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LETTERFORMS, CULTURAL FORMS

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN GRAPHIC DESIGN,

WESTERN CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES

SINCE MID-CENTURY

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Abstract

Beginning with an understanding of the aesthetic and idealism of modern design, this thesis discusses the interrelationship between culture, technology and graphic design since mid-century. A review of the rise of postmodern critique, particularly as expressed through digital technologies, demonstrates how cultural shifts and developing communications technologies work in tandem to influence the emergence of visual systems. By revealing several underlying premises of modernity, it is shown that the linearity of modern design is a biased and limited theory of vision. This argument is reinforced by contrasting the modern conception of direct communication with alternative design practices that encourage readers to play a more active role in the interpretation of a message. However, the thesis ultimately returns to the fundamental principles of modernism to suggest that certain tenets of modernist thought should not be jettisoned so quickly, simply because digitization encourages open-ended viewing experiences.

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Résumé

« Discutant pour commencer de l'incompréhension de l'esthétique et de l'expression pure du graphisme moderne, cette thèse traite de l'interaction entre culture, technologie et graphisme moderne depuis le milieu du siècle. L'étude de la critique post-moderne, en particulier comme expression de la technologie numérique, démontre comment les changements culturels et le développement des technologies de communication travaillent en tandem et influencent l'émergence des systèmes visuels. En dévoilant quelques éléments fondamentaux de la modernité, il a été démontré que la linéarité du graphisme moderne est une théorie sur la vision qui est limitée. Mais finalement, la thèse revient au fondement principal du modernisme, en suggérant que certains principes de la pensée moderne ne peuvent être aussi rapidement écartés, simplement à cause de la "digitalisation" qui encourage une vision illimitée. »

Acknowledgement

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I. Introduction

"Art moves technology, and technology moves art. From the two is the child of design, which gives us moments in which we can stop and observe the time, the age in which we live." [1]

Graphic design emerged the moment the human race began to communicate in visual form, but it was the 20th century that gave birth to the graphic designer. Undeniably, the countless scribes, calligraphers, illustrators, printers and typographers of the past who left us their imprints and techniques are part of the history of graphic design. But historians have only recently begun to group these diverse activities together, rewriting the history of visual communication and, in effect, creating the discipline of communication design.

In fact, only in recent decades have graphic designers proclaimed themselves as such. Due, in part, to the lofty corporate identity and visual systems developed after World War II, the "commercial artist" was promoted to the status of "graphic designer", implying a strategic approach to the merging of form and content. The new title also held implications of social responsibility. A modern ideology of direct communication was incorporated into design practices, thus creating the designer's role to elevate mass culture through a methodology of rational problem solving.

In the 1980s, new capabilities based on digital technologies began to undermine the modern system as designers started to tamper with linear

communication. The volatility of digitization deeply disturbed the established designers of the day who had spent their lifetimes setting the modern standards of graphic design in an effort to distinguish and elevate the field. Their concern was not simply that new powerful technology was in the hands of untrained designers, but that prestigious design schools and popular alternative culture publications were also breaking down the pillars of modern communication design that had only recently been constructed.

The onslaught of the Macintosh computer and its accompanying graphic software generated new "postmodern" visual forms, along with an evocative design discourse on the chasm between old (modern) and new (postmodern) approaches to visual communication. But some clarification is required. To maintain that the visual unity of design is "modern" and that the layering and fragmenting of type and imagery is "postmodern" does not reveal how cultural ideals relate to the formation of letters or the arrangement of visual space. Moreover, it does not distinguish between print and digital media. If postmodernism is simply understood as a reaction to modernism, then how do we account for the return to more structural forms on the Internet? Although there has been a decline in modernist ideas of "good" design, we cannot hastily assume that they have been supplanted by postmodernism. Modern thought is not a suspended ideology, but a way of thinking that is deeply ingrained in our culture, the traces of which are ever present. Moreover, the

interconnection between print technology, design and culture cannot be severed as digital technologies take root. As long as graphic design finds expression within the medium of print, it cannot escape the cultural prejudices that have been established within this form of expression.

Graphic design is a cultural voice, which tells different stories depending on the communications technology we choose for transmission. This will become apparent in the next four chapters, where the interplay between design, culture and technology will be traced. In laying the theoretical groundwork, Chapter One, *High Design, Low Design* critically analyses the form and ideology of modern design. Whereas some of the underlying premises of modernism are initially highlighted in the first chapter, Chapter Two, *Cultural Parallels*, develops a broader investigation of the relationship between design and Western culture. Here, a discussion of the cultural categorizations, "modernity" and "postmodernity", unfolds to avoid an over-simplification of the terminology within the context of graphic design. Along with demonstrating that these terms suggest more than a stylistic description, this section also considers how Western ways of perceiving the world get translated onto the visual plane. Chapter Three, *Looking into Space*, considers "postmodern" practices in design, introducing technology into the mixture.

Although it will be shown that the modern design movement is undermined by new cultural ideas and technologies, Chapter Four,

Rethinking Deconstruction, demonstrates that "postmodern" design does not

necessarily open new possibilities for the reader in the static realm of print.

Instead, it is argued that the multilinear, open-ended, digital medium is the

place where viewers are empowered most. Finally, Chapter Five, *Modernism*

Revisited, takes a further look at computer-mediated communications and

suggests that modern design may be finding its way back, this time in pixels

rather than in print.

[1] Kendall. "Playing with Code." *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design.* 2 (1998): 28.

II. High Design, Low Design

"I was raised to believe that, as a designer, I have the responsibility to improve the world around us, to make it a better place to live, to fight and oppose trivia, kitsch, and all forms of subculture which are visually polluting our world."[1]

This statement was made by Massimo Vignelli, one of the most outspoken graphic designers on the principles of modernism. A pioneer in American corporate identity, his approach to design has not wavered since he began his career in the 1950s. And his views have become even more entrenched in light of recent developments in digital typography.

An object without ornament or classical reference looks "modern". In this sense, modernism is a style. It is also an ideology, viewed by some as a universal, timeless aesthetic. Modern or "Swiss" design entails a visual unity of design elements, achieved by an asymmetrical arrangement of words and "objective" photography on a mathematical grid. The typographic treatment of modern design imitates the simplified forms of deStijl and Bauhaus letters.[2]

Two decades earlier, instructors at the Bauhaus School had emphasized absolute clarity, affirming that typography "must never be impaired by an *a priori* esthetic."[3] At mid-century this ideal of a transparent alphabet was transplanted into the "International Typographic Style". The setting of sans serif fonts in a flush-left, rag-right configuration was considered a neutral form communication that would not impede the transmission of meaning.

