

Representation and Embodiment:

**A critique of the philosophy
and pedagogy of graphic
design and advertising.**

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While working as a Graphic Designer at a creative firm in Boulder Colorado, I had the opportunity to help develop ideas for various printed collateral for several clients. The academic background that I came from was very concept oriented; that is to say that the idea of the object came first along the lines of metaphors and tropes, and the visual images and typography reinforced that idea. I was disappointed to learn that in the business world, speed and efficient management of billable time were of primary importance. Nobody had time to think about the visual message and stimuli portrayed in any of the designed material. They wanted immediate and universalized messaging that could be recognizable to as wide an audience as possible. A new client, DataPlay was in the process of building a new storage device they felt was going to change the market for recordable data. The data to be recorded included music, databases, basically anything that could be stored and downloaded from the internet onto a recordable disk the size of a quarter. During the development of brochures and web page design, we conceived an idea, which was very common within advertising for high-tech gadgets. The Art Director called a model agency and the search was on. Several models were contacted and a photo-shoot was scheduled. The models were between the ages of 15 and 20 and were

Those who pooh-pooh the ability of advertising . . . to condition people have failed to grasp the peculiar logic upon which the media's efficacy reposes. For this is not a logic of propositions and proofs, but a logic of fables and the willingness to go along with them. Jean Baudrillard

of considerable aesthetic proportion and shape. The photographer was positioned at an angle above the model. The model then held the small disk up, toward the camera; the model's lovely face smiling at the would-be viewer. The models were dressed in an attire that was either business casual or jeans and a t-shirt. The visual identification was to be very simple: for print media, the picture of the model was placed on



a white background with simple typography set in an easy to read display font (see figure 1). For web based media, the model was placed halfway down the web-page on the left and leaned into the browser page. When I was working on one of the pages for the brochure, I kept wondering if we were missing our target audience, that of the technologically affluent. The target audience were white heterosexual males in the age range of twenty-five to fifty. I asked the Art Director (white woman, thirty- six, single parent) about maybe changing some of the figures to older and definitely non-white people. The idea was accepted and we went back to looking at talent. The new models used were: an attractive fifty-year old white balding male, a middle-aged latino ex-football player and an assortment of twenty-something Japanese men and women that looked so similar to one another that it was eery. The concept of any system of identification for DataPlay collateral therefore, was to appropriate the metonymical contingencies

of these individuals and then juxtapose that with an empty background literally filled with nothing but a white-glossy space. The figure on the collateral became the disc, the new media on which to imprint personal space, for the user to imprint themselves, to consume the image of the figure on the page. The viewer of the collateral could easily relate to the the visual figures that of whiteness, heterosexuality and ultimately values of youth onto and from this tiny object. After working on projects like this for a little over a year, I got out of the corporate space and into creative and academic space, and I have been much happier ever since. Now I am teaching an introductory course to graphic design and am sending people out into the work-force so that they can maintain cultural stereotypes in advertising and visual communications. This is not my hope, but for the purposes of this paper, I would like to explore the pedagogical forms and ideas of visual communicators and also critique those ideas, products and procedures of the dominant ideology.

The term “Graphic Designer” is a relatively recent concept. The word has the first recorded usage in the early 1920’s by William Addison Dwiggins, “...(a) highly literate book designer who established a house style for the Alfred A. Knopf publishing company...”. (Meggs 187) At this time period, commercial activities in design and advertising were taking off in the

It is obvious, that the machine is here to stay. Whole armies of William Morris and Tolstoy could not now expel it. Let us then exploit them to create beauty – a modern beauty, while we are about it.
Aldus Huxley

