

# Response and Responsibility: Promoting Responsible Thinking in Graphic Design Education

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Now, more than ever, it is essential that students of graphic design take responsibility for the messages portrayed in their work. Current social and political climates demand considered, well-researched and articulate items of communication. Ignore this responsibility and our future design professionals run the risk of repeating the errors of a recent past: items of design that offend, pollute or simply misinform.

Graphic design has a short history. While in practice for a hundred years, it is only in the last fifteen that any real academic attempt has been made to theoretically analyse it. The other arts have centuries of practice and theory to defend them. But despite its youth, it is an art with massive impact. Graphic Design is everywhere. Whether we, as the public, are aware of it or not, we engage with it daily, from admiring the exquisite elements of our *Apple* products, to navigating our way through the pages of a daily newspaper, to disposing of our empty packaging into its appropriate recycle bin.

To engage with art or theatre we often need to seek it out: to go out of our way to admire it. According to the National Gallery of Victoria's most recent annual report, 2 million people visited the Gallery in 2004/2005. Recent circulation figures conducted by Fairfax Media indicated that over the same period 1.4 million people read *The Herald Sun* and its associated free publications every Saturday. This equates to 73 million readers per year of one days publication of one newspaper. Graphic design has an enormous audience, and its responsibility to that audience cannot be understated. I fear however, it has become so much a part of our existence we have come to take it for granted - perhaps, too much so. As the saying goes: familiarity breeds contempt.

## **Advertising, the digital revolution and political correctness**

To truly gauge the impact of graphic design and understand why it is vital that its education be so cautious, we need to examine its Western origins. Through doing this, three major transitions in its development will be identified that have resulted in its derision by those who choose to see graphic design only as a thoughtless, shallow and commercial practice; an attitude that students of design need to vehemently challenge.

Firstly, where it began. The term 'Graphic Design' originates from one William Addison Dwiggins, author of *Layout in Advertising*, published in 1928, in which he used the term to describe the practice of manipulating type and image into persuasive messages (Heller & Balance, 2001). Graphic design in the West was born of the formidable twentieth century phenomenon called advertising, and to this day has some difficulty shaking off the '*tool of capitalism*' taint (Heller & Balance, 2001:295). Its existence as an art independent of its origin began in the '50s, but despite its many years of independence, separating graphic design from advertising can be a difficult task.

As graphic designers we cannot really deny our past. It's a little like being petulant teenagers endlessly embarrassed by the brashness of their parents. But, for most designers the association with advertising is distant and best severed from current practice. Advertising is a persuasive force; graphic design is the pursuit of ideas that communicate (Heller and Balance, p. 295). Both have a commercial basis.

The teaching of graphic design needs to engage with its history and this includes advertising. Early advertising provided a living to an enormous number of talented artists, illustrators and typographers, including such revered icons as René Magritte, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Piet Zwart, Norman Rockwell and Andy Warhol. Advertising is responsible for some of the greatest visual statements of our time: James Montgomery Flagg's *Uncle Sam* whose accusing pointed finger encouraged thousands of young men towards an untimely death; and the DDB Needham *Volkswagen* campaign of the '60s that introduced the 'people's car' of the Third Reich to American consumers who just 15 years previously had considered all things German abhorrent. The promotion of everything from cars to world wars was in the hands of the advertising moguls and their storehouse of extraordinary talent.

While it nourished the development of graphic design, advertising is also to blame for many misconstrued perceptions of it.

As part of the process of learning the value and responsibility of a public voice, students of design must be made aware of the damage poor public communication is capable of. By default the advertising industry provides the best examples of these, largely because they are the ones most scrutinised in the media and by such watchdogs as the Advertising Standards Bureau.

Graphic design is a mirror to contemporary culture. It is important that practitioners and students be critically engaged with that culture and its ever-shifting values. Students of design need to look at all forms of public imagery, question them and challenge them if necessary. Advertising imagery provides a familiar and easily accessed means of learning this notion of critical analysis.

Fortunately, some of the worst offenders of inappropriate and thoughtless communication are taken to task in the daily press, providing students with easily digested text critical of irresponsible messages.

Recently, a newspaper report on the inquest into the death of Diana Brimble directed scathing criticism at the advertising for the Pacific Sky cruise ship on which she died, from toxic levels of the date-rape drug GHB. The ad promoted the ship as a haven for predatory men, tagging the cruise: *'More girls. More sun. More fun. There's nothing else a guy needs to know'* (*The Age*, June 14, 2006, p.6).