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After World War II, Bauhaus teachings developed into a methodology of graphic design that guided designers for decades. Logos and extensive corporate identity systems with corresponding graphic standards were developed for companies such as AT&T, United Way, Westinghouse, UPS, IBM, American Airlines and Bloomindales, to name a few.[4] It would be an overstatement, however, to suggest that modern design has only one face. Outside the realm of corporate identity, designers such as Paul Rand and Saul Bass rejected the rigidity of the grid and pioneered an alternative style. Herb Lubalin's "typographic expressionism" was "a uniquely American response to European modernism."[5] And Ed Benguiat, another luminary of the *New York School,* "celebrated eclecticism and ornament, exploiting photo typesetting's capacity to reproduce illustrative, decorative forms."[6]

These legendary designers may have shrugged off notions of universality and Swiss standards of legibility in favor of more expressive forms, but none of them strayed too far from the basic tenets of modernism. Their typefaces became less transparent and their compositions responded to the shifts in American consumer culture, but they did not challenge the modern quest for direct, linear and clear communication. They rejected dry formalism in favor of idiosyncratic graphics and illustrative styles, but there was no real objection to modernism as a design ethos. As Paul Rand declared in 1996:

"I haven't changed my mind about modernism from the first day I ever did it... It means integrity; it means honesty; it means the absence of sentimentality and the absence of nostalgia; it means simplicity; it means clarity."[7]

The modern aesthetic was appropriated by the international design community in the 1940s, but it was not until the 1980s — when designers began to have direct control over the design process on their Macintosh computers — that anyone in the design community bothered to question some of the premises upon which modernism was built. The old guard began an explosive dialogue as they resisted the new practices. Renowned designers, such as Rand and Vignelli, had been working in accordance with modernity's aesthetic principles — clarity, purity, asymmetrical organization on a grid and legible typefaces — and they were not impressed by computer-generated solutions. Vignelli argued that the trendy magazine, *Emigré*, was a "national calamity" and an "aberration of culture."[8]   Henry Wolf, acclaimed for his art direction of magazines such as *Esquire* and *Harper's Bazaar* between the 1950s and 1970s, described the current wave in typography as "having 420 channels on television, and flicking the button but finding nothing you want to see."[9]

As they listened to the curmudgeons discredit their compositions, it became apparent to the new generation of designers that the modern program presupposed categorical distinctions. As expressed by Tibor Kalman in the early 90s,

"Graphic design, says history, is a professional practice with roots in the modernist avant-garde. Design history creates boundaries: On this side is high design; on this side is low design. Over here is the professional and over there is the amateur. This is what's mainstream, that is what's marginal. Preserve this, discard that."[10]

In the last decade, there has been a growing awareness that dichotomies such "high" vs. "low" and "ugly" vs. "beautiful" are deeply rooted in the profession. But what remains unclear is that it is not the history book of graphic design which makes distinctions, but modernism itself. The chasm was ingrained in Western society long before modernism became the driving aesthetic for architects and designers. As argued by Andreas Hyussen in *After the Great Divide*,

"Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture."[11]

The modern aesthetic developed in accordance with changing cultural needs. As argued by Lawrence Levine in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, the fear of strangers, in conjunction with a new age of "the cheap, the common, the commercial, and all too often the ugly" prompted the dominant class to categorize "high" and "low" culture.[12] In his assessment of the social scene in 19th century America, Levine explains that rapid urbanization resulted in the masses and the higher social strata occupying

the same physical spaces. Aware that the erosion of *social* distinction was

immanent, *cultural* distinction became the tool for the American bourgeoisie

to maintain its hegemony. The elite successfully transformed public spaces such

as opera houses, theatres, museums and parks into sacred places, "convinced

that maintaining and disseminating pure art, music, literature and drama would

create a force for moral order and help to halt the chaos that was threatening

to envelop the nation".[13]

At the turn of the century, this gap between "legitimate", institutionalized,

bourgeois art and the art of mass culture was challenged by artistic movements

such as Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism and deStijl. These revolutionary

groups, also known as the "historical avant-garde" had distinct visions and

artistic inclinations, but their artistic fervor was fueled by their political

and social convictions. Fascism and Stalinism put an end to these movements.

And when the terminology was reappropriated by architects and graphic

designers following the War, the ideological grid was joined to a new language

of aesthetics that concentrated on pure form. Ironically, the Bauhaus design

style, which once aimed at creating a new spiritual society, became the lever

for the smooth functioning of the corporate capitalistic machine.

Both generations believed that art was "inextricably bound to the idea of

progression in industrial and technological civilization"[14] but as postmodern

architects argued in the 1970s, modernists paid "lip-service to the social

sciences", designing for Man rather than the people.[15] Modern designers and

architects did not believe that art could improve the world in the same way that

the Constructivists or Futurists did. Instead of merging art and ordinary life, they

anticipated design being the panacea of a "kitsch" consumer society. American

graphic design was born out of this biased premise. As Hyussen remarks,

> "It was only in the 1940s and 1950s that the modernism gospel and
> the concomitant condemnation of kitsch became something like
> the equivalent of the one-party state in the realm of aesthetics"[16]

In opposing kitsch, "the simulacra of genuine culture," designers became

the missionaries of a universal standard of beauty and legibility.[17] As it is now

understood, theories which espouse universality or objectivity are doomed

to failure, but in the days before postmodern critical activity, this top-down

idealism was the graphic designer's perceptual grid. The ideology was clearly

expressed by Ladislav Sutnar (1897-1976), who introduced modern graphic

design to America in the 1940s. The following summarizes his perspective:

> "Good visual design is serious in purpose. Its aim is not to attain
> popular success by going back to the nostalgia of the past, or by
> sinking to the infantile level of mythical public taste."[18]

Serious design in the modern tradition does not respond to the lowly

taste of the masses, nor does it reflect the personal taste of the designer. As

Vignelli explains, "there should be some assurance an original good program

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should not be wasted by temperamental designers who are more interested in expressing themselves than in solving the problem with which they must deal."[19] Serious graphic design, in line with Mies van der Rohe's motto, "form follows function", contains no reference to the past nor extraneous elements. Acclaimed typographer, Eric Gill (1882-1940) supports this view in *An Essay on Typography*.[20]

> "The 19th century architects' practice of designing ornamental walls and drawing out full size on paper every detail of ornament is now at last seen to be ridiculous even by architects... It is now understood that ornament is a kind of exuberance and that you cannot be exuberant by proxy; nineteenth century attempts at being so desolate, and a world which desires pleasure more than anything else finds itself surrounded by things which please no one but fools."[21]

Perhaps the tone of modernism, rather than the design itself, prompted the fierce backlash in the eighties. New forms were introduced, suggesting alternative ways for designers to respond to mass culture apart from adopting a position of indifference and detachment. As shown in Chapter Four, "postmodern" graphic design is decorative — and not at all serious. In a playful manipulation of imagery and fonts, contemporary waves in typography blur the boundary between "high" and "low" culture, merging high-end design and the everydayness of our digital environment. It is an activity that reinforces the idea that we live in a "deconstructed world, agitated by more and more complexity [and] where the attention span diminishes hourly."[22]

Whereas the style of modernism was influenced by 20th century industrial society, deconstructed forms are an expression of the technical advances and cultural shifts of our emerging digital culture. For those designers and architects who grew up within the modern tradition, the loss of their world in the 1980s was surely difficult to withstand. But to quote McLuhan, "for all their lamentations, the revolution had already taken place".[23]

[1] Vignelli, Massimo. "Long Live Modernity!" *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design.* Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 51-2.

