Graphic Design in the Postmodern Era

By Mr. Keedy

This essay was based on lectures presented at FUSE 98, San Francisco, May 28, and The AIGA National Student Design Conference, CalArts, June 14, 1998. It was first published in 1998 in *Emigre* 47.

Any discussion of postmodernism must be preceded by at least a provisional definition of modernism. First there is modernism with a capital "M," which designates a style and ideology and that is not restricted to a specific historical moment or geographical location. Modernist designers from the Bauhaus in Germany, the De Style in Holland, and Constructivism in Russia, share essentially the same Modernist ideology as designers like Paul Rand, Massimo Vignelli, and Eric Spiekermann. Its primary tenet is that the articulation of form should always be derived from the programmatic dictates of the object being designed. In short, form follows function.

Modernism was for the most part formed in art schools, where the pedagogical strategies were developed that continue to this day in design schools. It is a formalist, rationalist, visual language that can be applied to a wide range of circumstances. All kinds of claims can and have been made in an effort to keep Modernism eternally relevant and new. The contradiction of being constant, yet always new, has great appeal for graphic designers, whose work is so ephemeral.

Then there is the modern, with a small "m." It is often confused with Modernism with a big M, but being a modern designer simply means being dedicated to working in a way that is contemporary and innovative, regardless of what your particular stylistic or ideological bias may be. Modern designers who were not necessarily Modernist would include designers like Milton Glaser, Charles and Ray Eames, and Tadanori Yokoo.

With all the confusion in these early days of formulating theoretical paradigms, it is understandable why some designers have given up trying to connect their practice to contemporary theory. By the time postmodernism came along, many designers were quite happy to dismiss it as a trendy fad or irrelevant rambling, and be done with it. That is exactly why I think it is important to examine some of the connections between the postmodern condition and graphic design.

Although there has always been some confusion about what postmodernism is, the most obvious feature is that it is a reaction (not rejection), to the established forms of high Modernism. The second most prominent feature of postmodernism is the erasing of the boundaries between high culture and pop culture. But probably the most contested feature is that of "theoretical discourse," where theory was no longer confined to philosophy, but incorporated history, social theory, political science, and many other areas of study, including design theory. Postmodernism is not a description of a style; it is the term for the era of late capitalism starting after the 1940's and realized in the 1960's with neo-colonialism, the green revolution, computerization and electronic information.

Postmodernism didn't have much impact on graphic design until the middle of the 1980s. Initially, many designers thought it was just undisciplined self-indulgence. A hodgepodge of styles, with no unifying ideals or formal vocabularies, dreamed up by students in the new graduate programs. But in fact it was a new way of thinking about design, one that instigated a new way of designing. Designers began to realize that as mediators of culture, they could no longer hide behind the "problems" they were "solving." One could describe this shift as a younger generation of designers simply indulging their egos and refusing to be transparent (like a crystal goblet). Or you could say they were acknowledging their unique position in the culture, one that could have any number of political or ideological agendas.

The vernacular, high and low culture, pop culture, nostalgia, parody, irony, pastiche, deconstruction, and the anti-aesthetic represent some of the ideas that have come out of the 80s and informed design practice and theory of the 90s. After the 80s designers may still choose to be anonymous, but they will never again be considered invisible. We are part of the message in the media. In the postmodern era we are not just mediators of information, but individuals who think creatively and visually about our culture.

Although Jan Tschichold has been celebrated as an early proponent of modernist asymmetric typography, designers have increasingly come to respect his earlier calligraphic and latter classical work. Tschichold's body of work is an important precedent for today's postmodern typography in that it represents diversity in ideology and style. It was one that ranged from craft-based calligraphy and machine-age modernism to neoclassicism.

Another important precursor to postmodernism was W. A. Dwiggins, a designer who translated traditional values and aesthetics into a modern sensibility. He was a tireless experimenter with form, who took inspiration for his work from eastern cultures, history, and new technology. Unlike Tschichold, Dwiggins never embraced the Modernist movement nor was he deified by it. However, he was absolutely committed to being a modern designer.

Although Dwiggins's and Tschichold's work seems to have little in common, there is a similarity in how their work was initially misrepresented. Tschichold was celebrated as a Modernist typographer, which downplayed his more substantial body of design and writing based on traditional and classical ideas. On the other hand, Dwiggins has always been represented as a traditional designer in spite of the innovative and experimental nature of most of his work.

