CMC Seminar 14 September 2015

Report

Christian Mosbæk Johannessen presented his work in progress on logos of oil companies, under the title 'The shape of black energy'

His presentation was based on a large corpus of logos from Irish forecourt operators and large oil companies.

Departing from his framework for analysing graphic shapes, Christian explained how different logos require different amounts of specification, in the form of the specific 'shapes' that specify a given contour, hence different 'densities', different informational bandwidths. The densities of all the logos were presented on a chart showing an average density of around 12.

Factors determining high bandwidth included whether or not images were part of the logo (images of eagles, dragons etc), but also how regular the shape is. The logo of Saudi Aramco, a perspectivally tilted star, had a particularly high density (243), and forecourt logos tended towards a lower density than those of large oil companies, which might, for instance use a serif font.

He then focussed on the logo of Topaz, which has high informational bandwidth, despite being rather abstract. This is the result of irregularity. Through its irregularity the Topaz logo tries to respond to the increasing critique of fossil fuels by looking almost informal and friendly, and almost childishly 'innocent'.

Christian also discussed the colour of these logos, although he will not be able to include this in the journal article he is currently preparing. In examining colour, he used a visualization of the relation between hue and brightness in the logos. This revealed that the colours of oil company logos cluster in two regions - relatively bright reds and orange on the one hand, and greens and blues on the other hand, suggesting both 'energy' and a concern for the environment. The Topaz logo again differed, using a colour region rarely used by other oil company logos, with more yellow and shaded colours.

The paper touched on many theoretical issues, including data visualization (a way of showing the shape densities that is more readily accessible than a table of figures still has to be found), the analogy of Christian's approach to phonetics and phonology in language, and the 'supra-modal' nature of Christian's shape system.

Discussion further explored these issues, including the relationship between Christian's specification of shapes, based on their contemporary technological mode of production and articulatory trace making on the one hand, and the perception of graphic form on the other.