[2] See examples of deStijl and Bauhaus typography, Figure A.

[3] Meggs, Philip B. *A History of Graphic Design.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983. 291.

[4] AT&T, United Way designed by Saul Bass; Westinghouse, UPS, IBM designed by Paul Rand; American Airlines, Bloomingdales designed by Massimo Vignelli

Lupton, Ellen. *Mixing Messages: Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. 39.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Rand, Paul. "A Paul Rand Retrospective." Cooper Union. Boston.Oct. 1996.

[8] Vignelli, Massimo. "Massimo Vignelli vs. Ed Benguiat (Sort of)." *Print.* XLV.V (1991): 91. See a cover of *Emigré* Magazine, Figure B.

[9] Kaplan, Michael. "The Visual Thinker Henry Wolf." *Graphis.* 293.50 (1994): 68.

[10] Kalman, Tibor, et al. "Good History/Bad History." *Looking Closer, Critical Writings on Graphic Design.* Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 27.

[11] Hyussen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Postmodernism, Mass Culture.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. vii.

[12] Levine, Lawrence. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986. 173.

[13] Ibid. p. 200.

[14] Hyussen, A. op. cit. 4.

[15] Venturi, Robert, et al. *Learning from Las Vegas.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997. 54.

[16] Hyussen, A. op. cit. 54.

[17] Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. 10.

[18] Heller, Steven. "Ladislav Sutnar: Pioneer of Information Design." *Graphic Design USA 17, The Annual of AIGA.* New York: AIGA, 1997. 57.

[19] Vigelli, Massimo. *Grids: Their Meaning and Use for Federal Designers.* Federal Design Library, National Endowment for the Arts, 1976. 9.

[20] This thesis is typeset in Gill Sans.

[21] Eric Gill. *An Essay on Typography.* Boston: David R. Godine, 1936. 8-9.

[22] Byrne, Chuck, et al. "A Brave New World: Understanding Deconstruction." *Looking Closer.* op. cit. 116.

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[23] McLuhan, Marshall. "Playboy Interview: A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media." *Essential McLuhan*. Ed. Eric McLuhan, and Frank Zingrone. Concord, ON: Anansi, 1995. 266.

11 EMIGRE

MACINTOSH

ANGELES / Taken
adders & Rick
ROTTERDAM / Rick
FRANCISCO / Eric

/ Gerard
Werken]
/ Jeffery
INDIANAPOLIS /
n Garrett
Lankelen

III. Cultural Parallels

The functional imperative of modern design to communicate directly to the reader is based on some underlying assumptions that have become apparent in our so-called "postmodern" society. But before identifying these surfacing postulations, some understanding of "modern" and "postmodern" terminology, along with the social and philosophical issues that surround it, will help situate design more profoundly within the culture that produces it. In this way, the discussion of "modern" or "postmodern" design is not reduced to a question of style.

The term, "postmodernity" was coined by Jean François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition,* where he argues that the legacy of the Enlightenment and all its claims to knowledge, along with faith in human progress, science and instrumental reason, have come to an end. His final remark in the text, "[l]et us wage on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable, let us activate the difference and save the honor of the name" captures the shift in our cultural landscape. [1] The loss of a "grand narrative" has led to a fragmented society composed of individuals with incommensurable beliefs.

In highlighting some of the changing conceptions of our "selves" and our communities, postmodern theorists have shown that our social reality no longer coincides with modern thought. But other thinkers argue that "postmodernity" should be considered as a time designation rather than as

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term with explanatory power. While recognizing the dramatic shifts in our society, they view our place in history as a continuity rather than as a break with the past.

For example, in his philosophical work, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, Richard Bernstein rejects the modern/postmodern dichotomy which dissolves any common ground between competing claims, and asks instead that we begin to address the ethical-political issues of our time. He is primarily concerned with the impasse that occurs in our society between individuals with opposing ethical positions, since neither side can rationally ground their arguments.

Part of the problem, Bernstein argues, is that we are often drawn into a misleading Either/Or debate. Either we hold the modern view that "there is a rational grounding of the norms of critique" or we take the postmodern position that "the conviction that there is such a rational grounding is itself a self-deceptive illusion."[2] Bernstein claims that these labels do not clarify our social conditions and that we can only begin to deal with the sensitive issues of our time by understanding our cultural "mood". He writes:

> "'Incommensurability', 'otherness', 'alterity', 'singularity',
> 'différence', 'plurality'. These signifiers reverberate throughout
> much of the twentieth-century philosophy. For all their difference,
> they are signs of a pervasive amorphous mood — what Heidegger
> calls a *Stimmung*. It is mood of deconstruction, destabilization,
> rupture and fracture — of resistance to all forms of abstract
> totality, universalism and rationalism."[3]

Bernstein addresses the problem by raising the Socratic question, "How should one live?" in a social milieu with others whose value systems and ethical convictions are incommensurable with our own, and at a time when there is no rational basis for our fundamental beliefs. It is an especially difficult problem given that "the dominant tendency in Western philosophy and metaphysics has been to privilege and valorize unity, harmony, totality and thereby denigrate, suppress, or marginalize multiplicity, contingency, particularity, singularity."[4]

In dealing with this plurality, Bernstein takes the pragmatist's position that calls for a "decentering" of the subject. In an encounter with an-other, the pragmatist takes responsibility for his or her claims by participating in a dialogue while recognizing his or her own fallibility. Defending one's arguments may involve a *bricolage* of strategies such as argumentation, narrative and imagining new possibilities, but a critique of the "Other" is never based on any certainty that convictions can be grounded. Nor is it based on an appeal to a form of relativity or pluralism where "anything goes". Bernstein does not discount the postmodern view that "an apparently irresistible pluralism renders any unilinear view of the world impossible".[5] Yet he does not find the situation hopeless. He argues:

> "The type of pluralism that represents what is best in our pragmatic tradition is an engaged fallibilistic pluralism. Such a pluralistic ethos places new responsibilities upon each of us. For it means taking our own fallibility seriously — resolving that however much we are committed to our own styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or

suppressing the otherness of the other. It means being vigilant against the dual temptation of simply dismissing what others are saying by falling back on one of those standard defensive ploys where we condemn it as obscure, woolly or trivial, thinking we can always easily translate what is alien into our own entrenched vocabularies."[6]

We accomplish this task, Bernstein explains, by grasping "an-other's position in the strongest possible light."[7] It is not so much a question of reconciling differences, as it is an attempt to meet on common ground. This "dialogical encounter" does not exclude conflict, but the "Other" becomes a "conversational partner", deserving of civility and respect.

