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HOW HAS THE CONCEPT OF GRAPHIC DESIGN CHANGED AS A RESULT OF COUNTERCULTURAL DESIGN WORK IN LATE 20TH CENTURY BRITAIN?

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FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

MASTER OF GRAPHIC DESIGN AND TYPOGRAPHY

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This dissertation is an examination into the ways in which countercultural design work in Britain has helped to shape the definition and possibilities of graphic design.

The work draws upon three important movements in countercultural design and then looks at the way in which these events shape the postmodern re-evaluation of the subject.

First, I examine designer Ken Garland's 1964 *First Things First* manifesto which called for a change in priorities for spending on design away from advertising lead work towards more socially beneficial practices.

Next I look at the transgressive aesthetic of punk graphics and specifically punk zines where the self-publishing culture enabled by new technologies was used to create an anti-authoritarian design aesthetic.

Following on from this I look at the protest posters David King produced for the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Anti-Nazi League. Key themes which emerge are the deliberate use of impoverished production methods and the idea of branding a protest movement.

Having looked at these examples I examine how countercultural design movements have influenced postmodern ideas of deconstructionism and a shift in design education, culminating in the appointment of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville at Yale University in America. This was a decisive break with modernism and had clear influences from countercultural graphic practices.

Finally I assess the impact of countercultural practices on our contemporary notion of graphic design.

Chapter 1: Introduction

To start with I wish to ask a fundamental question and then look at the ways we might try to answer it. The question is simple: What is graphic design? The answer is complex and as we shall see arguments about its definition have raged for decades.

To begin with we need to look at where the term 'graphic design' originated. Its first use is attributed to W. A. Dwiggins in an article entitled *New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design* in 1922[1].

Dwiggins distinguishes three classes of printing: 'plain printing; printing as a fine art; and a third large intermediate class of printing more or less modified by artistic taste.' (Dwiggins, 1922, republished in Bierut, et al. 1999, p.15) Into this third class of printing he places advertising design:

> Its function is to prepare the ground for selling something, or to sell something directly itself. By hook or by crook, by loud noise or subtle argument, it might fulfil its mission of getting something sold. (ibid, p.16)

Dwiggins felt this new class of design was suffering from a confusion over the place of art within it. He criticised advertising designers who 'pile up ornament like flowers at a funeral' (ibid, p.17) and felt that the term 'art work' within the advertising industry had confused designers as to the content they should be producing.

He wanted to separate this form of printing from 'fine art printing' and 'plain printing' in order help designers do a better job. He realised that this form of work had different demands and needed to develop its own processes:

> The printing-designer's whole duty is to make a clear presentation of the message – to give it every advantage of arrangement – to get the important statements forward and the minor parts placed so that they will not be overlooked. This calls for an exercise of common sense and a faculty for analysis rather than art. (ibid, p.17)

[1] Steven Heller in *Looking Closer 3* cites Dwiggins as the originator of the term.

It is tempting to assume that this third category of printing is what Dwiggins means by graphic design. But actually he only uses the term once in the article:

> Advertising design is the only form of graphic design that gets home to everybody. (ibid, p. 16)

This suggests that Dwiggins had a wider conception of the term graphic design than might be assumed on first reading. The real significance of his article is the separation of forms of printing and the different requirements for each.

It is a significant moment because for graphic design to become a distinct discipline it required effort to entangle it from related subjects.

The problem with Dwiggins' system is that it does not have a place for design which is not plain printing, fine art or advertising work. Works like Wainwright's walking guides or Harry Beck's London Underground map do not find a place within the scheme.

So from the start the definition of graphic design is troubled, even so the importance of creating a category of design with its own rules had been established.

During this dissertation I shall be looking at designers who have worked outside Dwiggins' three categories. I shall be attempting to argue that such design work has opened out the possibilities for the subject and has helped to improve our understanding of what graphic design is and what it might become.

The dissertation is bookended by Ken Garland's 1964 manifesto *First Things First* which was updated a put out again in 2000 by the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*.

The manifesto was a concise and strongly worded public call for design to be about more than advertising. The time between the two manifestos provides a convenient period to assess the shifts and rebellions within design practice and will allow us to see how the term 'graphic design' has changed.

My particular focus is on countercultural design work. By this I mean designers working outside the mainstream who used design to question authority. This includes protest posters, the punk music movement and finally the postmodern revolution in the arts.

Chapter 2: First Things First

Ken Garland's *First Things First* manifesto called for a shift of priorities for graphic designers from advertising towards socially beneficial purposes

Graphic design has a long association with advertising. Even before W. A. Dwiggins formulated the term it was being employed in a commercial context.

In post-Second World War America graphic design was pressed into the service of industry and advertising. There the commercial artist's function was to sell, but many designers justified the profession in terms of boosting the economy and thus aiding society.

Designer Paul Rand argued:

> Even the graphic artist by 'selling' a product helps secure jobs as well as profits. Under these circumstances it becomes a matter of social responsibility for the commercial artist to have a clear and firm understanding of what he is doing and why. (Rand and Rand, 1960, republished in Bierut, et al. 1999, p.141)

But even in America some designers questioned the orthodoxy of graphic designer as 'commercial artist' by suggesting a designer's work should have a higher function. In 1949 the Hungarian émigré to America, György Kepes, emphasised the importance of design functioning for the benefit of man:

> Has not our concern for the efficiency of the detail led to the neglect of the efficiency of the most important design, the design of man as an individual and as a member of society? It is a brutal paradox of our age that by concentrating all efforts on material products the very heart of all those achievements is neglected; the producing man, the active man, man's happiness, growth, and promise. (Kepes, 1949, republished in Bierut, et al. 1999, p.100)

In Britain socially minded designers were also questioning their role in society.

In 1963 designer Ken Garland attended a conference put on by the Society of Industrial Artists[2]. There was a debate going on about why graphic designers should join the society.

[2] The society has changed its name several times over the years and is now known as Chartered Society of Designers. According to the group's official website it changed its name to the Society of

Garland was angered by the assumptions being made about graphic design. He said: 'The manifesto was meant to be an alert to the fact that monies, which were pouring into visual communications of all sorts, seemed to be going down the wrong channels. There were all sorts of things that we could have been about and we weren't' (Odling-Smee, 2007, p.65)

Many of the trade magazines at the time focused on advertising and the society itself valued designers who could help sell products, but did little to recognise work outside of this remit. Garland believed passionately that designers should have loftier ambitions and decided to make a stand.

