...

- Denotation (what is there and obvious)
- Connotation (what is being communicated)
- The Iconic Sign
- The underlying myth
- Context
- Colour
- Any other factors you notice...



Take notes and improve your thinking



Process:

- Break into small groups of 2 or 3 people;
- Take it in turns to show **your** image and explain your analysis;

As you partner shows their image, ask them questions to clarify the:

- Denotative level - what is there and obvious?
- Connotative level - what is being communicated/suggested under the surface?
- The Iconic Sign — is an icon being used, if so, how?
- The underlying myth - is a bigger story/fiction being created?
- Context — How are the elements of the image situated?
- Colour — How are the colours being used to communicate?
- Research - What research have they drawn on?
- Any other factors you notice...

Recap - What and why.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation.

It is important to understand semiotics in order to understand contemporary culture.

As a practitioner it also provides you with the knowledge and ability to communicate effectively.

What are Semiotics?

Semiotics have directed our shared understanding of what we see and how we 'read' any image or artwork. It provides us with meaning and context with the aim of heightening our intellectual encounter with a piece of visual communication and art. Most significantly it effects how we perceive the world and the meanings we acquire and share from the world around us.

For this reason, semiotics is the prevailing **structuralist** model persistently used to deconstruct contemporary imagery including advertising and design as well as texts.

Semiotics explained

All communication is the result of the interplay between *representamen* (a thing serving to represent something), *interpretant* (the effect of a sign on the person who encounters it), and an *idea* (the concept).

(David Macey, 2000, p.294)

Useful key semiotic terms

- Sign The sum of the signifier plus signified
- Signifier The physical thing.
(Works with signified to combine into a sign)
- Signified The meaning that is intended from a sign
- Iconic sign Looks like what it represents (falling rocks)
- Indexical sign Where there is a relationship between the signifier and signified (smoke and fire)
- Polysemic A sign that has more than one meaning
- Arbitrary or symbolic sign A sign where the meaning of it is culturally acquired
- Anchorage The combination of elements within a sign that fit together and fix the meaning (i.e. word and image)

Language as a sign-system

- For Saussure, language is a system of signs
- The sign can be split into two components,

The signifier

the sign itself (what you see/hear)

‘Cat’

‘Cath’

‘Chat’

The signified

what it refers to (the thing or concept)

Small, furry animal that says ‘miaow’

- To communicate clearly, the hearer/reader must know the signifier and the signified



Useful key semiotic terms

- Denotation The literal meaning of a sign or code
- Connotation The symbolic/abstract meaning or intention created by a sign
- Code A system used to create meaning
- Decoding When audiences interpret a text
- Encoding The intended meaning in a text
- Myth The way in which certain signs contribute to ideologies in our society
- Paradigm A distinct set of theories, models or class of objects or concepts (exemplar)

Visual Methodologies, Gillian Rose (2022)

Representations of Bodies:

Age: What is the age of the figures in the photograph meant to convey? Innocence? Wisdom?

Gender: Dyer argued in 1982 that adverts still very often rely on stereotyped images of masculinity and femininity. Men are active and rational, women are passive and emotional; men go out into the world, women are more associated with the domestic. This is less true now, but gendered differences are still crucial to advertising, as Figure 9.1 suggests.

Race: Again, adverts often depend on stereotypes. To what extent does an advert do this (Johnson, 2008)? Or does it normalise whiteness by making it invisible (see Dyer, 1997)?



Visual Methodologies, Gillian Rose (2022)

Representations of Bodies:

Hair: Women's hair is often used to signify seductive beauty or narcissism.

Body: Which bodies are fat (and therefore often represented as undesirable and unattractive) and which are thin? Are we shown whole bodies, or does the photo show only parts of bodies (women's bodies are often treated in this way in cosmetic ads)?

Size: Adverts often indicate what is more important by making it big.

Looks: Again, adverts often trade on conventional notions of male and female beauty. Susan Bordo's book *Unbearable Weight* (1993) is an excellent discussion of, among other things, how adverts picture bodies in ways that depend on cultural constructions of race, gender and beauty.



Visual Methodologies, Gillian Rose (2022)

Representations of Manner:

Expression: Who is shown as happy, haughty, sad and so on? What facial and other expressions are used to convey this?

Eye contact: Who is looking at whom (including you) and how? Are those looks submissive, coy, confrontational?

Pose: Who is standing and who is prone? What does that convey about their social position?