Graphic design is not normally conceptualized within an ethical-political framework. But as an expression of the cultural moment, it is relevant within this larger social context. "Modern" or "postmodern" design entails more than a stylistic preference — it presupposes a value system that filters the way designers conceptualize their work. In addition to reflecting popular attitudes, the form graphic design takes embodies deep cultural dispositions. After all, when designers choose one way of visually communicating over another, they are also expressing the way they view the world and their place in it.

Keeping in mind Bernstein's philosophical concerns, modern design can be understood as a mechanism which dismisses the "Other" in an effort to create universal signification. To use Bernstein's terminology loosely, a "dialogical encounter" does not exist between the designer and the viewer,

since the audience is not treated as a "conversational partner". The functional ideal of modernism rejects the notion that messages could be interpreted differently by different audiences. Not only does it refuse to respond to the vernacular of mass culture in its dichotomizing of "high" and "low" art, it pays little heed to age, gender, class or race. While advertising targets particular audiences, graphic design seeks to distinguish itself from crass commercialism. As a result, the high modernism of the 1950s produced a visual culture that either classified or homogenized. Advertising overtly domesticated women and stereotyped races while graphic design tried to raise the aesthetic level of consciousness by flattening all difference.

In our modern/postmodern *Stimmung*, those who still believe they can improve the world through an idealization of form are unaware of the damaging social implications of their work. Recall Vignelli's opposition to "trivia, kitsch and all forms of subculture". His understanding of "postmodernity" as a kind of subculture rather than an emerging societal "mood" demonstrates that he is out of touch with the cultural fabric of our times. In 1995 he declared:

> "Post-modernism should be regarded at best as a critical evaluation
> of the issues of Modernism. None of us would be the same
> without it. However, the lack of a profound ideology eventually
> brought Post-Modernism to its terminal stage. In the cultural
> confusion provided by pluralism, and its eclectic manifestations,
> Modernism finds its raison d'être in its commitment to the original
> issues of its ideology and its energy to change the world into a
> better place in which to live. Long live the Modern Movement!"[8]

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Perhaps aware that his stance on the issue was becoming more and more unpopular, by 1998 Vignelli acknowledged the need for an alternative design approach. He became more forgiving of the design he once termed a "cultural calamity", and declared that there is room for two kinds of design — "structural" and "emotional". He explains:

> "On one side you have structural designers involved in structural information, and on the other side there is more involvement in the appearance of things. Maybe this is all right because you get something from it, and maybe that something has nothing to do with legibility, but it sets a mood, like in music. So I cannot anymore be ferociously against this side because there is indeed room for it too. Of course I do resent that because of the lack of structure, we have more people falling in love with the other side."[9]

Although he shows no signs of approval, Vignelli concedes that design can be textural as well. Careful not to undermine his position, he offers a structural/emotional dichotomy and does not hide his preference for one side. Vignelli's argument is fascinating; not for its acumen, but for the way it is constructed. In a typically modern way, Vignelli has tried to make sense of things by ordering the world into neat, separate packages. The notion that design can be structural *and* emotional does not fit within this system.

We previously saw how modernism dichotomizes between "high" and "low", "distinguished" and "vulgar", and "beautiful" and "ugly". In fact, oppositional binary systems underlie many of modernity's claims to knowledge.

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In the 17th century, when science became the new religion and objectivity the new god, Western civilization set out to create an ordered understanding of the world. A cultural value was secured to the notion of "absolute truth" and a new imperative was placed on the human race to uncover it. By the 1950s, this belief in an objective, attainable reality was so ingrained in the way the West produced meaning, the notion of a universal method of communication went undisputed.

The belief in the existence of an objective truth brings with it a system of binary oppositions, for where there is truth, there is falsehood. Apart from this core distinction, many other supposedly "natural" oppositions such as "reality" vs. "representation", "objective" vs. "subjective", "mind" vs. "body", "inside" vs. "outside", "original" vs. "copy" and "male" vs. "female" form modernity's perceptual grid. It is important to note that modernity did not only construct these dichotomies, but placed value on one side, linking meaning to power. This bias has repeatedly surfaced in feminist studies. As summarized by Judy Wacjman in *Feminism Confronts Technology,*

> "The science which was emerged was fundamentally based
> on the masculine projects of reason and objectivity. They
> characterized the conceptual dichotomizing central to scientific
> thought and to Western philosophy in general, as distinctly
> masculine. Culture vs. nature, mind vs. body, reason vs.
> emotion, objectivity vs. subjectivity, the public realm vs. the
> private realm — in each dichotomy the former must dominate
> the latter and the latter in each case seems to be systematically
> associated with the feminine."[10]

In our modern/postmodern *Stimmung*, the belief in the existence of an objective reality begins to break down, along with the categorical binary oppositions like those mentioned above. We have begun to acknowledge that the West's relentless search for absolute knowledge has been futile and that the existence of a single reality is an illusion. We are also aware that conceptual dichotomies — far from being "objective" or "natural" — were aimed at controlling the production of meaning, expediting an ordered understanding of the world.

Having briefly outlined the modern paradigm, what becomes clear is that while attempting to broaden his philosophy to incorporate new realities, Vignelli ultimately clings to the traditional grid. "Structural" design is directed toward the objective eye, and "emotional" design, like music, relies on the subjective apparatus of the body (which simply gets in the way of clear communication). Vignelli continues:

> "In the last twenty years, we have seen teachers more interested in teaching an attitude of 'why not' and 'what if'. That is the postmodern mentality. It is what's emerging from people who were rejected by the mainstream of thinking because they were incapable, and eventually there were so many, they became a culture. They are the generation of the why-nots who have a "let's try, who-cares" attitude as opposed to those who have a social responsibility and involvement, a commitment to making a better world. It's not up to graphic designers to change the world, but everything visual and everything that surrounds us can be better design if you don't offer the alternative of bad design."[11]

Vignelli's position is extreme and perhaps insignificant to a younger generation of designers who would agree with him on at least one count — that he is "on the way out."[12] Yet his views have helped create a forum in which design discourse has taken place over the last two decades. Unfortunately, the rhetoric of this discourse has led to a simplistic understanding that modernity is about legible typefaces and social responsibility and that postmodernity is illegible, reckless design.

