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Criticality in Graphic Design

Clare Bell

Finding herself caught between the supposedly opposing camps of practice and theory, designer and researcher Clare Bell here makes a case for increased criticality in contemporary graphic design.

Pervading the contemporary culture of Western society and functioning as a mediator at almost every point of visual communication, it is inarguable that graphic design bears considerable social responsibility. And yet, although it is generally acknowledged that through the process of graphic design socio-cultural content is created *intentionally*, that it can be generated as an unintended by-product of graphic design is a less examined aspect of the practice.¹ Broadly speaking, graphic design is more frequently *described* than analysed² and is predominantly discussed by its practitioners in terms of its history, formal design characteristics and craftsmanship—usually with reference to client objectives, intended audience and general level of communication efficacy. Little research is carried out from within the practice itself to explore the ways in which graphic design both conveys and becomes imbued with social content, or to establish the impact of its social and cultural production.³

The socially embedded nature of design has been acknowledged by journalists, design historians⁴, cultural theorists, anthropologists, linguists and sign theorists (who “have demonstrated the extent to which the subject is constituted by social structures, languages and codes”)⁵. Yet, as a practise, design has “traditionally been concerned more with the production of things rather than their analysis and interpretation.”⁶ While the object-status of graphic design products cannot be denied, the limiting effect of critiquing graphic design from the partial view of artefact (both material and immaterial), or end-product alone, is that it restricts a full exploration of the societal role of graphic design. The acknowledgement of this dimension is key to establishing how graphic design mediates the relationships between significant discourses of

¹ Michael Rock, “Can Design be Socially Responsible?” in *Looking Closer – Classic Writings on Graphic Design*, eds Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller and D.K. Holland (New York: Allworth Press, 1994), 192

² Sue Walker, *Typography and Language in Everyday Life, Prescriptions and Practices* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 5.

³ Andrew Howard, “There is such a thing as society,” *Eye: The international review of Graphic Design*, Vol. 4, No. 13 (Summer, 1994).

⁴ R. Bestley and I. Noble, *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design*, (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2005), 27.

⁵ John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*

society and culture, and also to how both the process and products of the activity of graphic design participate in, and are actually constructive of society itself.⁷

Although the subject of “social responsibility” or socially responsible design appears frequently in graphic design discourse,⁸ the meaning of the term “social responsibility” is often restricted to, or used as, a taxonomic description or classification of the content being mediated via graphic design: for example, graphic design’s contribution to the potency of visual advocacy of a specific “socially responsible” project. However, the precise mechanisms through which graphic design can be understood and apprehended as a form of social production responsible for the cultural reproduction of social relations remain to be established.⁹

Graphic design has been described as an “insular profession”¹⁰ producing “cyclical yet unproductive design arguments.”¹¹ And yet it has a remarkably prolific publishing output in the form of trade magazines, journals and books many of which lavishly illustrate and detail its chronological history or serve as collections that collate and celebrate the visual output of its practitioners.¹² However, it is still a fact that from *within* the field the number of critical, academic or peer-reviewed texts and conference papers produced is limited compared to such output from other visual disciplines, (film, fashion, architecture or fine art, for example). Although there is a nascent body of work of this kind,¹³ at present graphic design writing predominantly emanates from the industry’s practicing luminaries who produce, in the main, journalistically styled pieces. These are, in disciplinary terms, introspectively focused on analyses of form, and are largely comprised of works that in essence aim “to nurture the professional graphic designer’s practical expertise.”¹⁴

⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage, 1997), 1; Paul Du Gay, *Doing Cultural Studies The Story of the Sony Walkman*, (London: Sage, 1997), 3.

⁸ See C. Peters, “First Things First 2014 A Manifesto”, <http://firstthingsfirst2014.org/> retrieved 04-03-2014; Poyner et al, “*First Things First Manifesto*,” *Eye: the International review of Graphic Design*, Vol. 9, No. 33 (Autumn, 1999); The Living Principles, “*The Living Principles, Creative action for collective good*,” <http://www.livingprinciples.org/framework/roadmap/>, retrieved 15/02/2014; J. Stone and L. Rigsby, *A Client’s Guide to Design in Design Business and Ethics*, (New York: Richard Grefé, AIGA, 2009),18.

⁹ Andrew Howard, “There is such a thing as society”, *Eye Magazine: the International review of Graphic Design*. Vol. 4, No. 13, (Summer, 1994).