Visual Methodologies, Gillian Rose (2022)

Representations of Activity:

Touch: Who is touching what, with what effects?

Body movement: Who is active and who passive?

Positional communication: What is the spatial arrangement of the figures? Who is positioned as superior and who inferior? Who is intimate with whom and how? Hodge and Kress (1988: 52–63) have a useful discussion of positional communication.



Visual Methodologies, Gillian Rose (2022)

Representations of Props and Settings:

Props: Objects in adverts can be used in a way unique to a particular advert, but many ads rely on objects that have particular cultural significance. For example, spectacles often connote intelligence; golden light indicates tranquillity, and so on.

Settings: Settings range from the apparently 'normal' to the supposedly 'exotic', and can also seem to be fantasies. What effects does its setting have on an advert?





Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Magritte



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

The Treachery of Images

René Magritte's painting *La Trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*) has long been identified as being a universal example of representation versus interpretation. The words below the image read 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (This is not a pipe).

Confounding as this may seem to audiences, this in fact draws attention to the fact that the pipe in the painting is not a pipe, but rather a drawing or representation of a pipe. Indeed, what has been shown in this presentation is a digitised photograph of a painting of a representation of a pipe.

This painting, part of a series created by Magritte, was seen as part of the surrealist movement and it creates a three-way paradox out of the conventional notion that objects correspond to words and images. This indeed is central to semiotic theory.

Activity 1 – Anchorage / The linguistic Sign

Create a series of captions

The image below does not contain enough information for a clear deconstruction. It is what is termed as 'polysemic' (having multiple possible meanings). Create a number of captions that change the interpretation of the image. This is what is known as anchorage text. For this is one you are invited to have some fun!

Take 5 minutes to discuss in small groups, then we will discuss in the larger group.



Activity 2 - Denotations and Connotations

Denotation?

Connotation?

- Feather
- Daffodil
- Blue
- Male
- Female
- Revolutionary
- Prisoner
- Tears
- Army
- Teacher

Activity 2 - Denotations and Connotations

Denotation?

Connotation?

- 🙏
- ❤️
- 🇬🇧
- 🚦
- 🎵
- ©
- ✝️
- %
- ✓

Deconstruction

Context: Semiotics



Structuralism

Structuralism first came to prominence as a specific discourse (debate) with the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure often referred to as the 'father of semiotics'.

Structuralism uses the order of semiotics to help us define meaning.

This applied meaning is an external social process that is shared and agreed. It is a 'construct' meaning it only exists as a shared concept or idea.

Post-structuralism

Emerging in the 1960s, Post-structuralism is a variation of structuralism, often seen as a critique, emphasising plurality of meaning and the instability of concepts that structuralism uses to define society. Post-structuralism adopts the premise of multiple, unfixed interpretations whereby we can be certain of nothing.

Deconstruction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2022)

a) The action of undoing the construction of a thing.

b) Within Philosophy and Literary Theory. A strategy of critical analysis associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), directed towards exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language.
Also transferred.

Deconstruction

- a procedure of poststructuralism, often used as a label for this trend in thinking. It is a method of textual analysis that works to establish the instability of textual meanings and to show that there are no authoritative interpretations of texts. The method was founded by **Jacques Derrida** (1930–2004), who used it to mount a radically sceptical critique of the assumption, supposedly prevalent in Western culture, that meanings are fixed and determinate. In particular, deconstruction opposed structuralist claims that discourse has underlying structures that furnish and support its meanings. In place of such a view, it invited both critic and reader to operate imaginatively, engaging in ‘active interpretation’ of a text regarded as a free-floating network of words. Puns and wordplay abounded in deconstruction and were used by its exponents to illustrate the drifting indeterminacies and transformations of meanings they take to be characteristic of discourse.
- Derrida's own approach to the visual arts was circumspect: his *The Truth in Painting* (1978) deconstructs what Cézanne wrote, rather than what he painted. Nonetheless his critical practice not only influenced much academic writing on art during the 1980s and 1990s, but also provided a model for conceptual artists.



IN AN ABSOLUT WORLD



TBWA Paris, 2007

This advertisement design wholly relies on visual information to communicate core messages for the Absolut Vodka brand. This helps it transcend language and cultural boundaries.

It is promoting an alcoholic drink and is aimed at a very specific target audience with some very clear objectives.

It wants to communicate market domination, by suggesting that without question it is the 'absolut' best.