To declare that designers who are fragmenting type and crossing the line between text and image have a "why-not, let's try, who cares" attitude is to miss what is most important about design. As a cultural voice, design reflects the social construction of meaning. In our modern/postmodern *Stimmung*, design can be structural *and* emotional, fragmented *and* socially responsible. Design, like the culture that contains it, has not quite left modernity behind.

Unlike Vignelli, Bernstein avoids the slippery distinctions between "modernity" and "postmodernity" by blurring the boundary between them. In another account, sociologist, Anthony Giddens, claims that "postmodernity" is not the supersession, but the maturation of modern thought. Giddens also acknowledges that our society has transformed radically since the 17th century, but he questions whether we are, in fact, living in conditions that can be labeled "post" modern. In *The Consequences of Modernity* he explains:

"The break with providential views of history, the dissolution of foundationalism, together with the emergence of counterfactual future-oriented thought and the 'emptying out' of progress by continuous change, are so different from the core perspectives of the Enlightenment as to warrant the view that far reaching transitions have occurred. Yet referring to these as post-modernity is a mistake which hampers an accurate understanding of their nature and implications."[13]

Giddens admits that claims of absolute knowledge have been replaced by a social environment of doubt, plurality and incommensurable beliefs, yet he states that it is misleading to describe our stage in history as "postmodern". Giddens suggests that a continuity exists between contemporary perspectives and the modern conception of the world which emerged in 17th century Europe, and he indirectly reveals their similarities by contrasting the two eras with traditional society. He argues that "[i]nherent in the idea of modernity is a contrast with tradition" and it is only within this greater historical perspective that he can establish that postmodernity is simply a later stage of modernity. Instead of dismissing the past, Giddens maintains that "the disjunctions which have taken place should rather be seen as resulting from the self-clarification of modern thought, as the remnants of traditional and providential outlooks are cleared away."[14]

Giddens' method of contrasting traditional and modern society highlights the essential characteristics of modernity and reveals the nature of contemporary social life. His hypothesis is that modernity is expressed by three

profound changes in our social relations; "time-space distanciation", the "disembedding" of social systems and the "reflexivity" of modernity. Fundamentally different than social relations within traditional society, these three features describe our society's dynamic complexion.

Giddens claims that "time" and "space" were linked in pre-modern societies, but that the invention of the mechanical clock disconnected "when" from "where" (the "emptying of time"). This mechanization led to the social organization of time, which ultimately caused a separation of "place" from "space" (the "emptying of space"). Giddens explains that this occurred because the ordering of society became independent from the actual presence and activities of its members.

The splitting of time and space creates the condition for "disembedding", the second feature of modernity. "Disembedding" is "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of space-time".[15] Social relations become suspended and "absent" others (strangers) appear within the local setting, resulting in distanciated human relations as well.

Lastly, Giddens' analysis of the "reflexivity" of modernity highlights another profound change in our society. Fundamentally different than the world-view of traditional society, this reflexivity unearths an enigmatic truth

about modernity that has become apparent now that our civilization has matured. He writes,

> "The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character ... [W]hen the claims of reason replaced those of tradition, they appeared to offer a sense of certitude greater than provided by preexisting dogma. But this idea only appears persuasive so long as we do not see that the reflexivity of modernity actually subverts reason, at any rate where reason is understood as gaining knowledge."[16]

If in conditions of modernity the social modes of life are examined endlessly in this circular fashion, then "reason" was tainted by subjectivity from the very start. This is an intriguing argument, for it dispels the postmodern view that our inability to ground epistemology is a recent phenomenon. The only difference is that now we all experience anxiety from "being left with questions where once there appeared to be answers."[17]

Although "time-space" distanciation and "disembedding" help us to understand the cultural climate in which we visually communicate, the "reflexivity" of the modern directly relates to shifting attitudes in graphic design. For one, there is no longer any certitude that "rational" problem solving will guarantee that the reader gains knowledge. As well, new signifying practices intentionally undermine the modern aesthetic by calling "objective" methods

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into question. Designers now even claim that legibility has little to do with meaning.

As one designer argues, "[l]egibility presents information as facts, rather than as experience... There is nothing wrong with logic or linearity, but these qualities satisfy only the rational side of the brain."[18] The issue of legibility will be discussed in the next chapter, but first it is important to clarify why modern design values direct communication in the first place. This question corresponds to Giddens' observation that in the West we are uncomfortable with unanswered questions.

According to postmodern thinker, Jean Baudrillard, we live in a disenchanted world where "everything must be produced, legible, real, visible, accountable, indexed and recorded."[19] Modern design, which simplifies visual elements in order to achieve clarity of communication, has coincided with this tendency in the West. For instance, usage of the grid and transparent typography was the designer's way of structuring the world so that everything could be revealed and understood. It seems that underlying the modern aesthetic is a cultural drive to search relentlessly for "truth" and "meaning".

Before the 17th century, any search for a higher truth unanswerable by the Church was deemed heretical. But as mentioned above, the Enlightenment set us on a course to dispel all mystery. In attempting to make everything transparent, our culture began to worship the idea of an "objective" reality.

And faith in instrumental reason led to the assumption that truth is within our reach. The modern aesthetic simply mirrored this cultural predisposition. If there were a message to be communicated, it would be a universal one. There would be no hidden meanings, no nuances, no uncertainty.

