The Designer As Author

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Michael Rock straddles two worlds: one academic, one practical. In the 1980s and early 1990s, first at the Rhode Island School of Design and later at Yale University, Rock rallied the profession to embrace design criticism. And he led with his own writings. His seminal 1996 text, "The Designer as Author," provoked a debate—which still rages today—over the authorship of design content. In it Rock poses the question: "What does it really mean to call for a graphic designer to be an author?" At the height of his academic success, he jumped from the ivory tower and into the commercial world, taking a gang of colleagues with him to become, in his words,"makers instead of critics." They founded 2x4, a professional design practice known for high-level collaborative work for clients like Prada. Today, his work is considered conceptual, thought provoking, and highly process driven. From Yale to Prada, from critic to maker, Rock's journey emphasizes the importance of theory to our field. His carefully considered essay gives shape and depth to this larger debate, just as his abstract intellectual approach to practical, professional work gives shape and depth to his designs.

The Designer as Author

Graphic authorship may be an idea whose time has come, but it is not without its contradictions.

"Authorship" has become a popular term in graphic design circles, especially in those at the edges of the profession: the design academies and the murky territory between design and art. The word has an important ring to it, with seductive connotations of origination and agency. But the question of how designers become authors is a difficult one, and exactly who qualifies and what authored design might look like depends on how you define the term and determine admission into the pantheon.

Authorship may suggest new approaches to the issue of the design process in a profession traditionally associated more with the communication rather than the origination of messages. But theories of authorship also serve as legitimizing strategies, and authorial aspirations may 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 as based on individual brilliance. The implications of such a re-definition deserve careful scrutiny. What does it really mean to call for a graphic designer to be an author?

The meaning of the word "author" has shifted significantly through history and has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the last forty years. The earliest definitions are not associated with writing per se, but rather denote "the person who originates or gives existence to anything." Other usages have authoritarian—even patriarchal—connotations: "the father of all life," "any inventor, constructor or founder," "one who begets," and "a director, commander, or ruler." More recently, Wimsatt and Beardsley's seminal essay "The Intention Fallacy" (1946) was one of the first to drive a wedge between the author and the text

with its claim that a reader could never really "know" the author through his or her writing. The so-called "Death of the Author," proposed most succinctly by Roland Barthes in a 1968 essay of that name, 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?" in 1969 as the title of an influential essay that, in response to Barthes, outlines the basic characteristics and functions of the author and the problems associated with conventional ideas of authorship and origination.

Foucault demonstrated that over the centuries the relationship between the author and the text has changed. The earliest sacred texts are authorless, their origins lost in history. In fact, the ancient, anonymous origin of such texts serves as a kind of authentication. On the other hand, scientific texts, at least until after the Renaissance, demanded an author's name as validation. By the eighteenth century, however, Foucault asserts, the situation had reversed: literature was authored, and science had become the product of anonymous objectivity. Once authors began to be punished fortheir writing—that is, when a text could be transgressive—the link between the author and the text was firmly established. Text became a kind of private property, owned by the author, and a critical theory developed that reinforced that relationship, searching for keys to the text in the life and intention of its writer. With the rise of scientific method, on the other hand, scientific texts and mathematical proofs were no longer seen as authored texts but as discovered truths. The scientist revealed an extant phenomenon, a fact anyone faced with the same conditions would have uncovered. Therefore, the scientist and mathematician could be the first to discover a paradigm, and lend their name to it, but could never claim authorship over it.

"Text became a kind of private property, owned by the author"

Poststructuralist readings tend to criticize the prestige attributed to the figure of the author. The focus shifts from the author's intention to the internal workings of the writing: not what it means but how it means. Barthes ends his essay supposing "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." Foucault imagines a time when we might ask, "What difference does it make who is speaking?" The notion that a text is a line of words that releases a single meaning, the central message of an author/god, is overthrown.

"the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

Postmodernism turned on a "fragmened and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion" of the subject, noted Fredric Jameson. The notion of a decentered text—a text that is skewed from the direct line of communication between sender and receiver, severed from the authority of its origin, and exists as a free-floating element in a field of possible significations—has figured heavily in recent constructions of a design based in reading and readers. But Katherine McCoy's prescient image of designers moving beyond problem-solving and by "authoring additional content and a self-conscious critique of the message ... adopting roles associated with art and literature" has as often as not been misconstrued. Rather than working to incorporate theory into their methods of production, many so-called "deconstructivist" designers literally illustrated Barthes's image of a reader-based text—"a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture"—by scattering fragments of quotations across the surface of their "authored" posters and book covers. The dark implications of Barthes's theory, note Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, were fashioned into "a romantic theory of self expression."