¹⁰ Matt Soar, *Graphic Design/ Graphic Dissent: towards a cultural economy of an insular profession*, (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2002), 1.

¹¹ Erica Nooney, *The Silence of the Swastika: Uncovering Absence and De-mythologizing Modernism in Contemporary Graphic Design Discourse* (AIGA, 2007), 28.

¹² For a sample of the nature of the writings under review, see the website of the Allworth Press, publishers of the *Looking Closer* series at www.allworth.com and *Eye: the International review of Graphic Design*.

¹³ For example see the journals *Visual Communication* (London: Sage Publications, 2002–present) and *Visible Language* (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1967–present).

¹⁴ Audrey Bennett, “*Meta-Design Inquiry An analysis of a participatory symposium*”, (New York: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2006) 3. Retrieved from <http://www.rpi.edu/~bennett/meta.designinquiry.pdf>, 03/01/2008.

The number of exceptions to this general rule is increasing slowly,¹⁵ but it remains the case that their appearance is sporadic and intermittent, with little of the material generated becoming integrated into the particular, or dominant, discourses that constitute the “locus” of knowledge utilised daily by practitioners or in the studio pedagogy of the field.¹⁶ Critic Rick Poyner, while enthused by “signs of industrious scholarship”¹⁷, makes the observation that “so little of this material is likely to make it into the field’s everyday discourse, let alone the public realm. Many of these writers will be familiar names to colleagues but unknown outside academia.”¹⁸ Because peer-reviewed research does “not tend to be highly valued by those engaged in practice”¹⁹ this has resulted in a situation where, “what exists is an intellectual chasm between practice and research with practitioners leading the way”.²⁰ Hence, with regard to the compilation of reading lists, the selection of content for design festivals, and the acceptance of submissions for conferences, this leaves us in the unenviable position of having no established criteria by which to select material. Instead of starting the discussion at a level that examines or evaluates each prospective text equally, within an established critical framework, we are more likely to fall prey to the construction of a knowledge base that meets the needs and presents the views of dominant groups and subjectivities.

Typographic historian Robin Kinross argues that the academic discussion of “design in general, is too often hermetic and unreal: in unholy partnership with the proud anti-intellectualism of many practicing designers”.²¹ Arising, perhaps, out of this lack of explicitly theoretically-informed practical work or scholarly writing emanating from within or through practice, has been the development of a perception (in the public and commercial realm) of graphic design as a marginal activity that with regard to the creation of content can contribute only at a secondary level—without the ability to perform at a primary or a constituent level within society. Too often it is viewed in the terms of its utility or application as an “add-on”²² enjoying only enjoying

¹⁵ Notable exceptions can be seen in the work of critical practitioners such as Jan van Toorn, WD+RU, Russell Bestley & Ian Noble, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville among others, whose work and nature of practice is outlined in Soar *Graphic Design/Graphic Dissent*, 71–111.

¹⁶ Nooney, *The Silence of the Swastika*, 28.

¹⁷ Rick Poyner, “The Closed Shop of Design Academia”, *Design Observer*, (2012), <http://observatory.designobserver.com/feature/the-closed-shop-of-design-academia/33658/> Retrieved 30/06-/2013

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ AIGA Design Educators Community, *Dialectic: A Proposed Journal for the Design Community*, AIGA (2014) <http://educators.aiga.org/dialectic-a-proposed-journal-for-the-design-community>, Retrieved 14/04/2014.

²⁰ Audrey Bennett BENNETT, A “The Rise of Research in Graphic Design”, in, *Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design*, ed. Audrey Bennett, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 14.

²¹ Robin Kinross, “Fellow Readers: Notes on Multiplied Language” in *Looking Closer 2*, Allworth Press, 1997, 19.

²² Lucienne Roberts, “Being Good,” *Eye: The international review of Graphic Design*. Vol. 16, No. 62 (Spring, 2007).

