MATERIAL DESIGN IS A POLITICAL CHOICE

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Recently, Google announced a new, updated and refreshed Material Design at Google I/O. In [material.io](https://material.io/design/introduction/) they define it as a visual language that synthesizes the classic principles of good design with the innovation of technology and science.

There we can find a list of formal and functional generic guidelines to embody most of our digital interface designs. Material Design is presented as a universal and neutral language that every designer and developer should put into practice.

Materialism is the new Modernism?

In design history, the idea of universality and neutrality comes from the Modernism movement - or Swiss Style - which, one could suppose, is what Google means by “good classic design”.

Modernism appears after the carnage of the First World War and it was built from a utopian desire of achieving a universal language that would sustain harmonious communication between all nations.

If we take a look at Material Design we can see that it's clearly influenced by the aesthetics and the ideology of Modernism. So much that it shares the same condescending attitude, as Google usually tells everyone what the best way to do things is and provides the tools to reproduce it.

Everything is very well documented and, with an “open source” rhetoric, they ensure that everyone practices their guidelines. And that can be a problem.

Pure and neutral aesthetics

When only one perspective dominates the discourse of what constitutes good design, the doors to many other different aesthetics are closed. All the different forms, colors, typography and other elements are filled with meaning and have deep cultural impact.

The idea of a neutral “pure” aesthetic is a myth. That’s why, for instance, the western culture can't recognize the Nazi swastika as a simple form. It’s a taboo in the history of graphic design because it represents sociocultural problems, the Second World War and the Holocaust.

In a similar way, when we make use of Material Design as an aesthetic for our interface designs, we are not just making a cosmetic choice. It's also a political choice.

We are representing Google, whatever that might mean.

Google is a multinational corporation that represents a particular culture and Material Design is just another tentacle of the octopus that monopolizes the Web.

That’s why, more than ever, movements like [Web-Brutalism](https://www.imaginarycloud.com/blog/why-we-need-web-brutalism/" \t "_blank) that have the boldness and the courage to question those “rational aesthetics”, dictated by science and technology, are very relevant.

It reminds me of the Postmodernism era.

Postmodernism: rejecting the formal organization

Postmodernism is a broad movement that began in the 70’s and it was a drastic break from the modernists utopian visions. With an attitude of skepticism and irony, they completely rejected the rational order and formal organization.

No more rules!

If for modernists form should follow functions, for post-modernists, form is the function.

We need to let ourselves be inspired by this kind of movements and other tendencies of graphic design outside of the western culture. Difference and opposition are essential to run a democratic and inclusive web.

We should stop using frameworks like Material Design and Bootstrap.

Legibility-communication must never be impaired by an a priori aesthetics.  
László Moholy-Nagy, The New Typography

The aesthetic should be the result of your user's needs and business goals.

Learning from graphic design

It's a fact that when the time comes to build digital products for specific clients, it's a risk to think outside of the box, as we fear to lack on the user experience. However, the real challenge is to design the same mental models with different forms. We can innovate and still respect the web standards.

Nowadays, with tools like CSS Grid and Flexbox, we have more possibilities to rethink layouts and what they can be, as we did in the past with Post-Modernism or Deconstructivism.

Jen Simons and Rachel Andrews have been doing a great job showing us how easy it can be and what we can do. Take the chance to check some of Jen's experiments at [labs.jensimmons.com](http://labs.jensimmons.com/) and get to know her great work.

Our users are becoming smarter than ever, owning a vast digital culture. They are open and I would even say that they want interfaces that both challenge them and trigger curiosity.

The evolution that graphic design faced through its history should not be ignored when embracing web design, as the lack of critical thinking will make us repeat the same mistakes over and over again.