Perhaps after years as faceless facilitators, designers were ready to speak out. Some may have been eager to discard the internal affairs of

formalism—to borrow a metaphor used by Paul de Man—and branch outinto the foreign affairs of external politics and content." By the 1970s design had begun to discard the scientific approach that had held sway for decades, exemplified by the rationalist ideology that preached strict adherence to an eternal grid. Müller-Brockmann's evocation of the "aesthetic quality of mathematical thinking" is the clearest and most cited example of this approach. Müller-Brockmann and a slew of fellow researchers such as Kepes, Dondis, and Amheim worked to uncover a preexisting order and form in the way a scientist reveals "truth." But what is most peculiar and revealing in Müller-Brockmann's writing is his reliance on tropes of submission: the designer submits to the will of the system, forgoes personality, withholds interpretation.

"The ever-present pressure of technology and electronic communiction only muddies the water further."

On the surface, at least, it would seem that designers were moving away from authorless, scientific texts—in which inviolable visual principles arrived at through extensive visual research were revealed—towards a position in which the designer could claim some level of ownership over the message (and this at a time when literary theory was moving away from that very position). But some of the institutional features of design practice are at odds with zealous attempts at self-expression. The idea of a decentered message does not necessarily sit well in a professional relationship in which the client is paying the designer to convey specific information or emotions. In addition, most design is done in a collaborative setting, either within a client relationship or in the context of a studio that utilizes the talents of numerous creative people, with the result that the origin of any particular idea is uncertain. The ever-present pressure of technology and electronic communication only muddies the water further.

Is There an Auteur in the House?

It is perhaps not surprising that Barthes's "The Death of the Author" was written in Paris in 1968, the year students joined workers on the barricades in a general strike and the Western world flirted with real social revolution. The call for the overthrow of authority in the form of the author in favor of the reader—i.e., the masses—had a real resonance in 1968. But to lose power you must have already worn a mantle, which is perhaps why designers had a problem in trying to overthrow a power that they never possessed.

The figure of the author implied a totalitarian control over creative activity and seemed an essential ingredient of high art. If the relative level of genius—on the part of the author, painter, sculptor, or composer—was the ultimate measure of artistic achievement, activities that lacked a clear central authority figure were devalued. The development of film theory during the period serves as an interesting example. In 1954 film critic and budding film director François Truffaut had first promulgated the "politique des auteurs," a polemical strategy developed to reconfigure a critical theory of the cinema. The problem was how to create a theory that imagined a film, necessarily the result of broad collaboration, as the work of a single artist, thus a work of art. The solution was to determine a set of criteria that allowed a critic to define certain directors as auteurs. In order to establish the film as a work of art, auteur theory held that the director—hitherto merely one-third of the creative troika of director, writer, and cinematographer—had ultimate control over the entire project.

Auteur theory—especially as espoused by the American critic Andrew Sarris—speculated that directors must meet three criteria in order to pass into the sacred hall of auteurs. Sarris proposed that the director must demonstrate technical expertise, have a stylistic signature that is visible over the course of several films, and, through his or her choice of projects and cinematic treatment, show a consistency of vision and interior meaning. Since the film director had little control of the material he or she worked with—especially within the Hollywood studio system, where directors were assigned to projects—the signature way a range of scripts was treated was especially important.

The interesting thing about auteur theory is that film theorists, like designers, had to construct the notion of the author as a means of raising what was considered low entertainment to the plateau of fine art. The parallels between film direction and design practice are striking. Like the film director, the art director or designer is often distanced from his or her material and works collaboratively on it, directing the activity of a number of other creative people. In addition, over the course of a career both the film director and the designer work on a number of different projects with varying levels of creative potential. As a result, any inner meaning must come from aesthetic treatment as much as from content.

"any inner meaning must come from aesthetic treatment as much as from content."

If we apply the criteria used to identify auteurs to graphic designers, we yield a body of work that may be elevated to auteur status. Technical proficiency could be claimed by any number ofpractitioners, but couple this with a signature style and the field narrows. The designers who fulfill these criteria will be familiar to any Eye reader; many of them have been featured in the magazine. (And, of course, selective

republishing of certain work and exclusion of other construct a stylistically consistent oeuvre.) The list would probably include Fabian Baron, Tibor Kalman, David Carson, Neville Brody, Edward Fella, Anthon Beeke, Pierre Bernard, Gert Dunbar, Tadanoori Yokoo, Vaughn Oliver, Rick Valicenti, April Greiman, Jan van Toorn, Wolfgang Weingart, and many others. But great technique and style alone do not an auteur make. If we add the requirement of interior meaning, how does this list fare? Are there designers who by special treatment and choice of projects approach the issue of deeper meaning in the way Bergman, Hitchcock, or Welles does?