From a Western point of view, it seems somewhat dubious to question graphic design's objective to clearly convey ideas. After all, what is the point of communication design if the message is misunderstood? Yet it does not seem so absurd once we recognize that there are ways to communicate, without making "everything speak, everything babble, everything climax."[20] One way to support this argument is to briefly describe a culture that does not attempt to "unearth all that is hidden."[21]

Consider Masatoshi Toda's posters for a Japanese department store called Vivre 21.[22] One depicts melting, luscious lips; the other, a woman's elongated hat, adorned with a lopsided hat. To look for hidden meaning in these images only serves to undermine their power of non-communication. As Baudrillard explains, any system "such that the signs no longer make sense, will exercise a remarkable power of fascination."[23] This is the power of the Japanese image — there is no description, no definition, no signification, no truth and no finality.[24]

The recognition that no amount of reason will produce an objective world may be a late 20th century Western phenomenon, but it is a conception

of the universe that Eastern cultures have taken for granted for thousands of

years. In Japan, for example, aesthetics are not presided by a rational order,

for there is no drive to reproduce reality. This idea is implicit in the following

poem,

> Smash a cherry tree
And you will find no flower
> In the splinters.
It is in the sky of spring
That cherry blossoms bloom[25]

The great fifteenth century Noh actor, Zeami Motokiyo, refers to this

poem in describing the existence of two kinds of realities, an ordinary one

and a higher one. Whereas in the West it has long been thought that knowledge

of a "higher reality" is attainable through detached observation, the Japanese

aesthetic affirms that "its essence is hidden and remains unnoticed in ordinary

human life."[26]

In *The Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo explains that the utopian ideal

of the Enlightenment was based on the belief that our self-understanding would

bring about our emancipation. And he suggests that the only kind of freedom

that we are now capable of experiencing is one that "oscillates between

belonging and disorientation."[27] The West is beginning to acknowledge that

"being no longer coincides with what is stable, fixed and permanent" and Vattimo

proposes that perhaps we will now be able to be human.[28] Yet the idea that

our ontological state is fragile and impermanent has always been one

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of the most significant aspects of the Japanese aesthetic. According to Buddhist teachings,

> "It is the failure or refusal to acknowledge that existence is
> transitory through and through that gives rise to frustration.
> If existence is a continual process of 'arising and passing away'
> then the idea that there are enduring, self-identical things —
> including human egos or selves — may be shown to be an illusion,
> a fabrication designed to mask the radically ephemeral nature
> of existence."[29]

Disquieted by the unknown, the West purges all nuance. As Baudrillard argues, "everything must pass into the absolute evidence of the real."[30] In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes makes the same argument. He writes,

> "The West moistens everything with meaning... we systematically
> subject utterance (in a desperate filling-in of any nullity which might
> reveal the emptiness of language)..."[31]

Barthes discusses the way in which the traditional Japanese aesthetic unveils the "emptiness of language." For instance, he observes that the appropriate response to a Zen master's question "What is a fan?" is "to close the fan and scratch one's neck with it, to reopen it, put a cookie on it and offer it to the master."[32] Similarly, the haiku poem is characterized by a "suspension of meaning."[33] According to Barthes, it is "spoken twice, in echo, in order to underline the nullity of meaning."[34]

This subconscious drive to "get to the bottom of things" explains the modernist compulsion to create visual forms that are universally understood. As described by Natalia Ilyin in a recent article on the revival of modern approaches in graphic design,

> "Modernism looks for the structure behind the structure. It doesn't present the world the way it is, it designs and builds and creates along designated lines. It explains the world to you in terms of its own invented language. It tries to get to the essence of meaning. It believes there is such an essence."[35]

Once we acknowledge that the compulsion to discover the "essence" of things is an attempt "to get the butterfly net of rationalism over the trembling wings of culture" we can begin to conceive of another kind of communication which closes the gap between "truth" and "falsehood", "appearance" and "reality".[36] Perhaps it is not as comforting as the structure that organizes our fragmented world into something more manageable. But for those who are not compelled to make perfect sense of life while experiencing it, the dissolution of these oppositions triggers an exciting response. To use Baudrillard's ideas in *Seduction*, Japanese communication design teases the viewer. In this "duel" between image and viewer, "everything is exchanged allusively, without everything being spelled out, the equivalent of the allusive ceremonial exchange of a secret."[37] Nothing is communicated, yet everything is understood.

Modern design tried to tidy up our unkempt society. But the implication

was that there is only one way to sanitize. In declaring that their practices were

"neutral" and "objective", modernists were designing in accordance with a

particular understanding of the way people envision the world. It was simply

accepted that the human eye — divorced from the subjective apparatus of the

emotional body — would always decipher a message in the same way. Jonathan

Crary in "Modernizing Vision", describes this model of vision.

> "Monocularity, like perspective... was one of the Renaissance
> codes through which a visual world is constructed according
> to systematized constraints and from which any inconsistencies
> and irregularities are banished to insure the formation of a
> homogenous, unified and fully legible space."[38]

This Renaissance notion of a singular eye identifying a "legible" space

was incorporated quite seamlessly within the field of graphic design. In its

appropriation of the model of linear perspective vision, modern design attempts

to control the eye and thereby dismisses the creativity of viewing. This way of

seeing is described by Robert Romanyshyn in *Technology, Symptom and Dream.*

In his discussion of Renaissance painting, Romanyshyn explains that the way

artists began to represent the world in the fifteenth century caused a cultural

form of vision that turned "the self into a spectator, the world into a spectacle

and the body in to a specimen."[39] In his view, the depiction of the world on

the canvas formed our actual perception of it. We became isolated selves,

detached from our own bodies and from the "outside" world, which we were left to observe from a distance.

Romanyshyn's metaphor of a closed "window" describes a barrier between us and the world which can only be penetrated by the eye, implying that the visual component of our being is the only bridge between "inside" and "outside". As a result, our disjointed world (the legacy of the partition of the canvas) is infinitely removed from us. And the eye, as a gazing, distant point in space, distills our soulful sensuality. He writes,

> "The vanishing point, the point where the world as texture, quality, and difference has shrunk to a geometric dot, has no sound, no taste, no smell, no color, no feel, no quality. It has only measure."[40]

Romanyshyn claims that linear perspective vision was an artistic view of the world that became a cultural one, as the "innate geometry of our eyes" began to perceive everything in the world on the same horizontal plane.[41] This model of vision corresponds to the modernist doctrine, which rejects an interplay between viewer and image and affirms that our internal makeup does not alter the impressions we receive. The modern designer's objective is to control the viewer's detached visual component so that information is transmitted seamlessly. In this process, meaning is finite and the text is closed.

This theory of vision, which distinguishes between "inside" and "outside", parallels the modern designer's desire to distance human perception and art.

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Although modernists have been cautious not to substantiate their methods on the basis of subjective preferences, the position of detachment can ultimately be explained by an individual's taste. Pierre Bourdieu explores the notion of "taste" in his work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. He suggests that one's cultural orientation is a result of one's education and social origin; that "taste" is not the sum of all that is taught, but the result of one's *habitus*.

