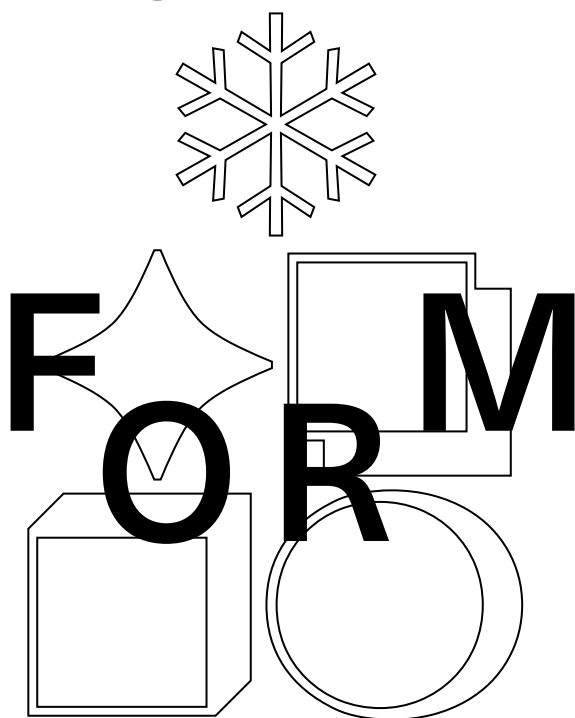
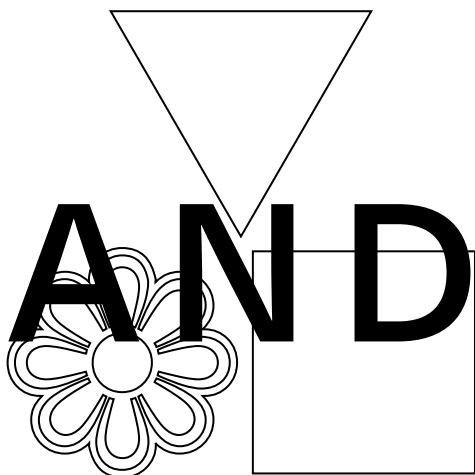
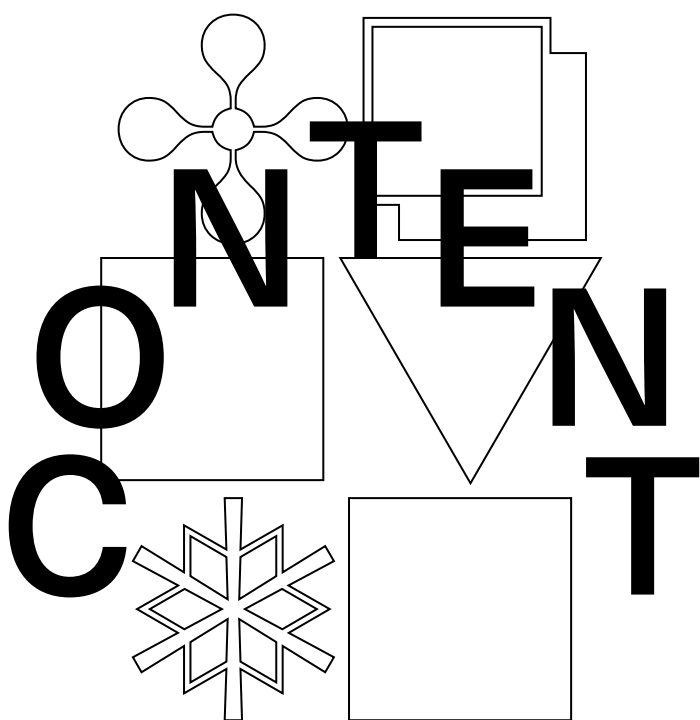




**The Pitfalls of
an Established Concept**

CONTENT AND FORM
The Pitfalls of
an Established Concept

Hoang Nguyen & David Gobber

p.6

Content and form are inseparable. We cannot change the meaning of something without modifying the form.

p.9

While thoughtful work on the form can surely do a lot of heavy lifting, form remains only one partial aspect of design.

p. 14

Instead, meaning arises from the connections one can draw between expressions and the overall structure these connections create.

p. 17

Meaning is always temporary and incomplete, shaped by the references one identifies and explores.