He wrote a draft manifesto and asked to read it out to the conference. In that speech he called for a shifting of priorities:

> In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on … We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes. (Garland, 1964, republished in Garland, 1996, p.30)

The speech was well received at the conference and was published in 1964 in several design journals as well as *The Guardian* newspaper. The manifesto was signed by numerous leading graphic designers.

Garland's aim was to switch the priorities of graphic design into areas not driven by profit. He later summed this up in a short document written for the University of Reading:

> How can we, with any moral justification, say to our colleagues and our students in communication design, 'First, develop and employ your skills in the cause of marketing and selling; then, and only then, may you devote what is left of your time (if any) to some secondary pursuit'. Given this assumption, there could be no graphic art, no design for books and periodicals, no film making, no photoreportage, until there had first and foremost been design for

Industrial Artists *and Designers* in 1963, the same year as Garland gave his speech. However Garland and supporting literature (including Bierut, et al, 1999, p.154 and Odling-Smee, 2007, p.65) all refer to the group by its former title.

> marketing and selling, since these arts derive communication skills. (Garland 1987, republished in Garland, 1996, p.88)

A number of designers misunderstood what the manifesto was arguing for. Garland later insisted the manifesto was not anti-advertising or primarily about an ethical attitude. Garland identifies himself as a socialist. He recognises that in a capitalist system designers need to work in a commercial context, which will often mean advertising, and he suggests that designers should not be coy about this.

He delivered a speech for the *Design for Survival* conference in New York in 1967 in which he said that all paid work is related to keeping the capitalist system going, either directly by increasing a company's profits or indirect by supporting a public service which in turn is financed by the capitalist system which it supports:

> So when I think about my work in the short term I always have in mind this fact: that financial profit is the spur to industrial initiative, the reward for commercial achievement, the balm for battered professional consciences; and that lack of financial profit is a sign of failure, no matter what. (Garland, 1967, republished in Garland, 1996, p.37)

His urge was to make designers admit they are working within the capitalist system and not to pretend that design work can be separated from the product being advertised.

He railed against the slogan 'the medium is the message'. For Garland design is inseparable from the message. So an advert for baked beans is a trivial work however great the design is, because the content itself is trivial. He said:

> The implication of the misleading slogan 'The medium is the message' is that those of us working in communication media may now treat with lofty condescension the initial content presented to us knowing that however trivial it may be we shall transform it into something significant; we can, in fact, welcome the triviality as being a fit challenge for our talents.
>
> This is eyewash. Respect for the content is an absolute requirement in our business, whether it is about baked beans, or the future of mankind, or what you will. (ibid. p.38)

Garland wanted designers to consider the messages they are asked to convey. He also wanted designers to consider work outside 'marketing and selling'.

He is a fan of Harry Beck's London Underground map and Wainwright's walking guides which gives an indication of the kind of socially useful graphic design work he would like to see receiving plaudits ahead of adverts.

The original *First Things First* manifesto was delivered at around the same time as independent design agencies like *Fletcher Forbes Gill* (established 1962) were popping up. Agencies working independently from advertising firms meant designers could begin to forge their own identities and choose the work they wanted to take on. It would also mean the big money from commercial projects could fund smaller, more socially beneficial or artistic work.

In some ways the manifesto can be seen as reflecting a move towards more independent design work and a call on these groups to consider their priorities.

The biggest change in the commercial world since the 1960s has been globalisation and with it global branding and marketing.

In the late 1980s the culture jamming movement was formed with the mission to subvert these global messages by graphically altering magazine adverts and billboards. The *Adbusters* magazine in Canada became one of its central publications and published pictures of subverted adverts.

The original message of *First Things First* struck a chord with the magazine's editorial staff who decided to update and reissue it at the end of the century.

In some ways the new manifesto makes its purposes a little clearer than in the original:

> Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best. (Barnbrook, et al. 1999)

The fact that the manifesto, even in modified form, is still seen as relevant today can be seen in both a positive and negative light. It shows designers are still aware of the problems with their profession becoming advertising led and are willing to rebel against it. But it also shows the commercial advertising world is still the dominate force in graphic design (it 'is how the world perceives design') ahead of more socially engaged work.

Chapter 3: Punk graphics and zine culture

New technologies in the 20th century opened the means to self-publication. Fanzines gave a voice to a new generation and opened up design to non-professionals. DIY zines were a perfect forum for the punk music scene as its amateur nature was easily translated into a reflection of the anarchic and transgressive politics of the music and fashion.

In this chapter I am looking at the growth of fanzines, which later became known as zines. These publications grew as a result of new technologies which meant that production, duplication and distribution of publications became cheaper and easier.

Cultural historian Stephen Duncombe defines zines as follows: '[Z]ines are non-commercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves.' (Duncombe, 1997, p.6)

The roots of zines can be traced to the political pamphlets which have a history stretching back to the early 16th century. Of particular note is Thomas Paine, whose political pamphlet *Common Sense,* published in America between 1775 and 1776, called on American citizens to fight for independence.

Political pamphlets could be very influential, but the authors had to overcome numerous hurdles including the cost for printing and distributing the material, running the risk of arrest (if the work was deemed treasonable) and of course finding a sympathetic printer.

Modern zines share DNA with political pamphlets, they have independence from the mainstream book and newspaper press and as such can contain material which would be deemed unfit for publication (because of its quality, subject matter, legality or just because it isn't commercially viable). But technology had made them much easier to produce and distribute.

Early technology which enabled fanzines to get a start in the 20th century included the mimeograph machine, invented by Thomas Edison and introduced in 1887 and the spirit duplicator (also known as the ditto machine) invented by Wilhelm Ritzerfeld in 1923. These devices were designed to be smaller and cheaper to run compared with existing print

technology. Nico Ordway has suggested that these devices 'led directly to the phenomenon of zines' (Ordway, 1996, p.187).

The earliest fanzines identified by historians focused on science fiction. From the 1920s onwards fan produced publications started appearing. Academic Teal Triggs identifies several early science fiction fanzines which could be seen as precursors to zines. These include *Amazing Stories* in 1926 and *Comet* in 1932 (Triggs, 2004, p.81).

A big technological breakthrough for zines was the photocopier. The process of Xerography was invented by a patent attorney called Chester Carlson in 1938 (Xerox Corporation, no date), but it was not until 1955 that Copyflo, the first entirely automated machine, was produced (Ibid).