United States as well as in Europe, but Europe was the vanguard for experimentation on both fronts. The Bauhaus in Germany is the school that comes to the forefront for pedagogy of design and art, even to the present day. The school, founded by Walter Gropius in 1919, believed that there should be no distinction between low art and high art and that students should learn their profession based on a model of gothic craftspeople. "The Gothic cathedral represented a realization of peoples longing for a spiritual beauty that went beyond utility and need, and symbolized the integration of architecture, sculpture, painting and crafts." (Meggs, 289) This idea of integrating spirit with reason is important here. The Bauhaus then comes from a place of two-fold senses: that of placing a subject capable of understanding an almost dialectic sense of their situation, interpreting it, and acting in a sense of synthesis, as well as the designed object containing a spirit of god like proportions. If we look to critics such as Raymond Williams, who look at culture as a historical process as opposed to a teleologic process we can understand the unique situation that the philosophic values of the school could have come from. "It (civilization) expressed two senses which were historically linked: an achieved state, which could be contrasted with 'barbarism', but now also an achieved state of development, which implied historical process and progress." (Williams, 13) The idea of progress is important here due to the fact that the codification of the school was created in order to increase the subject's view of the world; to develop their understanding of the world. The school worked with technology and

assumed that the marriage of all arts was key. The school was so enfatic as to demolish the distinction of high and low art, that Gropius hired Paul Klee and Vassily Kandinsky as instructors. (Meggs, 290) The utilitarian and utopian bent is still with us today, as schools such as Colorado State, and premier schools such as the Rhode Island School of Design teach the fine arts in conjunction with what could be considered as commercial. Artist's such as Andy Warhol, Man Ray, and Barbara Kruger either started their careers in the graphic field or delved into business communications to further their other projects. Aurthur Danto, in *Beyond the Brillo Box* tells us that, "Advertising or commercial art would be something you did for a living, art was something that was not a living but a life." (Danto 154) Graphic art distinctively has its roots firmly implanted in that of fine art and its aesthetic have come from similar philosophical values as well within its short history. However, when looking at how objects work within a given system of values and hierarchies, graphic design has always been looked down on due to its common usage or its utility. Modernists, like Paul Rand and institutions like the Bauhaus brought the high art aesthetics into graphic art. Andy Warhol for instance, used themes of advertising and commodification in his Soup Cans and Brillo Boxes, Warhol made the object of high art, pedestrian. Ironically, "The original designer of the Brillo box...was a failed second-generation Abstract Expressionist who went into commercial art..." (Danto 154) Commercial art, having this idea of being different of being lowly and common, yet yields to the same basic foundations of

aesthetics of its kissing cousin, that of high art. And this may be the crux. With slogans like, “Immature artists imitate, mature artists steal,” (Heller/Lasky 1) ideas of appropriation of previously successful advertising and other printed materials may have some sort of origin. What has worked will work again. And looking at formal devices like form and content, that are always talked of when it comes to design and design principles, we can look at the more “objective” forms within the general rubric of foundational skills. “Is the typography functioning at a level not only to be read (denotation) right to left in space on a page on the paper, but does the typeface express (connotation) more than what the actual words say?” Is a question I ask of not only myself when I design, but something I ask my students when reviewing their work. Expressing something is key. And many teachers and theorists/practitioners in the field question if students are being taught to think through problems of audience and mass communications at all. Meredith Davis speaks of this in her essay, *How High Do We Set the Bar for Design Education?*. “It is little wonder that employers find young designers self-absorbed with making personal statements in client-based work and incapable of presenting convincing arguments for their solutions to nondesigners.” (Heller 29) While expressing something either visually or verbally is important, it is also important to communicate ideas to clients/employers. This is what design theorists want to challenge. Criticism aside, it seems from the point of view of the naive or as yet, untrained students the call to individuality is strong. Business people that contact designers or creative

firms to secure visual business communications want advertising that will express what they want, not the expression of a designers caprices. And maybe the young designer, besieged by the stimuli of the culture in which they live can only reproduce what is in the culture itself. I sincerely doubt that business training includes the critique of presence of meaning, but maybe self-expression is unavoidable within the market place. However, designers such as Paul Rand see design as, "...less of

a business than a calling." (Rand 19) The individualist streak is popular now as ever in graphic