It has only been in recent years that discussions of Tschichold and Dwiggins have expanded to include the full scope and plurality of their work. That is because the postmodern context has encouraged diversity and complexity, and given us a critical distance to assess Modernism and its ramifications. In the postmodern era, the line dividing modern and classical, good and bad, new and old, has, like so many lines in graphic design today, become very blurry, distressed and fractured.

In the late 80s, an anti-aesthetic impulse emerged in opposition to the canon of Modernist "good design." It was a reaction to the narrow, formalist concerns of late Modernism. It staked a larger claim to the culture and expanded the expressive possibilities in design. The new aesthetic was

impure, chaotic, irregular and crude. A point that was so successfully made, in terms of style, that pretty much everything was allowed in the professionalized field of graphic design, and from then on typography would include the chaotic and circuitous as options in its lexicon of styles. In fact, most of the formal mannerisms of the late 80s have continued to predominate throughout the 90s. But now it's no longer an ideologically relevant, or even new style - now it's just the most popular commercial style.

In 1989 I designed a typeface to use in my design work for experimental arts organizations like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and CalArts. I called the typeface Bondage Bold. Rudy VanderLans saw it in some of my work and wanted to sell it through Emigre. After adding a regular weight, normalizing the spacing, cleaning up the drawings (with Zuzana Licko's guidance), and changing the name to Keedy Sans, it was finally released on an unsuspecting public in 1991.

I designed Keedy Sans as a "user," simply based on a vague idea of a typeface that I had not yet seen but wanted to use in my graphic design. Most typefaces are logically systematic; if you see a few letters you can pretty much guess what the rest of the font will look like. I wanted a typeface that would willfully contradict those expectations. It was a typically postmodern strategy for a work to call attention to the flaws and artifice of its own construction. But I never thought of it as being illegible, or even difficult to read. I have never been very interested in pushing the limits of legibility for its own sake. Absolute clarity, or extreme distortion, is too simplistic a goal, and it is ground that has already been well covered. I wanted to explore the complex possibilities that lie somewhere in between and attempt to do something original or at least unique.

At the time I had been using the American highway Gothic typeface in my design work that I cut and pasted from a highway signage manual. Another vernacular influence was the "f" from the Fiat logo. But I was not only quoting low vernacular sources; it was important that I mixed in high design sources as well. So I was thinking about Akzidenz-Grotesk Black, which was somewhat exotic in America, because I liked Wolfgang Weingart's typography. Overall I wanted a typeface that was similar to Cooper Black, extremely bold with a strong idiosyncratic personality. I think it is a very postmodern typeface in that it included "high" and "low" vernacular quotation, and it is self-consciously crude and anti-aesthetic in reaction to the slickness of Modernism. The initial reaction to Keedy Sans was that it was too idiosyncratic, it was "ugly," hard to read, and too weird to be very useful. It's hard to imagine that kind of reaction to a type design today. I guess nobody really cares any more.

In 1993, Keedy Sans was still able to cause a bit of controversy among graphic designers, and it was starting to be a popular typeface for music and youth-oriented audiences. Its popularity slowly but consistently grew; by 1995 it was starting to look pretty legible and tame compared to other new typefaces on the market. Eventually even the big boys in the corporate world were no longer put off by my typographic antics, and Keedy Sans made its way into the mainstream world of corporate commercialism by 1997.

Eight years later, it is no longer considered an illegible, weird, deconstructed, or confrontational design. Now it's just another decorative type style, one among many. Its willful contradictions are only what is expected in design today. I still think it is an interesting typeface; that's why it's a shame that now it signifies little more than the banality of novelty. Nowadays that seems to be all a designer can expect from their work.

Resisting mainstream pop banality is an outdated attitude that only a few designers of my generation worry about anymore. Now most graphic designers need results fast; formal and conceptual innovations only slow down commercial accessibility. It is hard for a generation raised in a supposedly "alternative" youth culture, which put every kid from Toledo to Tokyo in the same baggy pants and t-shirt, to believe that relevant forms of expression can even exist outside of pop culture. Today's young designers don't worry about selling out, or having to work for "the man," a conceit almost no one can afford anymore. Now everyone wants to be "the man." What is left of an avant-garde in graphic design isn't about resistance, cultural critique, or experimenting with meaning. Now the avant-garde only consists of technological mastery: who is using the coolest bit of code or getting the most out of their HTML this week.