Even more disturbing was another ad campaign that followed the death of Ms Brimble. A row of bikini-clad women was tagged: *'seamen wanted'* (*The Age*, June 14, 2006, p.6); a cheap, tasteless and sexist play on words that should never have gone further than the notepad of its author.

Similarly, in 2000 the infamous campaign for Windsor Smith shoes resulted in several column centimetres in our daily press critical of its content. Not only did this provide students with sufficient evidence of the consequences of inappropriate and sexist content, but the consequences of blatant plagiarism as well. On June 4, 2000, *The Sunday Age* published the original image on which the ad was based alongside the weak defence of the woman responsible for it: *'It's not copying. It's called appropriation'* (*The Sunday Age*, June 4, 2000, p.26).

Students should be encouraged to be vigilant about all the images and messages they find. Not all advertising comes under public scrutiny, especially that which is buried in seemingly harmless and disposable youth culture publications. One such example was published in the diminutive *Large* magazine in April 2000. The advertisement was for a brand of semi-expensive men's clothing popular among the 18-35 year age group. The image shows a young man lifeless upon his bed, blood dripping from his forearm and neck. A bloodied message is smeared on the back wall: *'help me'*. Diagonally along the side is a razor blade embellished with the brand name and the copy: *'cut sharp'*. This is an obvious and tasteless reference to the then apparent increase in youth suicide among young men. At the time youth suicide was a familiar topic in the mainstream press. According to the *Queensland Prevention of Suicide Strategy 2003-2008*, the national rates of suicide to 1999 had increased specifically because of the increase in suicides amongst young men, with the highest mortality among this group being aged between 25 and 34.

To utilise this information to sell shirts seems at best ludicrous, and at worst irresponsible and reprehensible.

But this is advertising, not design. Designers don't engage in such inappropriate message making... Fast forward to 2006 and peruse the July issue of *ID* magazine, a long time favourite

of design students for their brave and unconventional approach to publication design; a favouritism I was prepared to encourage until recently. Historically, *ID* did re-invent the magazine genre under the directorship of Terry Jones. It challenged the staleness of established mastheads with confronting and raw type and imagery.

Issue number 267, titled *Fashion Has No Mercy*, stepped over the mark of 'unconventional' and fell well into 'irresponsible'. A disturbing fashion shoot dominates its prestigious centre pages. In it, frighteningly realistic body parts appear severed and bloodied in the shelf of a refrigerator and a grubby sink: a hand adorned with a Marc Jacobs watch, a leg capped with an expensive sandal, and – personally - most disturbing, a severed piece of human head, hair sticky with flesh and blood, is the carrier of a *Dior* earring. Culturally, we live in an era tolerant of realistic and disturbing representations of human depravity. Movies like *Hostel*, *Saw* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* paved a bloody path to an odd acceptance of this genre. But this is a magazine, uninhibited by its classification sitting alongside *Vogue* and *House and Garden*. Surely this depiction of fashion accessory as the hapless adornment of a woman brutally dismembered and stored in a fridge cannot be justified.

To not look critically at one's own industry is in its own right irresponsible. To be led blindly by its leading lights is dangerous and careless.

## **The digital revolution**

The arrival of the digital revolution in the mid '80s changed the practice of graphic design irrevocably. For some it gave voice and freedom. Unshackled by production costs, small studios and individual designers, were now able to contribute valuable content to the visual landscape of the late Twentieth Century. Respected practitioners and design theorists like Paula Scher, Michael Bierut, Steven Heller and Ellen Lupton truly advanced the practice of good graphic design with the aid of new technologies. At home in Australia, young designers like Michael Trudgeon and the late Robert Pierce took the opportunity to challenge the design establishment with their newfound freedom of design production.

But this development had its nemesis. Anyone with a home computer, access to more software than was safe, a printer and a disc of clip art could - and did - claim the title of *graphic designer*. The result was an abundance of ill-conceived and poorly informed design. Their creators could hide behind a façade of aesthetic digital trickery with little regard for concept or content. It diminished the masterful achievements by such industry greats as Saul Bass, Abram Games, Paul Rand, Cipe Pinellis, Alexy Brodovitch, Lester Beall and the many others who, since the '50s, had breathed credibility and respect into graphic design.

Prior to the digital revolution dumb ideas were simply too hard or too expensive to produce. Photo retouching and commercial illustration were only employed if the outcome could be guaranteed as 'good'. The suite of Adobe products, while vital to the graphic design industry,

also brought with them the freedom and ease to produce average ideas, slickly rendered to appear valid.