Now, I know that in our German nations, at the present time, are many painters who stand in need of instruction, for they lack all real art theory ...For as much as they are so numerous, it is very needful for them to learn to better their work. He that works in ignorance works more painfully than he who works in understanding. . . . Albrecht Dürer

communications. Looking at websites like once-upon-a-forest.com or www.xor.com, one can see a single designer whose singular vision has taken over the fundamental business communications devices for personal style. This may be difficult to say of Joshua Davis' *Once Upon a Forest* site, which explores experimental visual forms in web based media and is not funded by any business entity, other than himself, but one can see the laboring of the solitary individual behind a computer for the sole reason of singular expression. However, websites like XOR's show how much a certain technology like Macromedia's Flash can either create new modes of thinking in relation to the media as it is viewed but also relies on the methodologies of previous systems and modes of thinking. The

problem seems to be that of designers having an education lacking in not just how mass communications work, but the relative and recognizable metaphors that any given imagery already contains. As Walter Benjamin illuminates, “During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence.” (Benjamin, 224) Graphic Design, having a short history has seen quite a bit of change due to the Industrial Revolution and the Information Revolution. The amount of graphic design, advertising or other items that are posited by a culture with the ultimate desire to sell those objects to as many people as possible is to have as many people as possible to purchase those items. What we are reinforcing as designers then is that white males have the power, they have the ability to embody discourse that purchases. These few select individuals purchase items as well as purchasing the advertising in order to promote other items. have most of the creative This tautology of the few making decisions of a discursive representation is only reinforced due to the fact that designers are taught that the individual exists, *a priori* to the larger social system. For them, there is no woman, there are no other races but white, and the only thing that matters is a sense of a youth that becomes reified through the use and observation of advertising; there is no difference. What critics like Moira Gatens will argue is that, “The crux of the issue of difference as it is understood here is that difference does not have to do with biological ‘facts’ so much as with the manner in which culture marks bodies and creates specific conditions in which they live and recreate themselves.”

(Gatens, 71) What our culture teaches is that the individual is sacred and it is the individual (artist, male, active) that can create a new meaning when confronted with a problem to be 'fixed' (consumer, female, reactive). The chief problem that exists for graphic designers, however, is one of space, proportion, messaging, not one of representation. If we look to a feminist criticism, of Gatens again, she talks of the artificial man, the body politic. The artificial man, "is not required to acknowledge difference. The metaphor (the body politic) functions to restrict our political vocabulary to one voice only: a voice that can speak of only *one* body, *one* reason and *one* ethic." (Gatens, 23) Since then, that graphic designers are taught to think in terms of style as opposed to one of politics, then looking to relevant historical forms may be in order.

In the book *Borrowed Design*, the authors Steven Heller and Julie Lasky write of historical uses of form and of appropriation of style, when appropriation can be necessary, and when appropriation is plagiarism. A notoriously famous poster, designed by Ludwig Holwein (see figure 2) for the National Socialist Student Organization in Germany in 1938 shows a young, heroic figure in typical Nazi attire, holding a fascist symbol, looking gloriously into the distance. An unknown designer appropriated the image (see figure 3) in 1989 for a poster advertising, America's Meat Roundup. The appropriation of this image, however humorous, illustrates Heller and Lasky's point well. The image from the Meat Council, takes a negative image from Nazi propaganda and

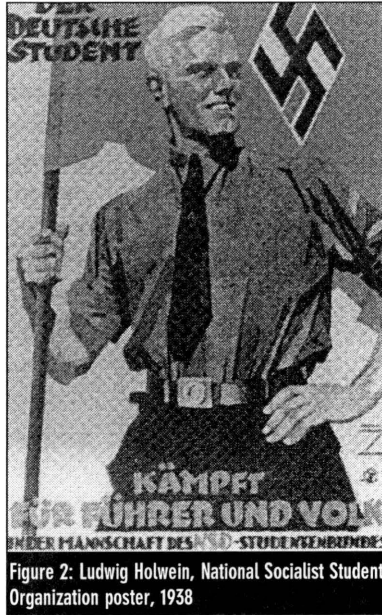


Figure 2: Ludwig Holwein, National Socialist Student Organization poster, 1938

appropriates it for something entirely different that the designer seems entirely unaware.