Resistance is not futile; resistance is a very successful advertising strategy. The advertising world co-opted our desire for resistance and has been refining it in pop culture since the 60s. After the 60s, advertising was never the same. It was the end of the men in the gray flannel suits. To this day ad agencies are full of middle-aged "creative directors" who talk and dress like twenty year-olds. They exploit an endless supply of new, cutting edge design talent to sell the same old stuff. By comparison, graphic designers were less successful at using resistance as a vehicle for changing attitudes in their profession in the 80s. That is because most designers did not want anything to challenge their continuity with a design canon they had so recently constructed. The only thing that the design establishment in the 80s was interested in resisting was new ideas.

That is why ultimately the strategies of resistance to Modernist dogma and the critique of the *status quo*, from the late 80s, only led to what is currently referred to as the ugly, grunge, layered, chaotic, postmodern design of the 90s. Only now there is little opposition and no resistance to what is an empty stylistic cliché. What I had hoped would be an ideological victory over the tyranny of style mongering, devolved into a one-style-fits-all commercial signifier for everything that is youth, alternative, sports, and entertainment-oriented. The "official style of the hip and cool" will probably be with us for some time, as it is easy to do and little has been done to establish any standard of quality.

There have never been as many books published on contemporary typography as in the past few years. Ironically, in spite of all these new type books, there has never been less of a consensus as to what is of interest or value in typography. Although these books are fun to look at, you would be hard pressed to find any significant discussion, criticism, debate, or even explanation in most of them. They include anything and everything except critical, informative, and qualitative analysis. This new cornucopia of type books is not the result of a sudden renaissance in typography, but the result of the publishing industry's ability to recognize and develop a commercial market. They have no interest in "separating the wheat from the chaff," so all this new work has just become "more grist for the publishing mill."

One of the reasons Jan Tschichold went back to traditional center axis typography was because when it was done by less skilled designers, he thought it resulted in less offensive work than when the more demanding asymmetrical modernist typography was poorly done. Unlike traditional or Modernist typography, typography of the postmodern era has not up to this point been clearly articulated, much less canonized, making that type of qualitative judgment difficult at best. This situation has led some designers to simply dismissing it all as garbage.

Even though the current publishing craze may be helpful as self-promotion for a few designers and a design aid for the creatively challenged, it may have done more damage than good to the promotion of typography as a sophisticated or discriminating craft. Fortunately, on a much smaller scale, some critical and historical ideas are still being disseminated, in spite of the smaller financial rewards. Some design history, criticism and theory has managed to get published in recent years, but compared to the picture books, graphic designers aren't buying it.

The practice of graphic design has from the beginning been intertwined with pop commercialism, but that does not mean that our values and ideals, or the lack of them, have to be dictated by the commercial marketplace. Just because thinking about design isn't a popular activity doesn't mean it isn't an important one.

Graphic designers *love* new things, and new things love graphic designers - like fire loves wood. Graphic designers loved the new international corporate culture. But it was the advertising industry that ultimately won the partnership with multi-national corporations. Then graphic designers loved the new desktop publishing. But it took away a lot of our low end projects, gave us the additional responsibility of typesetting and pre-press, shortened our deadlines, and ultimately reduced our fees. Now graphic designers love the new Internet. But maybe this time we should stop and ask: "Does the Internet love graphic design?"

Perhaps the Internet will simply co-opt graphic design, incorporating it into its operating system. Maybe graphic design will cease to exist as a discreet practice and just become another set of options on the menu. Or is graphic design just a lubricant that keeps everything on the info highway moving - are we just greasing the wheels of capitalism with style and taste? If graphic designers play a major role in building the bridge to the twenty-first century, will they be recognized for their efforts? Do you remember typesetters?

Graphic design's ephemeral nature has practically disqualified it from serious consideration as an important cultural practice. For most non-designers, historical graphic design is valued as nostalgic ephemera, while contemporary design is viewed as sometimes amusing, but mostly annoying, advertising. Graphic design is not generally accepted as having the cultural significance of other less ephemeral forms of design like architecture, industrial design, and even fashion. This is due largely to its short life-span and its disposable ubiquity. Will the even more ephemeral and ubiquitous media of film titles, television graphics, and the Internet create greater awareness and respect for graphic design, or will such familiarity only breed contempt?

New media is a practical embodiment of the theoretical paradigm established by poststructuralism. It was an idea about language, communication and meaning before it was ever a technology. But now it seems that the technology has eclipsed its *raison d'etre* and it exists outside of any theoretical critique. The often quoted cliché is that the new media requires new rules and the old assumptions do not apply, even though somehow the old consumers do. Curiously, the new media has not yet developed a new theoretical paradigm, or even a new lexicon, to comprehend this ideological shift. Ironically, the new buzzword is a familiar old standby from grammar school art classes - it's all a matter of "intuition."