Bourdieu explains that art can either be perceived as a "mode" of representation (an end-in-itself) or as an "object" of representation (a reflection of ordinary life), depending on the point of view of the observer. In describing the former way of experiencing art, Bourdieu writes:

> "The interest in the content of the representation which leads people to call 'beautiful' the representation of beautiful things, especially those which speak most immediately to the senses and the sensibility, is rejected in favor of the indifference and distance which refuse to subordinate judgment to the nature of the object represented."[42]

In order for this distancing between human perception and art to occur, Bourdieu explains that one must "possess the cultural competence, that is, the code to which it is encoded."[43] It is this detached way of observing art, which Bourdieu calls the "aesthetic disposition". Unlike 'popular' taste, which reduces art to life, the pure aesthetic "is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world."[44]

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As Bourdieu states, the formal refinement of "high" culture is:

> "a sort of censorship of the expressive content which explodes
> in the expressiveness of popular language, and by the same token,
> a distancing, inherent in the calculated coldness of all formal
> exploration, a refusal to communicate concealed at the heart of
> communication itself, both in an art which takes back and refuses
> what it seems to deliver..."[45]

The inherent contradiction of modernism, when applied to graphic design, has become utterly transparent by Bourdieu's words. If design is a medium of communication, how can it be associated with a methodology that refuses to communicate? When design is treated as sacralized art, it "takes back and refuses what it seems to deliver".

The formal properties of a work of art are not apparent to one who lacks the "aesthetic disposition". Similarly, modern graphic design does not "speak" to mass culture because it makes no use of the latter's visual language (i.e.: the vernacular). In its "break with the ordinary attitude toward the world,"[46] modern graphic design refrains from reflecting "popular" taste and therefore only succeeds in communicating its own cultural bent. Modern design advocates a detached and indifferent way of viewing, incarnating a theory of vision that is based not on feel, but on a casual coolness that has only measure.

Having identified how some aspects of the Western mentality have been molded into the doctrine of modern design, it has become palpably clear that graphic design is culturally inflected. The argument extends to the digital era,

where "reality begins to present itself as softer and more fluid."[47] Over the last

two decades, designers have begun to incorporate this conception of the world

into their work, and in doing so, have acknowledged that our interiority has an

effect on the way we see.

[1] Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979. 82.

[2] Bernstein, Richard J. *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992. 8.

[3] Ibid. 57.

[4] Ibid. 58.

[5] Vattimo, Gianni. *The Transparent Society.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1992. 6.

[6] Bernstein, R. op. cit. 336.

[7] Ibid. 337.

[8] Vignelli, Massimo. "Long Live Modernity!" *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design.* Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 52.

[9] Vignelli, Massimo. "Massimo Vignelli on Rational Design." *Design Dialogues.* Ed. Steven Heller, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1998. 6.

[10] Wacjman, Judy. *Feminism Confronts Technology.* University Park: Penn. State UP, 1991. 5.

[11] Massimo Vignelli. "Massimo Vignelli on Rational Design." op. cit. 7.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. 51.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid. 21.

[16] Ibid. 38-9.

[17] Ibid. 149.

[18] Poynor, Rick, et al, ed. "Type and Deconstruction in the Digital Era." *Typography Now: The New Wave.* Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 16.

[19] Baudrillard, Jean. *Seduction.* New York: St. Martins Press, 1990. 34.

[20] Ibid. 20.

[21] Ibid. 32.

[22] Kuro, Sachiko. and Kazuo Suzuki, photographers. *Advertising Photography in Japan.* Japan Advertising Photographers' Association: Japan, 1990. 116.
Lips reprined in 1999. Edward, Gomez, M., ed. *New Design: Tokyo: The Edge of Graphic Design.* Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers, 1999. 194. See Figure C.

[23] Baudrillard, J. op. cit. 77.

[24] Barthes, Roland. *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1982. 82.

[25] Ueda, Makoto. "Zeami on the Art of No Drama: Imitation, Yugen and Sublimity." *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*. Ed. Nancy G. Hume. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. 188.

[26] Ibid. 189.

[27] Vattimo, G. op cit. 57.

[28] Ibid. 10-11.

[29] Parkes, Graham. "Ways of Japanese Thinking." *Japanese Aesthetics*. op cit. 84.

[30] Baudrillard, J. op cit. 29.

[31] Barthes, R. op cit. 70.

[32] Ibid. 83.

[33] Ibid. 81.

[34] Ibid. 76.

[35] Ilyin, Natalia. "Warm Fuzzy Modernism." in *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*. 16.2 (1998): 4.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Baudrillard, J. op cit. 112.

[38] Crary, Jonathan. "Modernizing Vision." *Vision and Visuality*. Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, No. 2. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1998. 33.

[39] Romanyshn, Robert. *Technology as Symptom and Dream*. New York: Routledge Press, 1989. 33.

[40] Ibid. 89.

[41] Ibid. 32.

[42] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. 32.

[43] Ibid. 2.

[44] Ibid. 5.

[45] Ibid. 34.

[46] Ibid. 31.

[47] Romanyshyn, R. op cit. 59.

Fig. C

半人半魚。
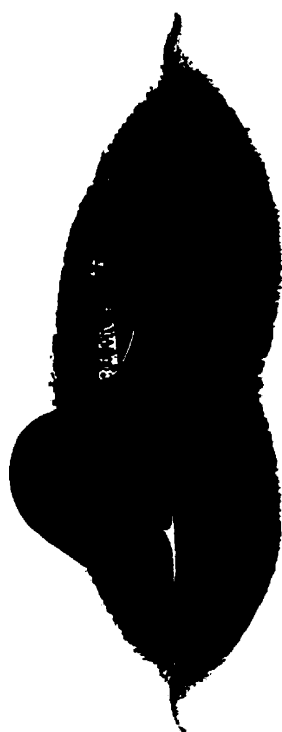
VIVRE21

夜会人。

VIVRE21

IV. Looking into Space

As discussed, modern design is supported by a model of vision that presupposes a linear path between a viewer's eye and an object of perception. In this conception there is no "space" between the eye and an image because the act of seeing is not understood to incorporate human experience. Rather, the "eye of distant and infinite vision" is a gazing, mechanistic, singular eye, which is disembodied from the self and shielded from the outside. [1]

This notion of monocularity and of the separation of the eye from the body are also addressed by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Romanyshyn claims that the invention of linear perspective painting served to isolate the visual component of our senses and divorce the self from the world. McLuhan, on the other hand, argues that the introduction of the phonetic alphabet and the printing press caused a break between the eye and the ear, disrupting the sensory complex and impairing the social spirit.

McLuhan explains that whereas an interplay of all the senses in traditional oral societies promoted a heterogeneous space of human interaction and interdependence, the invention of the printing press promoted an adverse cultural transformation. He shows that printed matter was instrumental in causing the visual component to become abstracted from the other senses, inducing an internalized, static and compartmentalized lived experience which ultimately led to a society of detached individuals.