It took time for the device to be commonplace enough for zine makers to take advantage and it was not until the late 1970s that the potential of the photocopier began to be exploited by zine creators.

Triggs observed in 2004 that since the 1970s the photocopier had remained the preferred means of zine production in the UK, in contrast with America where printing took over:

> In Britain, the majority of fanzines remain photocopied or if they are printed, retain the do-it-yourself and anti-institutionalised aesthetic established during the mid-1970s punk period (Triggs, 2004, p.108)

The photocopier became significant not just because of its speed and economy but also because of the design possibilities it enabled:

> The photocopier embodies certain qualities due to the nature of the process. For example, early machines often resulted in 'dimly streaked' effects, blacks were not fully black, and images were reproduced as high contrast, the outline of cut-n-paste inevitably featured, and so forth. (Triggs, 2004, p.107)

A recurring theme with underground or countercultural publications is that their aesthetic is often derived from the limited means of production. But this aesthetic can become a badge of honour, 'an image of amateurishness implying solid conviction, whereas a more polished result might suggest power, money and authority' (Hollis, 1999).

Zines enabled marginalised ways of life and interest groups to become heard. And they gave non-professional the chance to design.

Technology disrupted the strangle-hold of the printing / publishing trade and allowed a new generation access to publication. The ability to print before technology enabled much wider access to the process was at the mercy of printers. Often printers would refuse to print material because to do so would put them at risk of arrest:

> …As with 1960s radical broadsheets and underground comix, printers scrutinize the materials they are asked to print and will refuse if images or the content breeches obscenity laws. British laws in particular are written where all parties involved – producer, printer and distributors – could be sued for unlawful material. (Triggs, 2004, p.105)

The most famous example of this was when Richard Neville, Jim Anderson and Felix Dennis were all arrested, tried and imprisoned for the *School Kids* issue of *Oz* magazine.

Self-published zines allow the producer to take the risk on, and it is a hard sector to police because of the way they are distributed (often via post).

Zines were always an underground activity, and their actual impact on the wider population should not be over exaggerated. But I plan to show that their designs had a profound effect on the graphic design world.

There was a famous poster produced during the punk music movement:

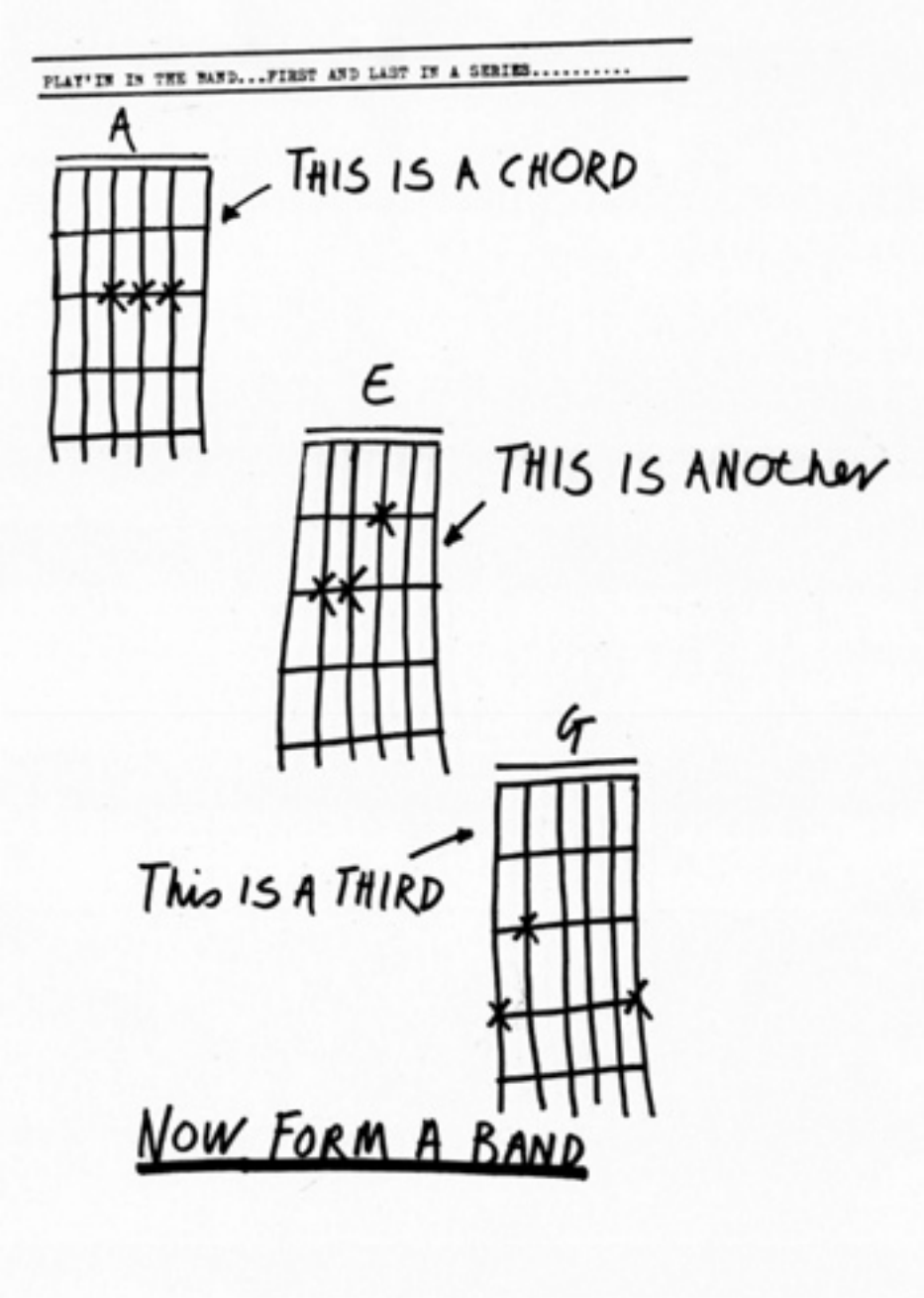

Figure 1: *Sideburns* zine 1976

This image encouraged readers to become musicians by just getting out there and doing it. Its message can also be applied to punk zines and fashion.