Although intuition is a satisfactory explanation for a five-year-old's crayon abstractions, it's a bit weak for describing the computer-graphic-multinational-imperialism that is reshaping our global culture. Intuition is a generic term for a perceptive insight that is arrived at without using a rational process. It is a way of saying "educated guess" without defining the education of the "guesser." That one's source of inspiration could be unknowable, or at least indescribable, after the death of the author, and at the end of history, is understandable in these postmodern times. But the unwillingness of graphic designers to recognize their indebtedness to history, education, and their peers is not. At this juncture in its history, graphic design practice needs a more rigorous and responsible discourse. Maybe we should leave "instincts" and "intuition" to our furry friends; then we could reinstate history, education and current practice as our center for critical reflection, discourse, and inspiration.

Theoretical and conceptual discourse in graphic design has always been a bit naive compared to older more established cultural practices. For example, all designers have been, and continue to be taught, the history of type design in terms of the five families of type: Oldstyle, Transitional, Modern, Egyptian, and Contemporary. This nineteenth century terminology devised by type founders is completely out of sync with period classifications used in the humanities. As such, it disconnects type design from our general cultural history. Given this type of foundation, it should come as no surprise that contemporary design discourse is also out of sync with that of architecture, literature, and art.

Graphic designers are caught up in a media stream that is very wide and fast, but not very deep. The only way to navigate in it is to go faster or slower than the stream. To go faster you must be at the forefront of technology and fashion, both of which are changing at an unprecedented rate. To go slower you need an understanding of context through history and theory. Graphic designers are predisposed to going faster or slower according to their experience and inclination, but mostly they are getting swept along in the currents of pop mediocrity.

How we communicate says a lot about who we are. Looking at much of today's graphic design one would have to conclude that graphic designers are twelve-year-olds with an attention deficit disorder. Designers today are representing our present era as if they were using a kaleidoscope to do it. Or more precisely, a constantly mutating digital collage machine, filled with a bunch of old "sampled" parts from the past, and decorated with special effects. Ultimately what we are left with is a feeling of aggravated and ironic nostalgia. This electronic Deja-vu-doo is getting old, again.

Maybe now it is time to dive below all the hype and sound bites of the advertising industries media stream, where graphic designers can have the autonomy to set their own course, even if it means swimming against the current now and then. Postmodernism isn't a style; it's an idea about the time we are living in, a time that is full of complexities, contradictions, and possibilities. It is an unwieldy and troublesome paradigm. However, I still think it is preferable to the reassuring limitations of Modernism.

Unfortunately most graphic designers are currently not up to the challenge. A few postmodern ideas like deconstruction, multiculturalism, complexity, pastiche, and critical theory could be useful to graphic designers if they could get beyond thinking about their work in terms of formal categories, technology, and media.

In the postmodern era, as information architects, media directors, design consultants, editor/authors, and design entrepreneurs, we have been chasing after the new and the next to sustain excitement and assert our growing relevance in the world. But inevitably the cutting edge will get dull, and the next wave will be like all the previous waves, and even the new media will become the old media. Then the only thing left will be the graphic design, and what and why we think about it.

Bibliography

A Tribute To W.A.Dwiggins: On the Hundredth Anniversary of his Birth, Privately Printed for Friends of Hermann Puterschein, At The Inkwell Press, New York, 1980.
Jan Tschichold: a Life in Typography, Ruari McLean, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997.
The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change, David Harvey, Blackwell, Cambridge MA and Oxford UK, 1990.
The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism, Thomas Frank, The University of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1997.

From Text to Hypertext: Decentering the Subject in Fiction, Film, the Visual Arts, and Electronic Media, Silvio Gaggi, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1997
Hyper Text: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology, George P. Landow, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1992.
Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History, Robin Kinross, Hyphen Press, London, 1992.
The Origins of Graphic Design in America, 1870-1920, Ellen Mazur Thomas, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997.
Graphic Design: Reproduction & Representation Since 1800, Paul Jobling and David Crowley, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1996.
Design Without Boundaries: Visual Communication in Transition, Rick Poynor, Booth-Clibborn Editions, London, 1998.
Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism, Victor Margolin, The University of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1989.
Design Culture: An Anthology of Writing from the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design, Steven Heller and Marie Finamore, Allworth Press, New York, 1997.
Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design, Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller and DK Holland, Allworth Press, New York, 1994.
Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design, Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller and DK Holland, Allworth Press, New York, 1997.

Mr. Keedy is a designer, writer, type designer, and educator who lives in Los Angeles.