Understanding graphic design in terms of content and form is common practice. Countless design curricula, creative workflows, and entire organisational structures are built around this concept. Many would even say that the whole purpose of design comes down to creating the proper form for a given content. We stumble upon this belief in everyday conversations, professional critiques, and bold statements by prominent design figures. Take the famous graphic designer Paul Rand as an example who—in an interview with John Maeda at MIT in 1996—defined design as “the method of putting form and content together”.

Although this view of design can seem helpful at times, it is ultimately flawed. It not only insufficiently describes how design communicates ideas, but more importantly, it is often at the core of what hinders the creation of excellent work. Instead of reducing design to merely finding a fitting form for a given content, we need to recognise it as the much more comprehensive practice of crafting expressions which—if done well—realise the desired communication.

To better understand the shortcomings of the content-form model and to get to a more robust alternative, we need to dip our toes into a bit of philosophy, linguistics, and semiotics, the study of signs and meaning.

{ Fig. 1 }

In a literal sense, “content” refers to a substance contained within something else. This already hints at the specific notion of communication implied when speaking of content and form. The linguist Michael J. Reddy calls this foundational concept the conduit metaphor, meaning that communication is generally understood as a conduit system. As such, communication starts with a sender who takes the meaning they want to convey and places it into a container, such as an image, a word, or a sign. This container is then sent to the receiver who extracts its meaning by reading, viewing, or otherwise interpreting the transmitted vessel.

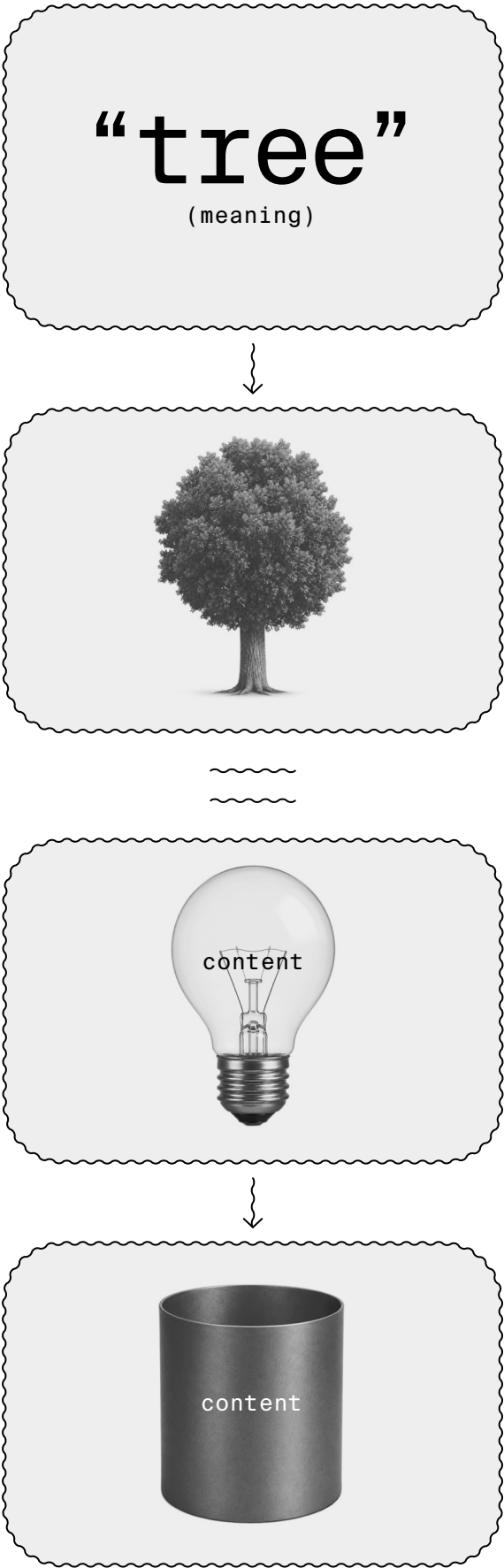
{ Fig. 2 }

This assumes that content and form can exist independently of each other, much like a message that can be placed inside a container but does not necessarily have to be. However, if this were the case, we could alter the meaning of something without affecting its form or modify the form without causing even the slightest change in what it conveys. Moreover, we could encounter “pure content” or “meaningless form”. But is this truly how we experience communication? No, we do not. Content and form are inseparable. We cannot change the meaning of something without modifying the form. Likewise, altering the form is not possible without also affecting the conveyed meaning.