Heller and Lasky argue, “Styles come and go so quickly in today’s design market that it would be unrealistic to suppose what one as visible as this (heroism and/or social realism) would not be appropriated by others.” (Heller/Lasky 138)

Reusing images and themes takes place in every form whether conscious or not. Again Heller

and Lasky argue that, “The past is a tool every

bit as vital as the pencil, paintbrush, and computer terminal. And like any tool, it may be misused by those who cannot or choose not to handle it deftly.” (Heller/Lasky 1-2) Pedagogy uses history as a tool, and the young designer needs to be taught the historical roots and implications of imagery and the power of making a statement. Looking back at the America’s Meat Roundup poster, we can see that the metaphor that is included with that of beef is...*fascism?* To

Style, whether a personal signature or generic distinction, is a vehicle for communicating an idea or message; it is not the idea or message itself. Even the most stylized design should be built on a solid foundation.

Steven Heller

illustrate the point from my own experience, I know of an upper level design student that was working on a poster for

an African-American student group on campus. She went to the library, found

a poster designer that she admired, scanned in an image of a poster that she thought would work, erased the typography, and put in the typography that she was given by the student group. I wonder about the ethics and thought process that take place in an instance like this. The student obviously cared about what imagery she was placing before an audience with the visual imagery for her poster. But the idea of using a previously successful idea was something that seemed very important to her. The



lack of critical approach is what I am concerned about. For her to steal the image from the poster and use the successful tropes and metaphors from the original and assume that her finished product would communicate the same message not only shows a lack of respect for her own work and ideas, but also demonstrates the lack of critical ability to think through visual problems. Mimesis and dominance seem to be the issue here. If we turn to someone like Theodor Adorno, who talks of art having a spirit:

...art participates in the actual movement of history in accord with the law of enlightenment: By virtue of the self-reflection of genius, what once seemed to be reality emigrates into imagination, where it survives by becoming conscious of its own unreality. The historical trajectory of art as spiritualization is that of the critique of myths as well as that toward its redemption: The imagination confirms the possibilities of what it recollects. (Adorno 118)

Looking back at the DataPlay materials, one can see not only a tendency to copy

fashionable and acceptable forms, but a desire to accept and copy a dominant and established style for stereotypes of race, gender and youth. The mimetic function here borrows from the success of previously tested and reified designs and stereotypes. The problem would then be that of designing objects that express something of worth that are challenging but at the same time approachable to a general audience without having to resort to the appropriation of past and successful imagery within advertising or graphic design in general. According to Adorno, the distinction between what is seen as, “The humiliating difference between art and the life people lead, and in which they do not want to be bothered because they could not bear it otherwise, must be made to disappear:

High on my wish list as a philosopher is a word which would express the secular equivalent of what Hegel refers to . . . as Spirit or Geist: something which stands to a culture as the self stands to its manifestations, through which it expresses itself, and through which it can be read by others. Arthur Danto

This is the subjective basis for classifying art among the consumer goods under the control of *vested interests*.” (Adorno 16-

17) The vested interests here are the quick pacing and quantity of the needs of businesses for visual imagery that they can identify with in the form of printed collateral and visual identification. Designers are caught in this crux of being overwhelmed with the creation of quality work. Copying dominant forms of imagery are sometimes the only way in which they can make deadlines under the constraints of time and billable hours. The breakneck speed at which businesses

need aesthetically designed objects seems ironic in this age of overproduction. Again, according to Adorno, "...in the age of overproduction the commodity's use value has become questionable and yields to the secondary gratification of prestige, of being in step, and, finally of the commodity character itself: a parody of aesthetic semblage." (Adorno 17) A critique of objects and mass art may be of interest here. "Any analysis of objects must ultimately imply an analysis of discourse about objects – that is to say, an analysis of promotional 'messages'..." (Baudrillard 164) Advertising therefore is the discourse about the object, yet is an object to be studied. Advertising comes up with slogans such as "It's your world, go with it!" Creative firms have a tendency to focus on the message when advertising products than what the message connotes in different areas of social hierarchy and stereotypes. The visualness of advertising was something that can be seen from places like Constructivism right after the turn of the century. "In 1924, ...they (Henryk Berlewi, Aleksander Wat and Stanley Brucz) introduced modern art forms to Polish society in industrial and commercial advertisements. Their brochure stated that advertising design and costs should be governed by the same principles that govern modern industry and the laws of economy. Advertising copy was reorganized for conciseness and impact, and visual layout was adapted to the text." (Meggs, 285-286) Advertising was now treated as an industry in the market place like that concrete objects. The fetishization of the advertising object is of particular note here. The object being described by the advertising object or its discursive element can now be addressed as

personalizing the object to a subject. Jean Baudrillard illustrates this idea with an example of Father Christmas:

We are for all the world like children in their attitude towards Father Christmas. Children hardly ever wonder whether Father Christmas exists or not, and they certainly never look upon getting presents as an effect of which that existence is the cause: rather, their belief in Father Christmas is a rationalizing confabulation designed to extend earliest infancy's miraculously gratifying relationship with the parents...into a later stage of childhood. That miraculous relationship, though now in actuality past, is internalized in the form of a belief which is in effect an ideal extension of it. There is nothing artificial about the romance of Father Christmas, however, for it is based upon the shared interest that the two parties involved have in its preservation. Father Christmas himself is unimportant here, and the child only believes in him precisely because of that basic lack of significance. What children are actually consuming through this figure, ...is the action of a magical parental solicitude and the care taken by the parents to continue colluding with their children's embrace of the fable. (Baudrillard 166–167)

This description of objects and how they relate to a parental and mythological figure is interesting. The advertising industry, with the leitmotif of interesting typographic and layout with precise control of the advertising copy seems to have ignored the social sphere in which they survive. It would seem that in a capitalistic society such as ours, the largest buying public is essential for products to be produced, purchased and consumed. The sexist imagery that is seen throughout advertising places men in a position of power over those that could be considered “less than”. In order to have the largest buying public at all is to have the equality of all sexes, races and ages. That is far from the type of culture that we are continuing. So what is the emphasis on design and advertising as they maintain social stereotypes? Again, I think the emphasis

on teaching style, not
representation. One
of mind not one of
embodiment.

**...I'm in the, kinda in the market, of the neighborhood
of a something, like some Levitocously,
Deuteronomous sort of a catastrophic lunch-box
Stetson...** Tom Waits

This duality of mind and body can then be looked at in two ways. Again if we looked to Walter Benjamin, art in the age of the reproduced original is placed in two categories: political art and aestheticized politics. the advertising world has a firm grip on the latter, but also participates in the former in some instances. As Benjamin argues, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” (Benjamin, 222) Since we have looked at a concept of authenticity of the individual, looking to the embodiment as the concept of an artifact may be of interest. The duality between mind and body, authenticity and reproduction, male and female, exist within the sphere of design and advertising in all forms of media. Only a few designers have acknowledged any sort of difference whatsoever when it comes to images of representation. The interesting thing about design is that it is mostly women oriented. Possibly derived since the image of males are seen as the holders of authentic creation, therefore anything that was the *verso* of creation is reproducibility. Tibor Kalman is a prominent figure due to his scrutinizing use of form and typography to create new layouts and new understanding of what he is representing. “Many designers believe that design is the end product, To me,

design is merely a language, a means to an end, a means of communication. The question is, what do you communicate— Burger King or something meaningful?” (Faralley, 8) This idea of meaningfulness I think is of particular note here in conjunction with the idea of the duality between mind and body. Design works within a social system that acknowledges bodies and recreates bodies as means, not ends. Mimetic function works in this area in that, “This identification carried out by the subject was ideally not that of making the artwork like himself, but rather that of making himself like the artwork.” (Adorno, 17)

What seems in order then is to open up codified rules, to make new forms of signification through the use of advertising. Gayatri Spivak, I think has a good example to follow in her idea of catachresis. “‘Catachresis’ is a ... local, tactical manoeuvre, which involves wrenching particular images, ideas or rhetorical strategies or of their place within a particular narrative and using them to open up new arenas of meaning (often in direct contrast to theory conventionally understood meanings and functions).” (Moore-Gilbert, 84) This seems exciting to me. A new system of signification that can take place in all forms of media that may be able to destroy old systems that are no longer socially relevant as well as opening up systems into ones of difference. As Gatens argues, “ This calls for not only a politics of difference – which seems the obvious register in which to analyze class, race and sex differences – but also for an ethics of difference – which would be capable of acknowledging that different forms of embodiment are themselves historical and open to change.” (Gatens, 104)

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