The idea that anyone could create music, fashion and zines was central to punk culture. The authority of professionalism was being knocked down. Duncombe said:

> The seamlessness of commercial culture and the technical virtuosity of high art encourages spectators/consumers to stand back and utter in awe, 'Wow. That's amazing. How did they do that?' Zines – with all their seams showing –

> encourage the opposite response, encourage you to come close, and say: 'I see how they did that. That's not too hard. Anyone can do that.' Commercial culture welcomes you into a relationship where you are alienated from any sort of reciprocal creativity; zines alienate you in order to welcome you back in as an equal. (Duncombe, 1997, p.129)

This questions the concept of graphic design as a professional practice. Do designers only learn to become 'good' in order to distance themselves from amateurs – to create work which is hard to imitate, that 'wows' viewers at how it was achieved?

The punk zine aesthetic set out to break the boundaries between amateur and professional by being deliberately transgressive and creating an anti-style.

This rule breaking methodology was not new, it had roots in Dada and Situationist International work:

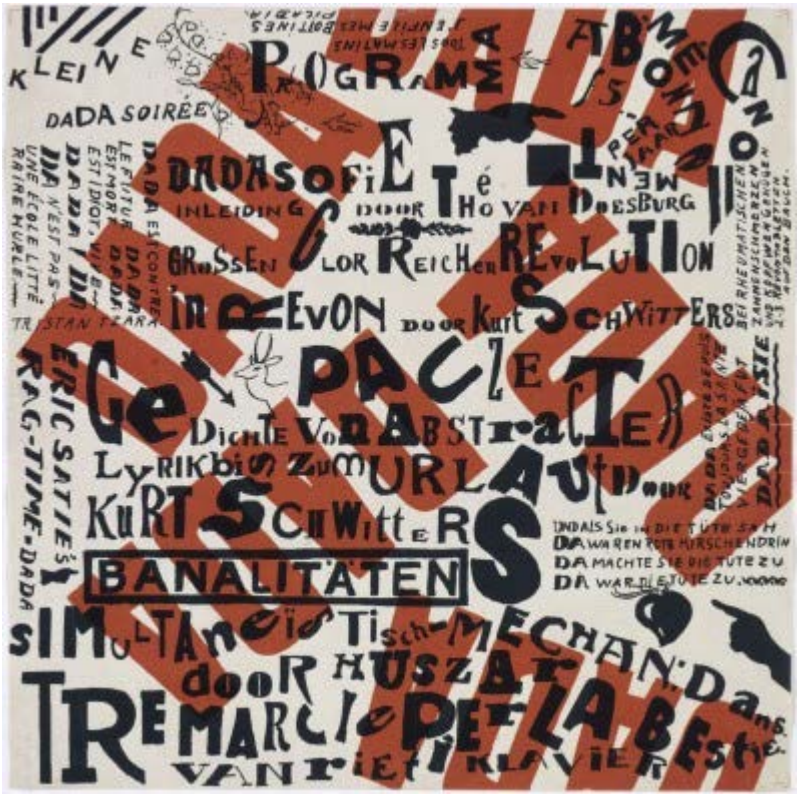

Figure 2: *Kleine Dada soirée* by Kurt Schwitters and Theo Van Doesburg, 1923

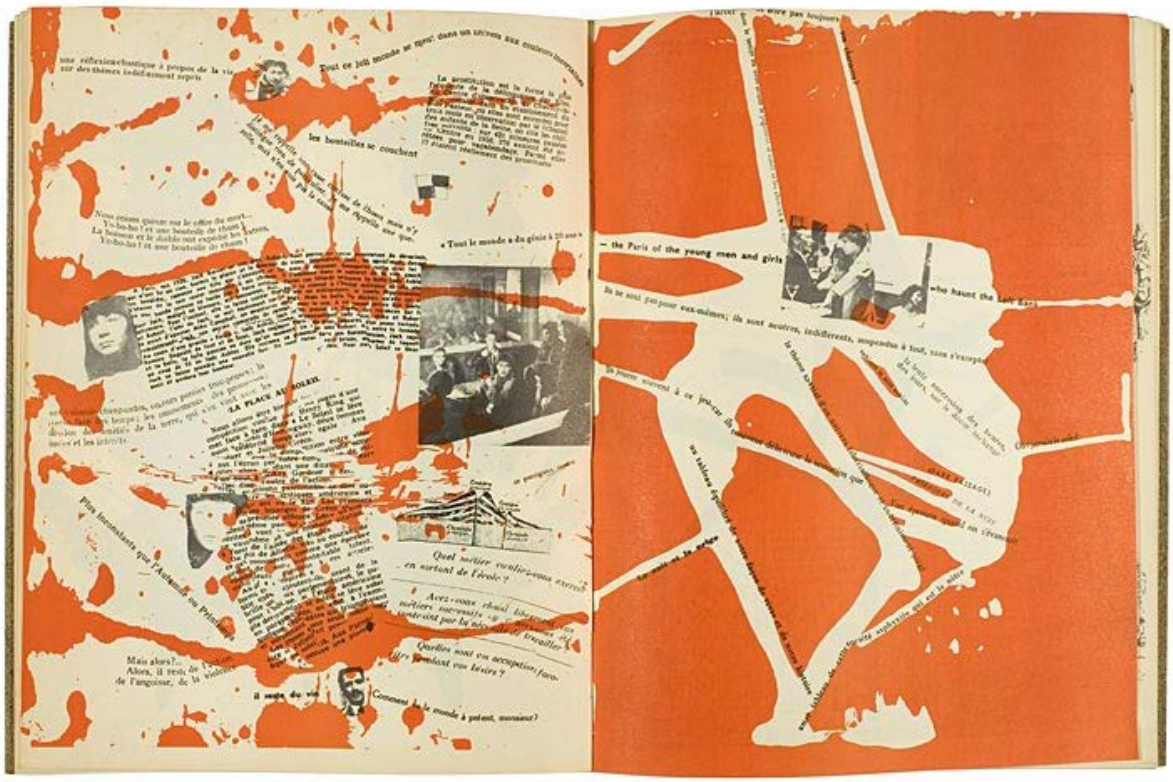

Figure 3: A page spread from *Mémoires* by Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, 1957

The first image is a poster advertising a Dada lecture and the second image is a spread from a Situationist book. Both show a similar chaotic typographic treatment to punk zine publications:

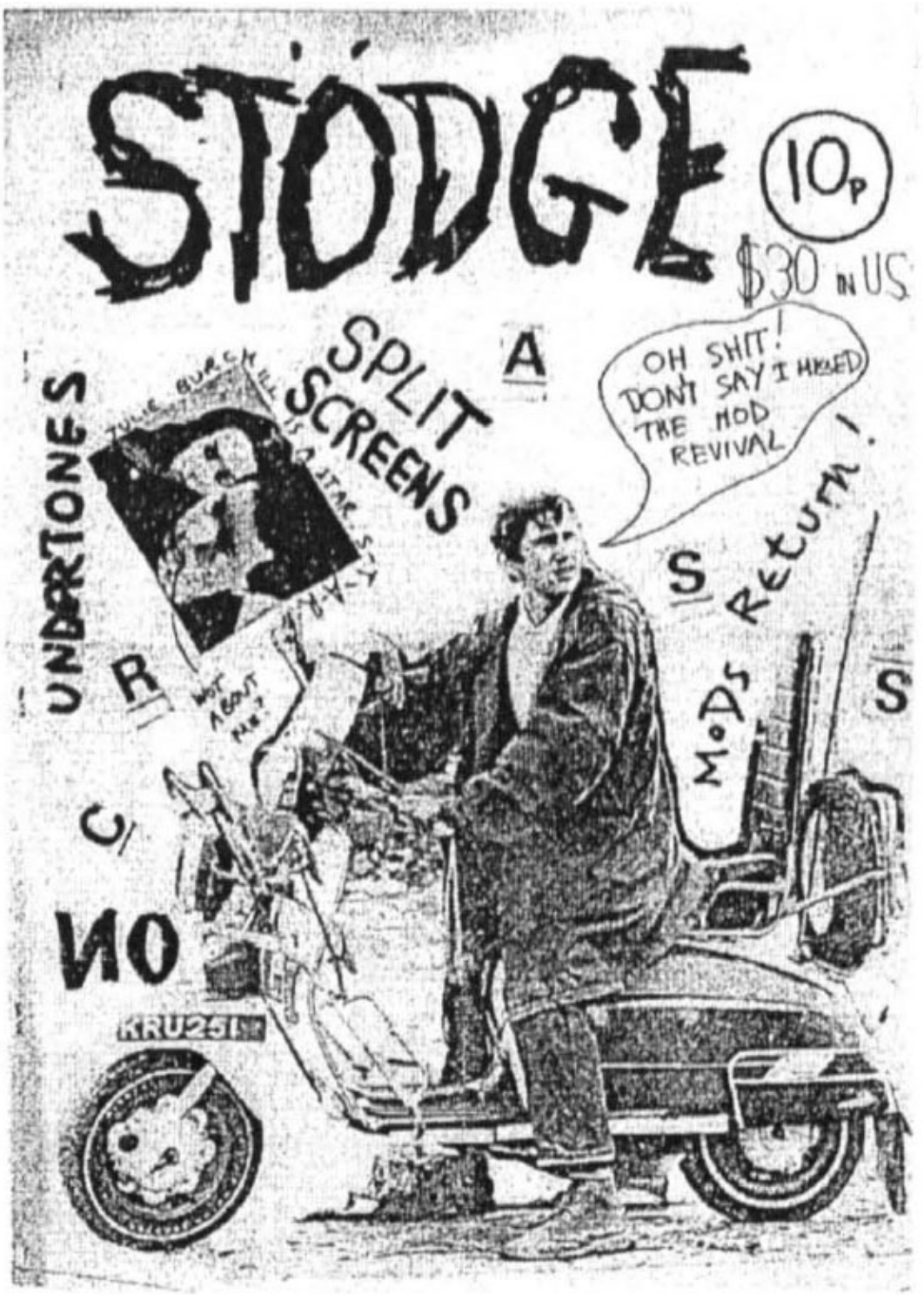

Figure 4: *Stödge* zine, 1979, Oxford, UK

Figure 5: *HAGL*, issue 19, 1990, Newcatle-Upon-Tyne, UK

So punk graphics have their roots in other art forms which sought to challenge authority. Dada started during the First World War as rejection of the forms of authority which had enabled and perpetuated the conflict. The Situationist International movement

was a socially revolutionary and anti-authoritarian organisation active between 1957 and 1972. Punk's style mirrors that of these earlier movements because it shares a similar anti-authoritarian political outlook.

But a key difference with the punk movement from these earlier styles was that it broke the rules in order to encouraged reciprocity. Its principal was do-it-yourself and the idea that anyone could take part.

In a similar way to earlier movements, the punk 'anti-style' negated one set of design rules, only to create and adopt new ones. Rather than being an 'anti-style' it is perhaps better to understand it as anti-authoritarian. It is a rejection of old rules and a sense of freedom – but of course freedom is always limited by resources. In this case it is also limited by the requirements of having to avoid the old rules at all costs.

And having started out as an anarchic and transgressive method, the punk 'anti-style' quickly became a style which was assimilated into the mainstream.

In a short period of time mainstream publication like Face and iD were incorporating the rule breaking ethos of punk graphics into their designs. However, shorn of its political content punk graphics become just another style to be used and abused.

The DIY ethos employed in punk design serves to show the ways in which protest graphics have shifted how design is thought about and taught. In the age of computers it is now easier than ever before for people to design their own publications.

More generally, the music, fashion and designs the scene produced forced people to confront their ideas of taste.

The last word goes to Ken Garland who realised the importance of visual literacy:

> These sensibilities are no longer the sole prerogative of a small group of privileged aesthetes, or those who have had the benefit of a design training. Indeed, the most vivid and productive innovation in our ways of dressing, designing and looking at one another was given to us – no, thrust upon us by the Punk or New Wave kids, with their eccentric behaviour, their torn fishnet stockings, their plastic bag dresses, their patched-up typography and their defiantly amateur fan magazines, or 'Fanzines'. (Garland, 1985, republished in Garland, 1996, p. 76)

By opening up design and encouraging DIY efforts punk zines had the effect of making the population more visually aware and presented professional designers with a challenge to their authority.

Chapter 4: David King – A house style for the radical left

David King created a graphic identity for the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Anti-Nazi League. The style was so strong it became synonymous with left-wing protest movements, becoming the closest these groups had to a house style.

Designer David King had a huge influence on the graphic identity of protest movements from the 1970s onwards.