{ Fig. 3 }

Fig. 1

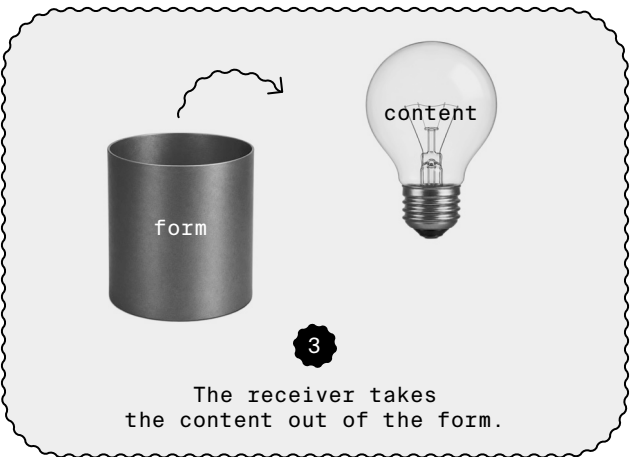
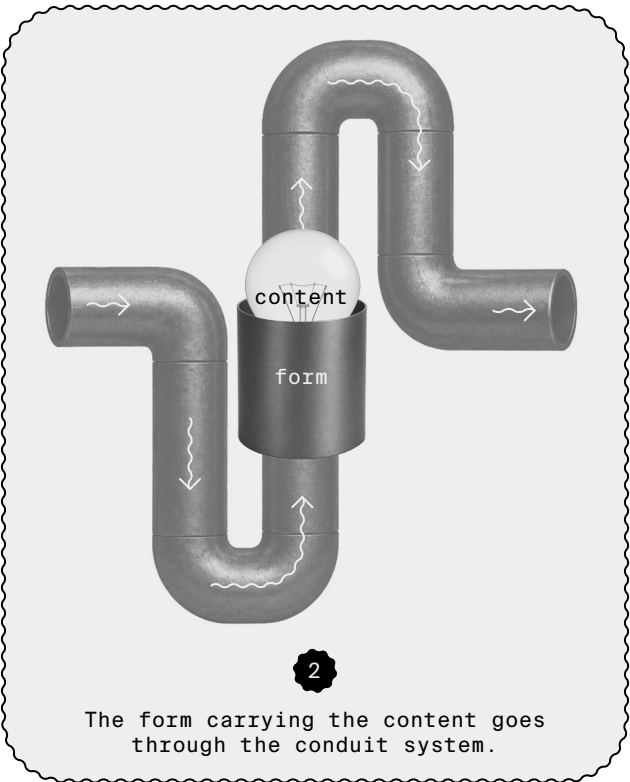
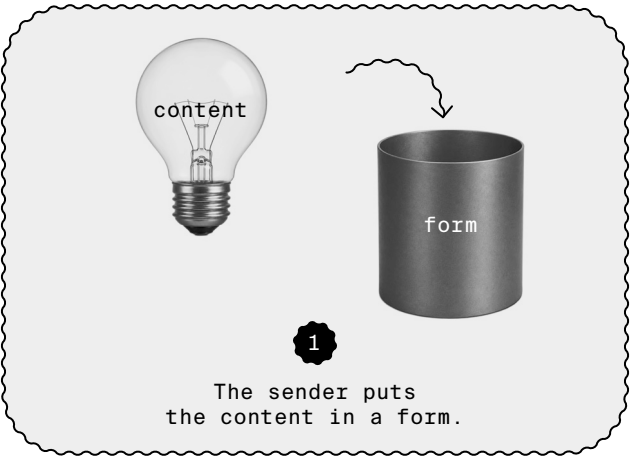
Content-Form Model



The meaning “tree” contained in an illustration like content in a form

Fig.2

Conduit Metaphor



Communication through content and form according to the conduit metaphor

In workflows where content and form are treated as separate, content is typically prepared by others in advance, with designers expected to “add” the form later. Form is not only regarded as independent from content but also as less important. This leads to two major problems: First, it discredits design as a merely decorative project, something that can even be skipped if necessary. Second, it limits designers to work with only a part of what makes up the entire design. In such scenarios, designers are often challenged with unnecessarily difficult or even impossible tasks. They are asked to create striking posters with bland images, clear pictograms for ambiguous instructions, engaging presentations burdened by cumbersome writing, and similar. While thoughtful work on the form can surely do a lot of heavy lifting, form remains only one partial aspect of design.

