

Designer as Producer [I]

The slogan "designer as author" has enlivened debates about the future of graphic design since the early 1990s. The word author suggests agency, intention, and creation, as opposed to the more passive functions of consulting, styling, and formatting. Authorship is a provocative model for rethinking the role of the graphic designer at the start of the millennium; it hinges, however, on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin. As an alternative to "designer as author" I suggest "designer as producer."

The avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 20s critiqued the ideal of authorship as a process of dredging unique forms from the depths of the interior self. Artists and intellectuals challenged romantic definitions of art by plunging into the worlds of mass media and mass production.

Production is a concept embedded in the history of modernism. Avant-garde artists and designers treated the techniques of manufacture not as neutral, transparent means to an end but as devices equipped with cultural meaning and aesthetic character. In 1934, the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote "The Author as Producer," a text that attacked the conventional view of authorship as a purely literary enterprise. He exclaimed that new forms of communication—film, radio, advertising, newspapers, the illustrated press—were melting down traditional artistic genres and corroding the borders between writing and reading, authoring and editing.

Benjamin was a Marxist, committed to the notion that the technologies of manufacture should be owned by the workers who operate them. In Marxist terminology, the "means of production" are the heart of human culture and should be collectively owned. Benjamin claimed that writing (and other arts) are grounded in the material structures of society, from the educational institutions that foster literacy to the publishing networks that manufacture and distribute texts. In detailing an agenda for a politically engaged literary practice,

Benjamin demanded that artists must not merely adopt political "content," but must revolutionize the means through which their work is produced and distributed.

Benjamin attacked the model of the writer as an "expert" in the field of literary form, equipped only to craft words into texts and not to question the physical life of the work. The producer must ask, Where will the work be read? Who will read it? How will it be manufactured? What other texts and pictures will surround it? Benjamin argued that artists and photographers must not view their task as solely visual, lest they become mere suppliers of form to the existing apparatus of bourgeois publishing: "What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value. But we shall make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography. Here, too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of political progress".

Designer as Producer

"Authorship is a provocative model... it hinges, however, on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin"

make the writer bigger?

Designer as Author

wider

DESIGNER AS AUTHOR

v/lc? large ...

Authorship, in one form or another, has been a popular term in graphic design circles, especially those at the edge of the profession, the design academies and the murky territories that exist between design and art. The word authorship has a ring of importance: it connotes seductive ideas of origination and agency. But the question of how designers become authors is a difficult one, and exactly who the designer/authors are and what authored design looks like depends entirely on how you define the term and the criteria you choose to grant entrance into the pantheon.

Authorship may suggest new approaches to understanding design process in a profession traditionally associated more with the communication than the origination of messages. But theories of authorship may also serve as legitimizing strategies, and authorial aspirations may actually end up reinforcing certain conservative notions of design production and subjectivity—ideas that run counter to recent critical attempts to overthrow the perception of design based on individual brilliance. The implications deserve careful evaluation. What does it really mean to call for a graphic designer to be an author?

What is an author?

That question has been an area of intense scrutiny over the last forty years. The meaning of the word itself has shifted significantly over time. The earliest definitions are not associated with writing; in fact the most inclusive is a "person who originates or gives clearly index authoritarian—even patriarchal—connotations: "father

of all life," "any inventor, constructor or founder," "one who begets," and a "director, commander, or ruler."

All literary theory, from Aristotle on, has in some form or another been theory of authorship. Since this is not a history of the author but a consideration of the author as metaphor, I'll start with recent history. Wimsatt and Beardsley's, seminal text, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), drove an early wedge between the author and the text, dispelling the notion that a reader could ever really know an author through his writing. The so-called death of the author, proposed most succinctly by Roland Barthes in 1968 in an essay of that title, is closely linked to the birth of critical theory, especially theory based in reader response and interpretation rather than intentionality. Michel Foucault used the rhetorical question "What is an author?" as the title of his influential essay of 1969 which, in response to Barthes, outlines the basic taxonomy and functions of the author and the problems associated with conventional ideas of authorship and origination.

Foucauldian theory holds that the connection between author and text has transformed and that there exist a number of author-functions that shape the way readers approach a text. These stubbornly persistent functions are historically determined and culturally specific categories.

Foucault posits that the earliest sacred texts were authorless, their origins lost in ancient history (the Vedas, the Gospels, etc.). The very anonymity of the

paragraph
ligatures
(titles
quotations)

not
ideal

st

(delete)

the rethink
7.0

The general authorship rhetoric seems to be grounded in the material structures of society, from artist books to political activism. But artist books easily fall within the realm and descriptive power of art criticism. Activist work may be neatly explicated using allusions to propaganda, graphic design public relations and advertising.