When it came to his protest graphics, King's work shares many similarities with Soviet Constructivism. King has argued this was due to him working with similar constraints to those Russian designers:

> If you're working on the Left, then you run up against all the same problems: where's the paper coming from? Who's going to print it? You can have whatever ink you want, so long as it's black or red. When I worked more commercially, and could use four-colour, I did so. But the leftist stuff was governed entirely by a lack of money, materials and time. And that had been the same in Russia. (Wilson, 2003, p.62)

One of the ways in which protest graphics have affected graphic design has been the development of a style born out of limited finances and resources. Just as in the Paris student uprising in 1968 and with early Communist designs the lack of resources forced designers to employ cheaper means of production.

In the commercial world there is generally more money for good quality paper and a range of inks, but protest movements enforced a small palette. This has been a key feature of protest movement designs from Ken Garland's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament work through to David Gentleman's designs for the no Iraq war campaign.

Deliberately using low cost production and design methods becomes a way for designers to express a political standpoint. Robin Fior, who was one of King's lecturers at the London School of Printing and Graphic Arts, took this view. Designer Richard Hollis described Fior's standpoint:

> Poor technical standards had the effect of making a grafica povera – an image of amateurishness implying solid conviction, whereas a more polished result might suggest power, money and authority. On the contrary, the effect of printing on cheap, off white paper, on wrapping paper or the wrong side of tinted paper using worn wood type, was aesthetic … This 'roughness,' a solution to which Fior returned over three decades in trying to make messages 'open' and accessible, was common internationally. (Hollis, 1999)

The deliberate use of 'impoverished' techniques has the effect of conveying the values of the design. The objective is to make a point about the wastefulness of expensive techniques and to show the designer in alignment with the impoverished people he or she represents. It is also a way of creating a style in opposition to the styles used by authority and thus is a means of showing dissent to authority.

King's work was a conscious attempt to create a graphic identity for the left, in order to put the ethos on the map. In 1976, shocked by the riots and killings in Soweto, South Africa, King started to produce posters for the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The Anti-Nazi League was impressed by his work and asked him to design posters for their campaigns. It was the work for these two groups that established King's protest style. The designs employ dot-on-dot printing – a technique which had been used by King's friend Judy Groves on *Time Out* magazine.

Figure 6: *Apartheid in Practice: Law and Order* by David King for the Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1980

In the apartheid posters King used a design which resembles a DIY newspaper. He pasted lines of text which appear to have been taken directly from a typewriter, detailing the situation in South Africa. The posters are dominated by a central image which takes up the majority of the poster's space. The image on each poster varies according to the subject – but they are designed to shock and support the accompanying text.

As a whole, the black, white and red colouring and inexpensive paste-up technique supports the idea of a grafica povera, mentioned earlier, which conveys the idea that these designs have been created to represent the impoverished and oppressed population. It creates a stark image, designed to shock the viewer into engaging with what is going on in the country.

The posters look like hand-made newspapers, expressing the idea of an alternative press representing the point of view of the marginalised population.

The irony is that King's background as a designer on *The Sunday Times Magazine* was at the opposite end of the spectrum from DIY newspapers. It suggests that King was deliberately using an impoverished style to create an aesthetic in opposition to the mainstream newspaper media of South Africa.

King's Anti-Nazi League posters, on the other hand, dispensed with the typewriter text and became more graphic productions. The simple motif of National Front = Nazi Front played on the similarity of the initials 'NF' with a swastika. These designs were if anything more constructivist than the apartheid posters. They made use of the characteristic slanted text and strong contrast between black, white and red colours. The amount of text is reduced and is used as a graphic symbol.

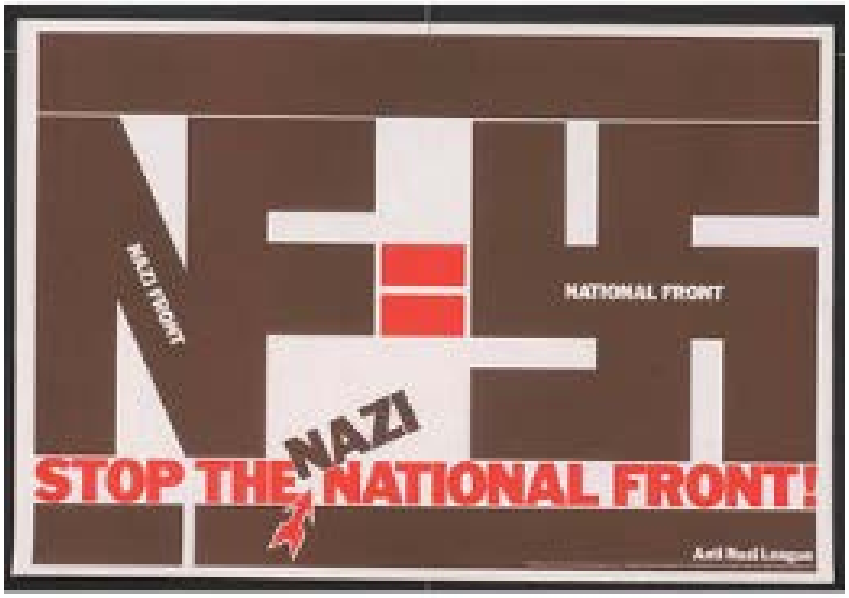

Figure 7: *Stop the Nazi National Front* by David King for the Anti-Nazi League, 1978

King felt that his work was successful in putting these movements on the map. In an interview in *Eye* magazine, conducted by Christopher Wilson, King said:

> David King: Before the anti-apartheid and anti-Nazi material, there wasn't a visual style on the Left – it was a mish-mash. Fior and Hollis did some marvellous posters, but there was no visual statement position over a wide area like they did it in Russia. We contributed to doing that.
> Christopher Wilson: Were you consciously trying to create a visual style for the Left?
> DK: Absolutely. (Wilson, 2003, p.65)

Wilson questioned whether a house style for the left is a good thing or a problem, and I think King's response is revealing:

> CW: But as soon as you create a style for a political stance, then it becomes easier to disregard.
> DK: In my experience, the creating of a specific visual style for that ethos went a long way toward putting it on the map in the first place. The Left is still using it, strangely enough.

> CW: But is that a good thing or a problem? King-derived work tends to look uncompromisingly hard now, especially after the softer, more fluid typography of the 1990s.
>
> DK: I would have thought that someone else would have had a few ideas by now. I never wanted to beat anyone over the head with this stuff; it was just the way in which I worked. As regards the design making the politics off-putting, well, people will always find an excuse to not get involved. There were still a million people on the anti-war march, so somebody's not being put off. (Wilson, 2003, p.66)

A strong identity conveys a strong message and is instantly recognisable, but its simplicity is easy to dismiss. An uncompromising message can be off-putting to those with more nuanced political thoughts. It becomes a one-sided argument which precludes discussion and interpretation.