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Deconstruction

Let us endeavor to decode some of the elements that have created this advertisement

Very little written information is provided in this advert. Most of the information presented is visual. This aids communication, especially through language barriers. The text is encoded and weighted with semiotic meaning.

Anchorage text is used to establish and fix meaning. The headline is a representation of a culturally shared idea. 'Absolut' replaces the word 'perfect', therefore fixing the meaning for the audience. The product is now aligned with perfection. The spelling in the headline matches the brand name on the bottle. This emphasizes that the product is Russian, providing authenticity and pre-eminence for this vodka brand. It also, once again, re-establishes the brand name with perfection.



The only other appearance of anchorage text is on the box from which the elements have been removed. Alongside is a symbol. The symbol is a culturally learned signifier that represents male: ♂. It is a pictogram and also the symbol for Mars, the Roman God of War. Therefore, the symbol denotes *maleness*, but the connotations are *power*, *strength* and *conflict*.



The box itself is symbolic of an object that can be selected, purchased and delivered remotely. It removes dialogue and suggests relationships/partners can be manufactured and obtained as part of a consumer choice. It objectifies the 'man' into a commodity.

The representation of the male figure itself denotes ideals of masculine perfection whereas the bespectacled appearance is a signifier that has connotations of intelligence. The facial expression is also happy which denotes male compliance in this paradigm, i.e. that a perfect man can be purchased and built. Also note the packaging foam which has connotations of protection suggesting the contents are valuable.



Red roses are polysemic, being an icon for flowers, but also a signifier of romance. This further promotes the paradigm of the 'perfect man'. In doing so it perpetuates the myth of an idealised and traditional heterosexual relationship.



The 'ripped' six pack torso signifies vitality, fertility, strength, health and sexual dominance. This social coding perpetuates the myth of the 'perfect' man in this advertisement.

The body parts also look simple to fit together suggesting the ease that one can find the 'perfect man' in the 'Absolut' world. The fixing parts also signify childhood toys like dolls and play figures. This also has a discriminatory and disparaging connotation in that anyone can do this, hence the symbolic representation that has connotations of childhood toys.



The tattoos or 'sleeve' is a sign of interest and participation in contemporary cultural traditions and social behavior. It is a code that adds to the myth of the perfect man as well as displaying a level of (non) gender conformity.

The male figure is perceived as culturally relevant, and accepted by wider his cultural 'tribe', which is a desirable attribute for the male figure and also for heterosexual females.



The guitar denotes musicality. In turn it connotes skill, talent and dexterity. Playing a musical instrument also takes time and effort to learn so this has connotations of commitment and perseverance. These attributes also align with the myth of the 'perfect man'.

The choice of instrument adds credibility to these conservative qualities as this fits closely with the 'rock and roll' myth which balances the previous attributes with an element of risk, fun-loving, passion and openness.





In contradiction of many of the previous signs we have analysed, the arbitrary smart, black, polished, formal shoes firmly re-establish traditional professional/managerial stature that aligns with the paradigm of career success. This is part of a code to denote conventional and traditional professionalism and conformity in the business world. This indicator of success also aligns with the myth of the 'perfect man'.

AS a binary contrast the advertisement uses the female model to signify a gender aligned, traditional representation of idealised female beauty.

The polysemic red cheeks suggest the character is flustered by the model-building operation but may also denote heightened stimuli similar to sexual arousal.



The red discarded stilettos are an indexical sign of abandon albeit they are carefully positioned so this may be an affectual or intentional symbol. In a similar way to the male characters black polished formal shoes the red stilettos are an arbitrary or symbolic sign of gender and sexuality.



The instructions are also anchorage text in that they help to fix meaning even though they are illegible. They function as an iconic sign of knowledge, know-how and procedure. The female characters' reliance shows obedience, trust and convention. This supports the myth of the subservient female who has less of a tendency for independent thinking and a willingness to follow set rules, structures and constructs.





A pile of books/papers are denoted on the storage unit and the connotation of this is intelligence and knowledge. The creators of the advertisement wish to ensure their paradigm is one that follows contemporary attitudes, and the audience decodes their symbolic value as being aligned with intellect. There is an intention to dispel the myth that beauty and brains are not at odds.



The framed photographs are icon signs in that they physically resemble what they signify. Carefully selected, collected and presented imagery are polysemic and can function to signify many things such as sentimentality, memory and an appreciation of artistic endeavor. This semiotic reading depends on the actual visual content.