This penchant for digital smoke and mirrors led directly to one of the greatest criticisms levelled at contemporary graphic design: as 'eye-candy', design in which only the aesthetic is important. The seductive qualities of computer-generated design are often the downfall of good student work. Even a good idea can sometimes be lost in the generic aesthetic of the digital age.

Students need to be encouraged to explore production methods that best communicate their idea. Good graphic design is good communication, be it a hand mark or digital line.

Students also need to learn skills in defence. Aesthetics *are* an important part of the business of graphic design, and defending their aesthetic decision making in reference to their communication task is vital. Why should a poster for Hiroshima Day be diminished because it dares to unite a beautiful and sensitive illustration with the horror of the event? Should a poster for International Women's Day continue to draw on the decades of suffrage clichés when there are other ways to celebrate the event? Does a poster for Pink Ribbon Day need to reference the thousands of deaths suffered by Australian women each year from breast cancer, or is it more important to make this new initiative appeal to the widest audience possible through a skilled and beautiful manipulation of image, typography and technology?

## **The demise of political correctness and the future of graphic design**

As already stated, graphic design is a mirror to contemporary culture. If unchecked it could stand victim to some of its less appealing aspects. The power of political correctness is slowly eroding. The term that has stood caretaker to the rights of minority groups, women and critical thinking for the last thirty years is, itself, under fire. Our own prime minister, in a recent attack on the English syllabus in Australian schools, declared it a 'victim of post-modernism and political correctness' (*The Age* April 21, 2006, p.3). A victim? Without political correctness we stand to become victims of attitudinal change more reminiscent of the past than a progressive future.

Students of graphic design, like most tertiary students, are young. A large number of them are female; almost all of them are from middle class backgrounds. Currently the average birth year of near-graduates is 1985. Mercifully for them, they have never endured the years of legitimate unequal pay, insulting objectification, illegal sexuality, and publicly-accepted stereotyping. They missed *Big M* commercials in which bikini clad women would lick milk seductively from the corners of their mouths or let it dribble erotically between their breasts. Nor have they enjoyed the testosterone charged powers of the *Marlboro Man*, or the sticky, sickly dribbling of the *Solo Man*, after he charges through the rapids in his kayak.

Recently political correctness has been blamed for the stifling of creativity and the right to be sexy. But, if it preserves us from reliving the horrors of mid-'70s advertising, long may it remain.

I fear however, this battle may well be lost. Even the '70s didn't push the boundaries of tasteless objectification as much as the new millennium demon: 'branding'. *Lee* and *Gucci* are just two of major fashion brands whose recent publicity has even the most tolerant of fashion commentators gasping. Terry Richardson's *Lee* campaign and Mario Testino controversial *Gucci* branding deliberately intend to raise more than an just an eyebrow.

However, advertising cannot be seen as the sole demon in this erosion of hard-fought-for rights against insult. Several examples of design, especially in the alcohol industry, have served a severe slap to political correctness in recent years. Will any of us ever recover from the *Cougar* re-branding? And from the same studio came *Pure Blonde*, a beer designed for younger men and especially younger women. Why? Because it doesn't make you fat. It can still make you drunk and silly and capable of misjudgement, but at least you'll keep your figure. Even the name is suggestive of dumbness: the empty-heady but pretty blondes of '70s era sit-coms like *Man About the House*. This product has caused a stir in the industry, but not outrage. In 2005, it took out the bronze award in the annual Melbourne Advertising and Design Club awards for best packaging.

As the laws of physics have taught us, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the practice of graphic design, there are always interesting dissidents prepared to challenge mainstream thinking: Historically, we can reference the montages of John Heartfield, and, more recently, the *Ad-busters* spoofs that use wit and humour to highlight the ridiculous visual claims of modern advertising. *Guerrilla Girls* use well-researched facts and figures on which to base their iconic images and statements. *Inkahoots* use their extraordinary design skills and political commitment to subvert attitudinal stagnation and benefit the modern needy: the unemployed; the working poor; aboriginals; trade unions and the environment. In the learning of responsible thinking, examples such as these are imperative to every design education.

## **Case studies of student projects**

As a teacher, you come to admire the thinking of your students. When the energy of youth merges with intellectual maturity, you feel the future of your beloved industry is in safe hands.