How do you compare a film poster with the film itself? The very scale of a cinematic project allows for a sweep of vision not possible in graphic design. Therefore graphic auteurs, almost by definition, would have to have produced large established bodies of work in which discernible patterns emerge. Who, then, are the graphic auteurs? Perhaps Bernard and van Toorn, possibly Oliver, Beeke, and Fella. There is a sense of getting a bigger idea, a deeper quality to their work, aided in the case of Bernard and van Toorn by their political affiliations and in Oliver by long association that produces a consistent genre of music, allowing for a range of experimentation. In these cases the graphic auteur both seeks projects he is commissioned to work on from a specific, recognizable critical perspective. Van Toorn will look at a brief for a corporate annual report from a socioeconomic position; Bernard evokes a position of class struggle, capitalist brutality, and social dysfunction; and Oliver examines dark issues of decay, rapture, and the human body. Jean Renoir observed that an artistic director spends his whole career remaking variations on the same film.

"If we add the requirment of interior meaning, how does this list fare?"

Great stylists such as Carson and Baron do not seem to qualify for admission to the auteur pantheon, at least according to Sarris's criteria, as it is difficult to discern a message in their work that transcends the stylistic elegance of the typography in the case of Baron and the studied inelegance of that of Carson. (You have to ask yourself, "What is their work about?") Valicenti and Brody try to inject inner meaning into their work—as in Valicenti's self-published Aids advertising and Brody's attachment to the post-linguistic alphabet systems—but their output remains impervious to any such intrusion. A judgment such as this, however, brings us to the Achilles' heel of auteur theory. In trying to describe interior meaning, Sarris resorts to "the intangible difference between one personality and another." That retreat to intangibility—the "I can't say what it is but I know it when I see it" aspect—is one of the reasons why the theory has long since fallen into disfavor in film criticism circles. It also never dealt adequately with the collaborative nature of cinema and the messy problems of movie-making. But while the theory is passé, its effect is still with us: the director to this day sits squarely at the center of our perception of film structure. In the same way, it could be that we have been applying a modified graphic auteur theory for years without being aware of it. After all, what is design theory if not a series of critical elevations and demotions as our attitudes about style, meaning, and significance evolve?

"the intangible difference between one personality and another."

Forward or Backward?

If the ways a designer can be an author are complex and confused, the way designers have used the term and the value ascribed to it are equally so. Any number of recent statements claim authorship as the panacea to the woes of the brow-beaten designer. A recent call for entries for a design exhibition entitled "Designer as Author: Voices and Visions" sought to identify "graphic designers who are engaged in work that transcends the traditional service-oriented commercial production, and who pursue projects that are personal, social, or investigative in nature." The rejection of the role of the facilitator and call to "transcend" traditional production imply that the authored design holds some higher, purer purpose. The amplification of the personal voice legitimizes design as equal to more traditional privileged forms of authorship.

But if designers should aim for open readings and free textual interpretations—as a litany of contemporary theorists have convinced us—that desire is thwarted by oppositional theories of authorship. Foucault noted that the figure of the author is not a particularly liberating one: the author as origin, authority, and ultimate owner of the text guards against the free will of the reader. Transferring the authority of the text back over to the author contains and categorizes the work, narrowing the possibilities for interpretation. The figure of the author reconfirms the traditional idea of the genius creator; the status of the creator frames the work and imbues it with mythical value.

While some claims for authorship may be simply an indication of a renewed sense of responsibility, at times they seem ploys to gain proper rights, attempts to exercise some kind of agency where there has tradi-

tionally been none. Ultimately the author equals authority. While the longing for graphic authorship may be the longing for legitimacy or power, is celebrating the design as central character necessarily a positive move? Isn't that what has fueled the last fifty years of design history? If we really want to go beyond the designer-as-hero model, we may have to imagine a time when we can ask, "What difference does it make who designed it?"

On the other hand, work is created by someone. (All those calls for the death of the author are made by famous authors.) While the development and definition of artistic styles, and their identification and classification, are at the heart of an outmoded Modernist criticism, we must still work to engage these problems in new ways. It may be that the real challenge is to embrace the multiplicity of methods—artistic and commercial, individual and collaborative—that comprises design language. An examination of the designer-as-author could help us to rethink process, expand design methods, and elaborate our historical frame to incorporate all forms of graphic discourse. But while theories of graphic authorship may change the way work is made, the primary concern of both the viewer and the critic is not who made it, but rather what it does and how it does it.

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