The contemporary furnishings stylistically fit with the subtle colour-coded accents of the female characters' clothing. It signifies order as well as sophistication which in turn is used to signify the traits of the female character.

The modernist style and quality of furniture suggests financial stability, taste and also affirms her role as a homemaker.

The iconic red colour throughout suggests vitality, passion and sexuality and also an element of danger albeit this seems pre-empted and intentional.





The physical context for this scene is the final code that supports the myth that has been created. From the view through the shrouded window, it is apparent that we are in a contemporary city apartment. When decoded it suggests a conventional young, single female professional who is financially secure living an innercity lifestyle. Likely to be surrounded by like-minded individuals it reinforces the paradigm set up by all the other signs. Every element has been encoded to provide relevance to the target audience who may consciously or unconsciously decode the advertisement.



IN AN ABSOLUT WORLD







Did you:

- Choose an image and think about how you could analyse it using semiotics.

Think about ...

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- The underlying myth
- Context
- Colour
- Any other factors you notice...

The next stage to writing a draft

Once you have deconstructed the semiotic messaging the next stage is to write a precis and **support your observations with references** from academic texts, peer reviewed journals/articles, books and credible websites.

- Once you get a grasp of deconstructing imagery, your next challenge is communicating your ideas in an academic piece of writing.
- The best way to do this is through practice. Most things that are difficult to begin are often the most rewarding.
- Next week is your opportunity to write a rough draft and upload to TURNITIN. I will be available online to help and answer any questions.
- For the first 20 minutes of every writing session (which are every 3 weeks) we will look at the brief and guidelines for your written submission. Next week we will also look at the Harvard referencing system before you attempt your first drafts.

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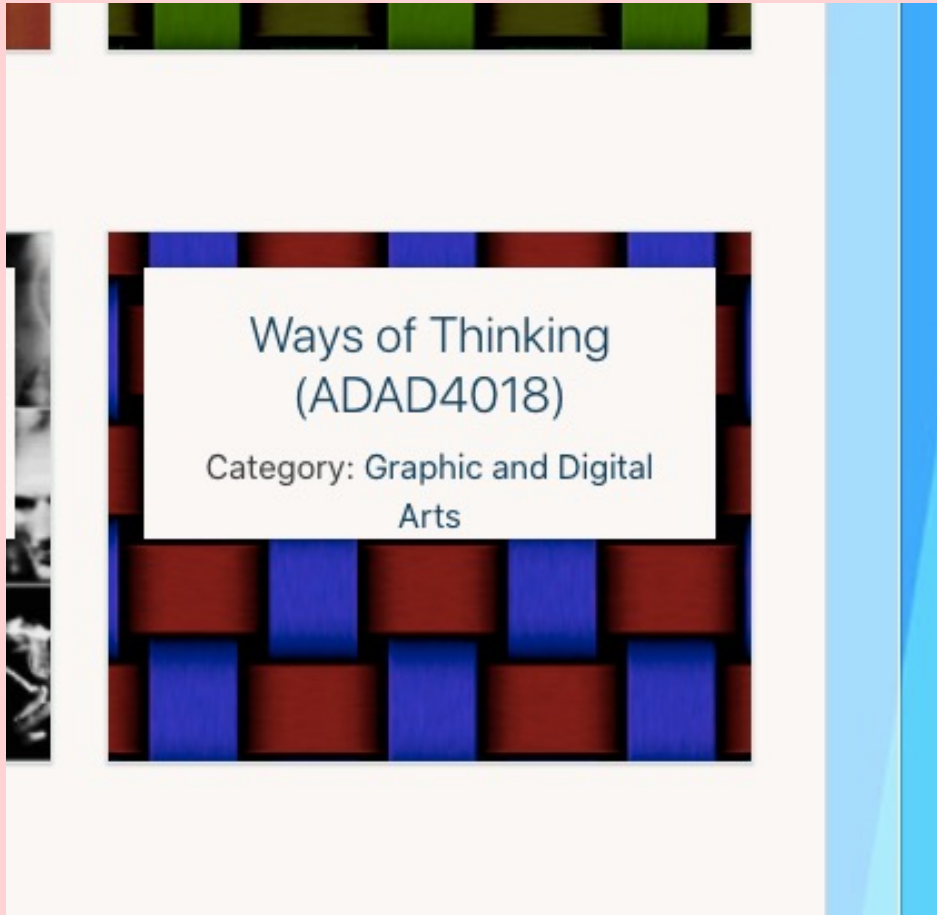
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Any questions?