As shown, describing design in terms of content and form leads to numerous challenges. It is an inadequate approach, especially when it reduces design to an exclusively form-related task. So what would be a better alternative?

The linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure can help us out here. At the end of the 19th century, he suggested that signs do not convey meaning through content that could be extracted from form. Saussure argued that meaning arises from how expressions differ from and relate to each other. Think about how something is defined in an encyclopedia. When you look up the definition of an expression, you will not find its “pure meaning”. Instead, you are presented with additional expressions related to your search term. These may be words, photos, diagrams, or something else. When searching for the definition of “tree”, you will find expressions like “plant”, “leaf”, “trunk”, “wood”, and maybe also a picture of a tree. It is through understanding how “tree” relates to all these other expressions that you can grasp its meaning. { Fig.4 }

Fig. 3

**Do these illustrations mean
different things?**



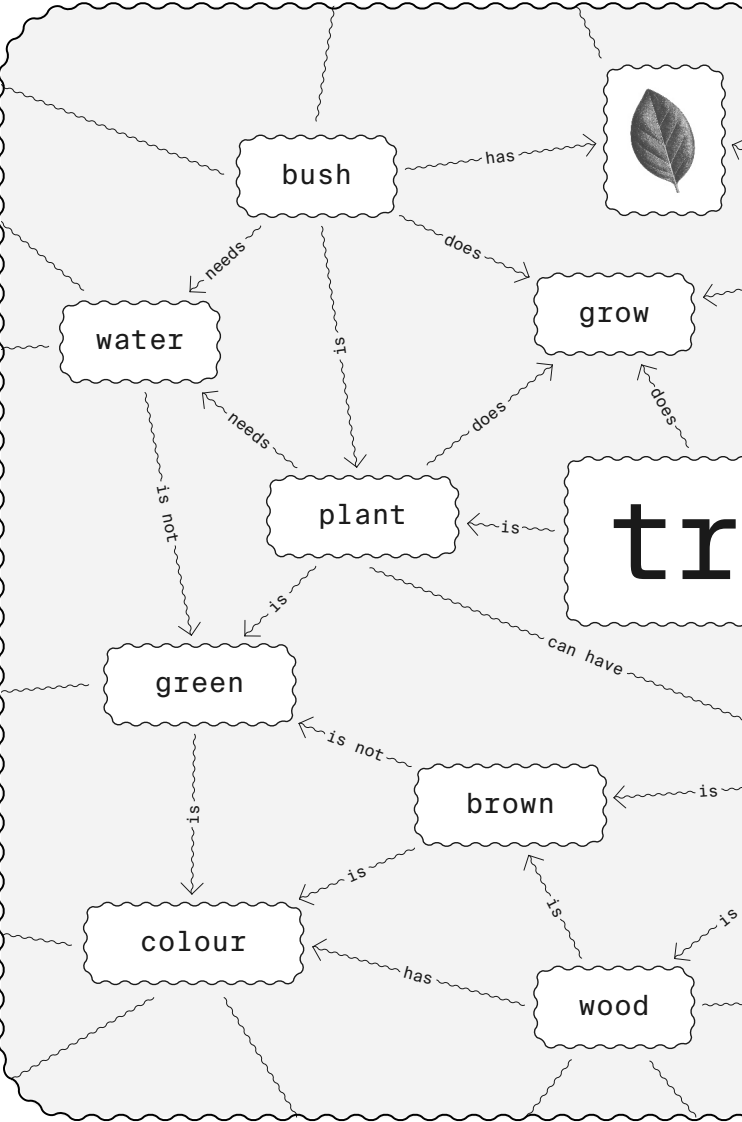
No. Identical forms do not have
different content.