Between 1994 and 2004, final year students of Visual Communication at Monash University produced an annual calendar specifically for the local graphic design industry. I inherited the project in 2003 and promptly needed to find a topic as yet unexplored in the preceding eight years. The history of graphic design in Australia is not well documented. We wax lyrical about the achievement of European and American practitioners but often forget the industry has a breadth of historical achievement at home. So the topic was determined: students had to unearth information and images regarding a group of designers they did not know and were, in some cases, dead. On completion *Pre-cursor* was, I thought, a triumph. The history of the industry was being acknowledged, students were discovering local design heroes, it was the first calendar that required students to write about their subject, and its publication subsequently

educated a large number of current practitioners about their predecessors. While the end result is good, on its completion an oversight became evident. Of the fourteen designers featured only three were women. Looking back through the collection of calendars, women represented only 25% of the featured designers over nine years.

The theme for the tenth and final calendar was obvious: 'The History of Women in Australian Design'. But even this presented thematic difficulties that perhaps reflect more on the nation's history than its design provenance. Most of the women were white, Anglo Saxon and middleclass. There are no indigenous designers or migrants, unless you count those that easily passed through the rigors of the insidious White Australia policy. It may be some time before students pour through the annals of their profession without noticeable omissions based on gender, race or class.

Dealing with sensitive or controversial topics must be addressed in any design education, whether through academic curriculum or self-initiated ventures. Armed with a sufficient body of research and a degree of courage students occasionally create designs that forever permeate my own design psyche, with a slightly jealous taint of 'damn, I wish I had thought of that'.

When I began teaching in the late '90s I took on the coordination of the first year students. I set their final project as a response to any social issue that they felt needed addressing. They then undertook the appropriate research in order to produce a well-informed solution. Most submissions were energetic but understandably young, clumsy and lacking in maturity. Except for two.

One student had followed diligently the social impact of a newly opened casino complex. His discoveries of child abuse, financial ruin, alcoholism, predatory sexual behaviour, assault and suicide seemed to contrast dramatically with the promotion of it as a family entertainment complex. He continued his research further and began a series of interviews with casino staff, principally cleaners. As the first into hotel rooms and public amenities, cleaners often make the gruesome discoveries of suicide victims. Statistics gathered by Lifeline indicated that 60% of problem gamblers had experienced some level of suicidal thought, and that it was common for them to have one or more failed suicidal attempts ([www.wesleymission.org.au](http://www.wesleymission.org.au)). It is also predominantly a male problem.

This was a difficult topic to confront but one he did with economy and impact: A silhouetted man, grey and anonymous, holds his fingers to his head to form a mock gun. On the opposite side explodes an arrangement of red dots positioned to resemble the logo of the casino. The communication is succinct and immediate without need of excess and brutal detail.

The second student was a young woman who toiled over a cross-stitch piece of typography: *'Australian Women's average weekly earning total 66% of men's.'* Her reference to the historical

practice of middle class women diligently and silently occupying their hours with cross-stitch cleverly highlights the unforgivable preservation of women as a working underclass.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, why is it so important that graphic design be responsible? Surely we are intelligent enough to dismiss the consequences of bad design and there are enough avenues to vent our displeasure should we be offended by it. We can report inappropriate content, write letters to the editors of newspapers, or we can simply stop buying a product. Graphic design is often seen as a softer discipline, the consequences of which are easily remedied. After all, it doesn't change the world if its wrong, does it?

In 2000, a woman named Theresa LePore redesigned an inexpensive piece of disposable graphic design. LePore was the Florida County supervisor of elections, and her design was the now infamous butterfly ballot. The 2000 presidential election hung on the results from Florida with only 300 votes between the leading candidates: Al Gore and George Bush.

In a well-intentioned attempt to make the type bigger for Florida's enormous ageing population she increased the type size and placed the candidates in two columns, side by side (Holland, p.97). Because of the confusion of the design, thousands of voters, many of them elderly Jewish retirees, accidentally voted for the staunchly right wing and anti-Semitic Pat Buchanan ([www.everything2.com](http://www.everything2.com)). While this obviously didn't win Buchanan the election, it most certainly lost the presidency for Al Gore. The insult to the thousands who discovered that their inadvertent vote went to someone they so dislike can also not be overlooked, and the rest of us can only ponder at the different political landscape had the error not occurred.

'Graphic design is important. It may not save the world, but when it goes wrong it can certainly help to [mess] it up.' (Grant, [www.inkahoots.com.au](http://www.inkahoots.com.au))

With approximately 200 graduates from tertiary graphic design programs entering the public arena each year in Victoria alone, it is imperative that they are suitably armed with the intellectual capabilities required to produce responsible design solutions. An awareness of gender and sexual politics, cultural and religious sensitivities and ecological impacts are just some of the issues contemporary designers will face in an average design career. Graphic design must transcend a mere concern with aesthetics and be a responsible and valued contribution to an already cluttered visual landscape. Whatever our students add, it must be of value.



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