

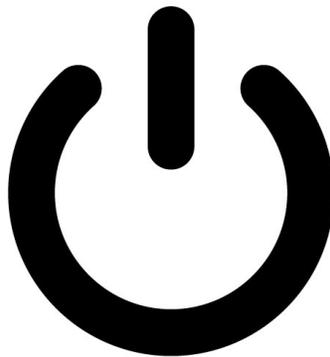
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Communication Theory

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Design Object - Power Symbol

We live in a world consisting of so many different people, cultures, and languages. Due to this, it's pretty much impossible for us to ever have a world with a single universal language that 100% of the planet's population will know. However, there have been inventions that have traveled across the globe to become universally known; the power symbol created by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) in 2002 is a prime example of this.



This symbol wasn't the base design of the word "power." Before this, there were two separate symbols; an I and an O to represent a closed electrical circuit, meaning its powered on, and an open one, meaning its powered off. These two separate icons were then simplified and combined into one to create the symbol shown above in 2002. The International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) created this symbol as a way of showing what a single button will do, but not many realize this "power" symbol doesn't mean power on and power off. This power symbol actually means "power on" and "sleep mode." When a piece of technology has this power icon, it means the device never fully powers down after pressing it, the electricity being ran through it simply lowers at a significant amount. It also usually means it can be powered back on and "off"

with a remote, but in order for that to work, there always needs to be a bit of electricity being run through the device even when powered “off,” hence the need for it to have a “rest mode.”



This design object reminded me of the discussion of Herbert Bayer and Moholy-Nagy, and their takes on art in Bauhaus. Herbert Bayer was the founder of the Universal typeface, which has only lowercase letters and geometrical forms. The talk of a universal way of communication is also present in the power symbol. In his vision of a future art form, Bayer spoke of wanting to bridge the gap between those with different languages. As the way of designing and communicating progressed over time, Bayer focused his attention on integrating both text and photo, much like Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy expressed how beneficial it would be for photography and text to go hand-in-hand in designs and future art. He believed the two separate ways of communication would pick up where the other lacks, allowing people to use their context clues to be able to fully understand a message. This combination went on to become the most effective way of communication within advertising, graphic design, and other forms of communicative art.

Speaking of these art theories, you can see the influence in the power symbol. It was an evolution of previous icons, which were once only words with no visual representation. Being just words would have made it pretty much impossible for the entire world to know and

understand the meaning behind them universally. For years, the “on” and “off” sides of a light switch were labeled with an “I” and “O,” which became universally understood. There’s no language barrier to keep people from knowing the meaning behind these icons. In 2002, the IEC integrated these two icons into one to create the power symbol. The context clues, text, and pictures talked about with Bayer and Moholy-Nagy in the expectations of future art are all applied when talking about this design object.

In the “Language of Vision: Painting, Photography, Advertising-Design” by Gyorgy Kepes, he makes a point that seems very relevant to the design of the power symbol and its history. Kepes states, “Each representation of an object or a thing acts on the picture surface and discharges its own unique direction of associations as a point, a line, a shape, acts on the picture-plane, and forces the eye into virtual spatial directions. These representations have positions, direction, shape, size, distance, and weight.” While consisting of only two simple elements, the power symbol still has differentiating positions, direction, and forces the eye into virtual spatial directions, as spoken of by Kepes. You have these once two separate and unique lines with opposing directions that were then combined into one to create a new meaning.

The creation of the power symbol went on to prove the future art theories of some historic artists. It showcased their ideas of the integration of text and imagery to create something meaningful, geometric shapes in design, and the universal way of communicating.

Citations

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