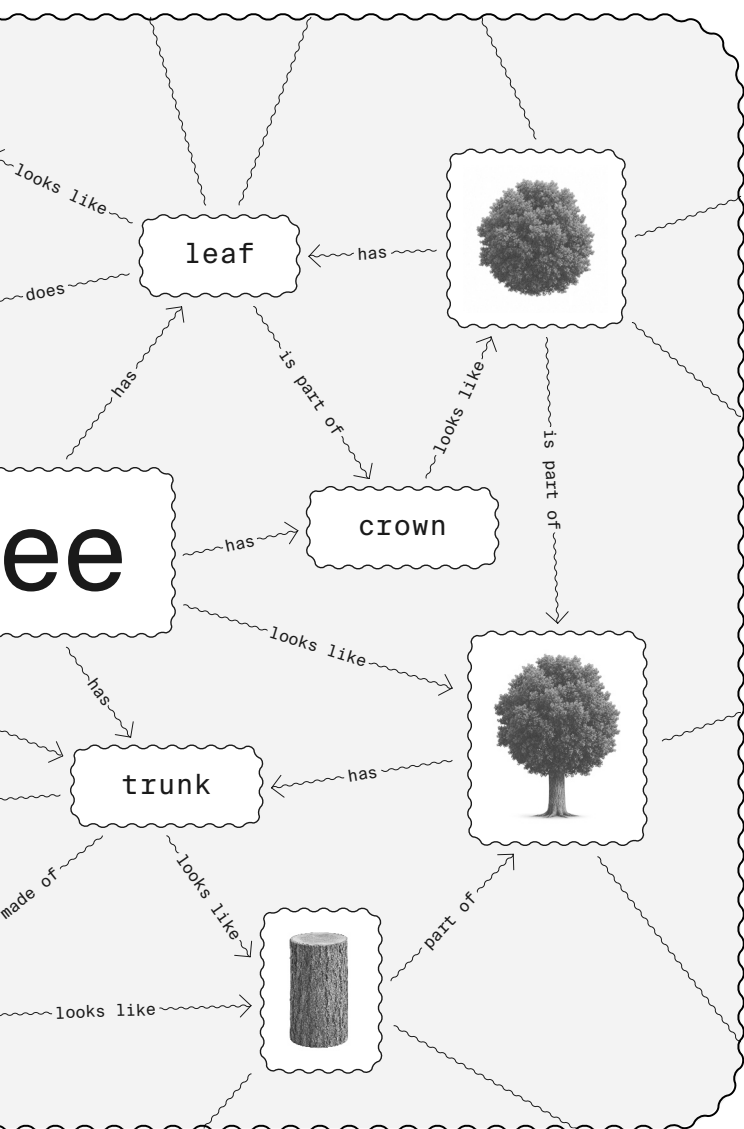
**Do these illustrations mean
the same thing?**



**No. Different forms do not have
identical content.**

Fig.4





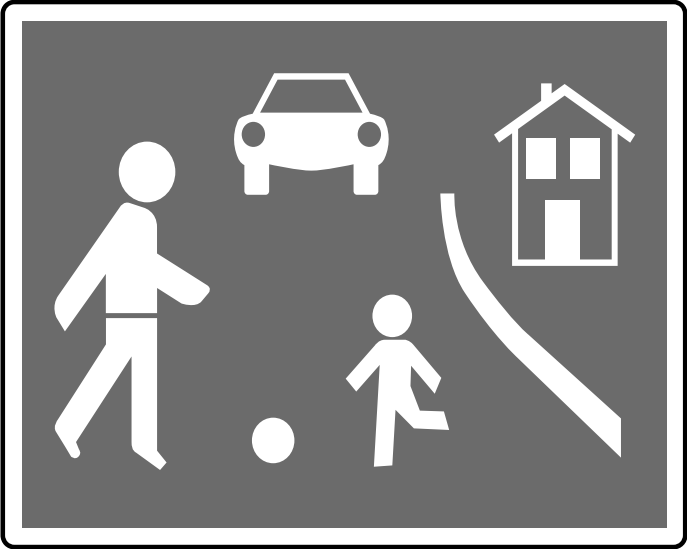
The word "tree" in a structure of connected expressions

Graphic design conveys meaning in the same way. Take the Austrian traffic sign for a “living street” as an example. Its exact meaning within the local traffic regulations may not be clear just by looking at it. However, we can still get a general idea of what the sign is supposed to communicate by exploring its connections and references to other expressions. We can easily recognise the shape at the top as a car and the one at the top right as a house due to their similarities to real-world objects. Thanks to our knowledge of how houses and cars usually relate spatially, we can conclude that the curved line is neither a ski nor a snake, but most likely the kerb of a road. The two figures playing ball are likely interpreted as an adult and a child, due to how they compare in size. The more connections we draw and relations we explore, the deeper our understanding of this design becomes. As our interpretation progresses, we will slowly figure out that this traffic sign indicates a residential area where people may be standing on the road, alerting drivers to be careful. { Fig.5 }