The idea of a left-wing corporate identity also runs counter to the anti-corporate branding pursued by *Adbusters* (see chapter 2) and Naomi Klein's *No Logo* book.

In that work Klein attacks the way global capitalism has allowed international brands to exploit slave labour in third world countries and the power corporations have to set the political agenda.

In this context the global brand has hugely negative connotations, so to attach a brand to a left-wing movement has become contradictory.

Also in a postmodern context there is a shift away from an authoritative interpretation of history towards a multiplicity of interpretations which gives equal weight to the views of minority groups. A protest style with a clear uncompromising message is undermined in this new context.

However the power of branding and having a strong and definitive message is undeniable. Huge corporations have based their businesses on having brand recognition and loyalty, and political parties need clear messages if they are to attract voters.

If protest movements do not make use of branding and do not have a clear message they are arguably denying themselves the strongest tool available for growing a movement and gaining members.

There is therefore a tension between the need for brand recognition and a clear messages with the requirement of giving disparate voices equal weight. This is perhaps why recent protest movements have struggled to create a clear graphic identity for themselves.

The recent Occupy movement is notable for its lack of a core message or demands. This may be a reflection of the post-modern requirement to give equal weight to differing opinions and the avoidance of an authoritative and thus dominant voice. It also restricts the effectiveness of the movement.

Chapter 5: The impact of countercultural design on postmodernism

The types of countercultural design work I have been documenting began to have an influence on the wider design world at the same time as the concept of postmodernism had academics questioning the traditions and rules governing their discipline.

Designer Rick Poynor sees a direct link between the punk aesthetic and the postmodern concept of deconstructionism:

> In the 1970s and early 1980s, graphic artists associated with punk rock mounted a sustained assault on professional design's orderly methods and polite conventions, revelling in deviation and chaos and refusing to acknowledge any such category as 'error'. (Poynor, 2003, p.38)

From this point Poynor draws a line from the punk aesthetic to the complex idea of deconstructionism. The point being that amateur designers were rebelling against the tenets of modernist design at around the same time as theorists were questioning it.

The modernist approach to design would live on, especially in universities. But magazines like Face and iD in the UK and Émigré and Ray Gun in the US would start to bend the rules, partly facilitated by a new technology, the Apple Mac computer, and partly as a response to the transgressive rule breaking of punk and protest graphic design.

With the Mac these pioneers wanted to test the boundaries of what it would allow them to create and they did not want to be limited by a set of design rules which were not written for the new digital age.

Eventually the rule breaking would enter the universities. A dramatic moment for the tension between modern and postmodern design took place when Sheila Levrant de Bretteville was appointed director of studies in graphic design at Yale University in 1990.

Yale had been a bastion of Modernism and the appointment caused such a controversy that Paul Rand, a member of the faculty, resigned and encouraged others to follow suit.

What angered Rand and others was de Bretteville's postmodern approach to design. Many of the themes to come out of protest movement graphics and countercultural design were picked up and modernist ideals were challenged.

For example de Bretteville embraced diversity and design featuring multiple viewpoints and interpretations, something that was present in zines where a diverse range of people made their views known for the first time. de Bretteville said:

> I will never, never, never forget to include people of colour, people of different points of view, people of both genders, people of different sexual preferences. It's just not possible any more to move without remembering. That is something that Modernism didn't account for; it didn't want to recognise regional and personal differences. (Lupton, 1992)

A thread can be seen to link the different points of view expressed in the plethora of zines, as well as the alternative voice expressed in the protest graphics of David King, and this postmodern viewpoint.

The views of previously marginalised groups are expressed and the work of unschooled and non-professional designers and artists are accepted as valid forms of communication.

It is important to note that the form of mondernism that de Bretteville was reacting against was the international style which had become synonymous with Yale and designers like Paul Rand and Massimo Vignelli.

That style sought to reduce the complexities of a message to its simplest form. The idea was to convey a message with the least amount of noise. The postmodern movement on the other hand celebrated noise and work which deliberately encouraged contradictory interpretations.

Another point is that the international style had become so dominate that it was seen as authoritative and thus a problem for those who wanted to question authority – such as zine producers and protest movement graphic designers.

de Bretteville picked up on the multiple viewpoints that movements like zines had enabled. Zines like *Riot Grrrl* had given a voice to a new wave of feminists, for example, and it was these different viewpoints that de Bretteville wanted to represent in the teaching at Yale. She said:

> In my understanding, feminism acknowledges the past inequality of women, and doesn't want it to continue into the future. And the issue of equality broadens beyond women to involve the equality of all voices. Feminist design looks for graphic strategies that will enable us to listen to people who have not been heard before. (Ibid.)

This era of rule breaking postmodernism had plenty of critics. Without rules almost anything could go and deliberately 'ugly' designs could be justified. The punk style was a reaction to authority in all its forms, including design education. But now design educators were themselves embracing the rule breaking ethos.

The student publication *Output*, designed at Cranbrook Univeristy in 1992, was clearly influenced by postmodern rule breaking and owed a lot to the punk aesthetic (as well as Dada and Situationism). A poster produced at the university is an example of this:

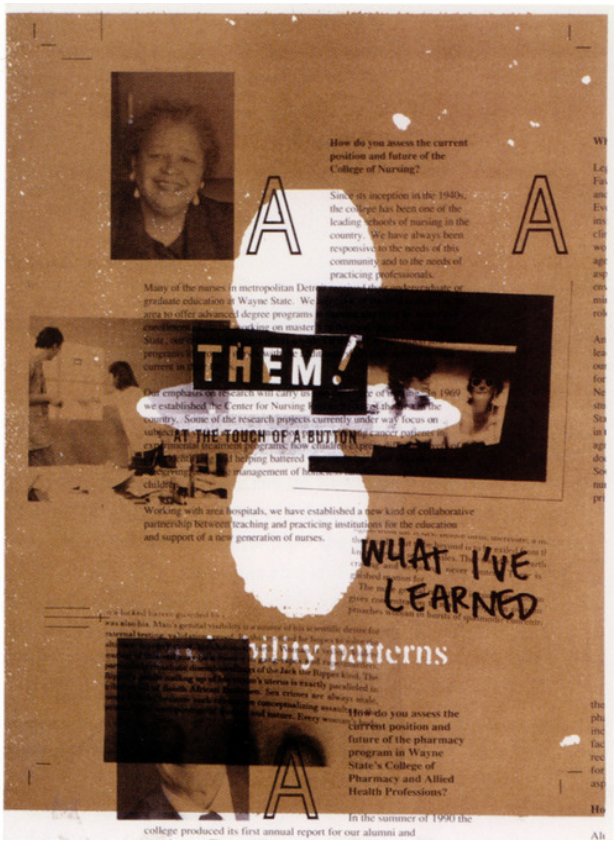

Figure 8: *Output* magazine, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1992