“ancillary status”²³ to an objective that is external²⁴ to its central function, which is, fundamentally, the production of meaning: for example in the marketing, promotion and communication of a third party message. This perception overlooks the fact that graphic design is already both a “participant and product”²⁵ of cultural communication and social interaction—with social and cultural agency. Downs addresses this lack of critical substance, characteristic of the profession: “*Graphics, as a culture, does not know what it knows.*”²⁶

The lack of criticality evident throughout graphic design practice has had a number of concrete effects. Firstly, in terms of education and research, there is yet to develop a solid epistemological or methodological position around which the discipline itself substantially coheres. Hence, the spectrum of rigorous and well-established methods from which the prospective researcher can select is rather narrow. Nor is there general agreement on the ontology of graphic design— and what seems to constitute the subject, terminologically speaking, suffers from what has been described as a “a certain incoherence.”²⁷ Added to this, the tendency for design schools to separate practice-based studio work from the theoretical and historical elements of student’s education²⁸ contributes to a lack of synthesis between the two areas which may limit the facility of many students and designers to systematically set forth the processes involved in the creation and interpretation of visual communication, or to write on the subject with ease. The situation is similar with regard to the apprehension of the social production of design, as highlighted by Ewan who writes, “Designers are primarily aware of their work as a selling device; there are few connections made to the socio-aesthetic tradition from which their profession was born. An aestheticism that separates images from social concerns dominates not only the thinking of practicing designers but also the curricula of most design schools.”²⁹

Secondly it may have caused a limited appreciation or awareness of the significance and value of the expertise and craft of graphic design in a number of spheres. Because of—and

²³ Gui Bonsiepe, “A step towards the reinvention of Graphic Design,” in *The Graphic Communication Handbook*, ed Simon Downs (Oxon: Routledge, 2012),10.

²⁴ Roberts, “Being Good.” For example, “Unlike the graphic designer, who looks for a kind of communication that is in relation to the nature of the message and of the presumed receiver, the client’s concerns and existence are elsewhere, outside of the communication process.” Pierre Bernard, “The Social Role of the Graphic Designer”, in Association Graphique Internationale, *Essays on Design I: AGI’s Designers of Influence*, (London: Boothe-Clibborn, 2002). Available at: <http://backspace.com/notes/2009/09/the-social-role-of-the-graphic-designer.php>. Retrieved 15/02/2012.

²⁵ Anne Burdick, “Neo-mania,” *Émigré Magazine* No. 24 (Winter, 1992).

²⁶ Simon Downs, “It’s all about communication: graphics and cybernetics,” *Kybernetes: The international journal of systems, cybernetics and management science*, Vol. 36 No. 9/10, (2007), 1287.

²⁷ Gui Bonsiepe, “A step towards the reinvention of Graphic Design,” 12.

²⁸ Prasad Boradkar, “Theorizing Things: Status, Problems and Benefits of the Critical Interpretation of Objects,” *The Design Journal* Vol.9, No. 2 (2006), 6.

²⁹ Stuart Ewan, “Note for the New Millennium: Is the Role of Design to Glorify Corporate Power?” in *Citizen Designer Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, eds Steven Heller and Veronica Vienne (New York: Allworth Press, 2003), 192

despite—the foregrounding of commercial imperatives at the expense of theoretical reflexivity at the heart of contemporary practice, research opportunities have yet to develop that might explicate and substantiate the merit and benefits of the craft. These could make a significant, positive impact on the extent to which design, and its practitioners, are valued (and remunerated) by the commercial business and industrial sphere. In turn this would, in fact, protect against some of the more exploitative and corrosive practices that one may encounter during a career in design as it currently stands.

An increase in reflexivity would lead to the strengthening of diagnostic abilities for the discipline itself, and hence the development of its capacity to be accountable, socially responsible and, in turn, to fully and successfully advocate for its own activities and practice. It would expand research opportunities to capture the tacit, or intuitively derived, aspects of its knowledge base and, with this increased capability to engage with the wider academy, would rescue what is now a relatively impoverished resource in terms of its academic literature.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that graphic design is currently undergoing a crisis of confidence and may be losing its grip on an autonomous sense of self-worth, a situation exemplified by one commentator who writes, “Something is wrong, and it’s time to reassess the philosophy of our profession, and its meaning as it stands today. It’s time to remove the mouldy rot before the business of design is further trivialised and humiliated.”³⁰ Well, unless the discipline begins to develop and engage with criticality seriously, it is missing out on opportunities to comprehensively address this situation. We owe it to the future of the discipline, to the next generation of practitioners and ourselves to acknowledge the field of graphic design for what it really is—in all its negative, but more importantly, positive aspects. The time to embrace criticality has come.

Clare Bell

³⁰ Gareth Stone, “Can you still make a living in design? Or would you be better off serving coffee?” *Design Week*, (3–9 August, 2015): <http://www.designweek.co.uk/can-you-make-a-living-in-design-or-would-you-be-better-off-serving-coffee/> retrieved 10 August, 2015