Another example of how meaning in graphic design is conveyed through references, rather than through content being “contained” in form, is the poster design for the music event “Salon skug”. Let’s focus on one particular aspect of this design: its typography. You might notice that the arrangement and sizing of the letters resemble a staircase viewed from above. At first glance, this might not seem significant. However, if you are familiar with the musician Ines Wurst featured on the poster, you will recognise this as a reference to one of her top-listened songs which tells a story set in a staircase. While such subtle references do not drastically alter the poster’s overall meaning, they contribute to a richer interpretation and, in doing so, enhance the design. Most importantly, this example shows once more that—whether obvious, subtle, or entirely hidden without prior knowledge—meaning is always defined by references. { Fig.6 }

Saussure’s model demonstrates that content and form are not relevant to how meaning is conveyed. Instead, meaning arises from the connections one can draw between expressions and the overall structure these connections create. Saussure’s and similar views therefore belong to a school of thought known as structuralism. Post-structuralism, with influential philosophers like Jacques Derrida, expanded on this idea. Derrida pointed out that Saussure’s model allows for a complete and definitive understanding of an expression if all its connections to other expressions are fully present in one’s mind. However, this is beyond what is humanly possible. Moreover, meaning is constantly in flux as connections evolve through reinterpretations, shifts in context, and the emergence of new expressions.

Fig.5
Fig.6



Austrian traffic sign for “living street”



Poster for Salon skug, December 2024

Fig. 7



- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1) Red Star | 12) Chinese Flag |
| 2) Pentacle | 13) Glowing Star Emoji |
| 3) Heineken Logo | 14) U.S. Flag |
| 4) Nautical Star | 15) Ancient Greek |
| 5) EU Flag | Hugieia Pentagram |
| 6) Hollywood Walk of Fame | 16) San Pellegrino Logo |
| 7) Éliphas Lévi's Pentagram | 17) Stella d'Italia |
| 8) U.S. Military Insignia | 18) Moroccan Franc Coin |
| 9) Nagasaki Flag | (1921-1924) |
| 10) Heinrich Cornelius | 19) Red Army Headgear Insignia |
| Agrippa's Pentagram | 20) Satanic Pentagram |
| 11) Converse All Star | 21) Morocco Flag |

The five-pointed star in different contexts

As a result, the definitive meaning of any expression is unattainable. Meaning is always temporary and incomplete, shaped by the references one identifies and explores.

There are countless examples that illustrate how the meaning of an expression changes depending on the references present in different historical, cultural, personal, or other contexts. Let's take the five-pointed star as an example. As a red star, it often signifies a socialist or communist worldview. In the EU and the U.S. flag, each five-pointed star stands for a member state. In the Pythagorean philosophy of Ancient Greece, it stood for health. At the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the star symbolises pop cultural success. In the Chinese flag, the five-pointed stars stand for the leadership of the communist party and the four social classes of China, as defined by Mao. In the metal music genre, the star is often displayed upside-down to symbolise evil or Satan, inspired by its similar use in occult contexts. The five-pointed star can also indicate a level of quality when rating products or services. These are only a fraction of the many varying meanings of this symbol throughout history and other contexts. { Fig.7 }

Derrida's insights offer profound implications for designers as they point out fundamental limitations when communicating through design. While clear communication is often set as the goal in design, one must recognise that the way expressions convey meaning does not allow for absolute clarity. Even if designers are not limited to modifying only the form, they simply cannot dictate how their work will be interpreted. The best they can do is to incorporate carefully selected references and consider the contexts of the audience to suggest the desired reading.

As we have seen, understanding design in terms of content and form results in various difficulties that ultimately make this approach inadequate. Rather than viewing design as the task of finding the "right" form for a given content, it should be seen as the practice of crafting expressions with thoughtful references that guide the audience towards the desired interpretation. Recognising references as central to communication highlights that design must go beyond form-related considerations. In practical terms, this means involving designers earlier in the process and granting them more influence over what is traditionally considered "content". Although the desired communication can never be guaranteed, this provides at least more favourable conditions for creating meaningful work that leaves a profound impression.

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“Content and Form” and “The Pitfalls of an Established Concept” set in Zapf Dingbats by Hermann Zapf

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Graphic design is often understood as the task of finding the “right” form for a given content. Yet this seemingly straightforward idea is ultimately flawed and limits the potential for compelling work. Drawing on Saussure and Derrida, Content and Form explores how meaning emerges through references. Consequently, design should no longer be viewed as merely a matter of form, but as the broader practice of crafting expressions that thoughtfully incorporate references.

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