This design became symbolic of the 'cult of the ugly', a term coined by graphic designer Steven Heller. He argued that whereas 'ugliness' may be appropriate to protest graphics (creating a graphica povera) or the punk movement, this design was plain ugly:

> Ugliness is valid, even refreshing, when it is key to an indigenous language representing alternative ideas and cultures. The problem with the cult of ugly graphic design emanating from the major design academies and their alumni is that it has so quickly become a style that appeals to anyone without the

> intelligence, discipline or good sense to make something more interesting out of it … Ugliness as its own virtue – or as a knee-jerk reaction to the status quo – diminishes all design. (Heller, 1993)

What this boils down to is the appropriateness of a design strategy to its function. The conditions which produced protest graphics created a form which reflected the language and identity of the protest groups, and punk graphics had the functional aim of transgressing rules in order to fight forms of authority.

Shorn of functional objectives a 'no more rules' style is like a riot without a purpose – a destructive and meaningless force.

But despite these excesses post-modernism was a revitalising movement. Design had moved on from being a passive carrier of someone else's message, designed to reduce interference or noise. Instead design could be more nuanced and invited the viewer to be an active participant in the meaning of the work.

It would also lead to a break with the idea of progress in art. Older art forms and vernacular art were reassessed and allowed a place in contemporary design. The amateur work of punk designers thus became a valid form of communication and previously suppressed viewpoints were given a voice.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation has been to highlight some of the ways the concept of graphic design has been challenged and expanded by practitioners working outside mainstream communications.

I began the journey by looking at Ken Garland's *First Thing First* manifesto. It wasn't the first time the dominance of advertising work was challenged, but it was a concise rallying cry for a generation of designers who believed their talents could be used for loftier aims.

Garland's point was to suggest there should be a shifting of priorities so that non-commercial uses of graphic design would receive more attention and funding. He also emphasised the importance of the content of design, stating 'Respect for the content is an absolute requirement in our business.' (Garland, 1967, republished in Garland, 1996, p.38)

From this point I have charted movements working outside advertising which have challenged notions of what graphic design is. My focus has been on political and counter-cultural works because I am interested in the interaction between underground culture and the mainstream.

In my study of punk zines I showed how amateur designers forged a new way of working in response to new technology but also established an 'anti-style' which would set it apart from mainstream culture.

This was not the first time that artists had challenged authority through the negation of mainstream forms. Dada and the Situationist International artists had done this before. But the punk DIY ethos brought the cultural rebellion to a much wider group of people and encouraged participation. It was an example of youth culture rejecting authority by negating its rules. In graphic terms this meant breaking the rules of typography and layout, just as in fashion terms it meant deliberately wearing ripped, torn and unfashionable clothing and accessories.

The punk aesthetic challenged the idea of international style by showing that form could be more than just a clear transmitter of a message, rather it could be a fundamental part of the message.

In my study of the protest posters created by David King I examined how the deliberate use of impoverished styles could be used to question authority. I also questioned the idea of creating a brand or graphic identity for a protest movement, noting the pros and cons of such an approach.

These studies fed the changing views on modernist design principals. In the lates 1980s and through the 1990s the old rules of design began to be questioned by both professionals and within universities. The transgressive punk style and the impoverished style of protest graphics took on a new significance because of their rule breaking nature.

In summary countercultural graphic designers have affected mainstream graphic design in three important ways.

Their deliberate transgression of the rules and traditions of design and typography have forced a re-evaluation of the discipline.

Secondly they have caused designers and educators to become more aware of the possibilities for the usage of graphic design outside of advertising and mainstream publishing. Universities and design journals now place more emphasis on the possibilities of designer as content provider and author, and the importance of social, environmental and political considerations within the remit of design.

Thirdly, the opening up of design to a larger part of the population through the possibilities of self-publishing and the opportunities offered by entry level desktop publishing software has had the effect of making the general population more design conscious and therefore more demanding and possibly more engaged with and interested in new design trends.

History does not run in straight lines, rather stories repeat themselves in different ways. The transgressive style of Dada and Situationist International artists was repeated in punk graphics, but for a different audience and by a different set of people (amateurs rather than artists).

Another circularity in this history is Ken Garland's 1964 *First Thing First* manifesto, which was resurrected by *Adbusters* magazine in 2000. This is another example of how concerns from a previous age have a habit of repeating themselves in different contexts through time.

It is probably an impossible task to come up with a definition of graphic design which will stand the test of time. But having a definition creates something which designers can push against and forge new ways of working. Sometimes it is limitations which are the biggest spur to innovation, so rather than avoiding a definition of graphic design perhaps it is better to have a definition which constantly evolves.

When looking at the future of graphic design the internet looms large. The internet has created a global space where users can contribute their own words as well as reading

others. It is an interactive and social realm and this gives graphic designers new directions to go in.

The commercial world has latched on to the internet as a new way to sell products. Social media sites such as Facebook allow advertisers to pay to place ads posing as status updates into people's news feeds. Some businesses sell products solely on the internet, dispensing with the expense of purchasing and hiring staff for high street stores.

But there is space for countercultural and non-commercial design on the internet. Protest movements such as Occupy use social media to spread their message and build a world-wide support base. Social media was also used by protestors during the Arab Spring uprisings which began in 2010 and are still taking place.

The role that designers have in this world is difficult to figure out. Social media requires writers, not designers. The fight to control social media seems to have been won by Facebook, which controls the look of its site and the way posts can be presented, over Myspace, which allowed users to design the look of their pages.

Over the next decade it will be interesting to see how designers react to this new world. The possibilities the internet offers in terms of global reach, interaction and social communication are immense. It will take a new generation of countercultural designers to take full advantage of this medium and once again push at the boundaries of 'graphic design'.

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