McLuhan argues that humanity inherited a "fixed point of view" due to the abstraction of the visual factor. But unlike Romanyshyn, McLuhan looks positively on technological innovation. He claims that our emerging electronic age could bring back the "mythic, collective dimension of human experience" that was experienced in oral culture.[2] For him, new information technologies are causing a shift in our sense ratios, resulting in a reunification with one's self and with others. He writes,

> "The 'simultaneous field' of electric information structures, today reconstitutes the conditions and need for dialogue and participation, rather than specialism and private initiative in all levels of social experience."[3]

McLuhan's writings are prophetic given that the computer's multi-media and interactive capabilities, along with its capability to layer and link moving type and images, encourage continuous and simultaneous experience. And his understanding of our relationship with our emerging electronic culture describes a new kind of visual experience that occurs when typography enters the "polymorphous digital realm."[4] McLuhan observes that the electronic age "is not mechanical but organic, and has little sympathy [for] the values achieved through typography, 'this mechanical way of writing'..."[5]

Typographic expression in the "electronic age" incorporates the idea that viewing is a process of human involvement, which entails an "act of consciousness".[6] Ron Burnett articulates this point in *Cultures of Vision*, where

he explains that images are not just representations that enter our field of vision, but are experienced by us in a personal way. In examining our response to images, Burnett introduces the concept of "projection", which he describes as a "meeting point of desire, meaning and interpretation".[7] This union is, metaphorically speaking, a "space" between the viewer and the viewed, where the eye, along with the rest of the body and the human state of consciousness, encounters an image and creatively interprets it. Rather than presume that we are detached from that which is "outside" ourselves, "projection" is a way of describing how we subjectively and imaginatively engage with our world.

According to Burnett, even though we inject meaning into images — and are in that sense responsible for what we see — we do not have an observing power over the world. We may be fabricating our own viewing process when we project, but our fragile subjectivity hinges on physical, emotional and psychological states. As Burnett explains, projections are "like filters, which retain all of the traces of communication, but are always in transition between the demands made by the image and the needs of the viewer".[8]

Although his discussion is primarily about images, Burnett's theory of vision can be applied to the way we experience graphic design. In fact, Joanna Drucker has made a similar argument in *The Visible World: Experimental Typography and Modern Art:*

"[T]he materiality of the signifier, whether it be word or image, is linked to its capacity to either evoke or designate sensation as it transformed into perception, and that it in no case has a guaranteed truth value, only the relative accuracy within the experience of an individual subject."[9]

Burnett's notion of "projection" is helpful in identifying some of the features of typographic design in a digital environment where designers have brazenly blurred the distinction between type and image. But first it should be noted that this is not the first time that graphic artists have tampered with the visual organization of knowledge. For example, the avant-garde poster at the turn of the century began to test the limits of legibility as advertisers responded to consumers' piqued interest in stylized typefaces.

As Drucker points out, unlike the serious, "unmarked" literary or biblical text which contains truth-value in the words themselves, "marked" advertising copy was manipulated so that words had a voice of their own.[10] Later on, Dadaists and Futurists shattered this distinction between "serious" and "playful" texts by symbolically marking their poems and manifestos. Filippo Marinetti, for example violated the letterform by capitalizing on its signifying power.[11] His desire was to "treat words like torpedoes and hurl them forth at all speeds".[12]

Despite these spurts of resistance, print culture since Gutenberg idealized a transparent alphabet for "serious" texts. Fonts changed according to the fashion of the times — serifs were adjusted and the relationship between "thick" and "thins" was negotiated — but type was always utilized to

communicate, with utmost clarity, the meaning of the words it formed. Ideas were validated by the "unmarked" text, which was linear, uniform, neutral, accessible, seamless and serious.[13]

Recently, digitization has empowered designers to transform the mechanics of representation and test the limits of legibility. As a result, demands are being made on the viewer to interpret messages. It is now expected that something like "projection" will occur while reading. Romanyshyn argues that "the computer will give flesh to this eye which in abandoning the body has dreamed of a vision of the world unmoved by the appeal of the world, a vision no longer moved by the allure of things".[14] But judging from contemporary waves in typography, McLuhan has it right; the digital medium brings about a "stream of consciousness" and an "open field of perception" creating the possibility for a richer viewing activity.[15]

When type is treated as a design element, there is more to visually interpret than a literal meaning. But when typography is treated as imagery — that is, when it is pushed to the limits of legibility — the result is an enhanced visual involvement on the part of the viewer. There is no clear distinction between type as a design element and type as an image, but certainly the relationship between typographic form and its traditional function has evolved in digital culture. Instead of emphasizing legibility, new approaches to communication design do not adhere to "objective" standards. In fact, it has

been argued that the more often a new typeface is used, the more familiar it

becomes. As stated by type designer, Neville Brody "readability is a conditioned

state".[16] Since words are no longer expected to contain truth-value, the fact

that they are illegible does not seem to present too much of a problem for the

designer. As the digital medium encourages designers to treat letters as images,

readers are simply invited to interpret messages on their own terms.

The less legible a typeface becomes, either on its own or in its

juxtaposition with other graphic elements, the more it takes on an inherent

image. When this occurs, words are no longer simply read, but understood

within the context of an entire visual construction. This new visual language

conditions readers to approach text differently — to look *into* a two-

dimensional space (page or screen) in order to decipher meaning. Put somewhat

differently, Richard Lanham argues that now we look "at" text rather than

"through" it.[17] Readers look "at" text because type designers go through pains

to ensure that their fonts are not overlooked in the reading process.

As Brody explains:

> "I wanted to take the role of typography away from a purely
> subservient, practical role towards one that is potentially more
> expressive and visually dynamic. There are no special characters
> and presently no lower–case is planned. The font is designed
> to have no letter spacing, and ideally it should be set with no line
> space. I decided not to include a complete set of punctuation
> marks and accents, encouraging people to create their own if
> needed."[18]

When the Macintosh computer was introduced to the field of graphic design in the eighties, designers began to layer and dissolve graphic elements, type being just one of them. This tendency has grown into a movement that not only encourages designers to test the limits of legibility, but also provides justification for this practice. Due to the influx of empowering technologies and the pervasive mood of our culture, new graphic forms are being generated by the design community.

The blurring of type and image is clearly a manifestation of our cultural tendency to renegotiate boundaries, but the technological impact cannot be overstated. Only recently could designers manipulate fonts, fragment letters, colorize images and create darkroom effects such as multiple exposures. Digitization eliminated their dependence on other professionals such as typesetters and photo retouchers, and enabled endless experimentation. The decline of modernist ideas of "good design" was inevitable the moment designers dipped their creative fingertips into the binary pool.

In the 1980s, the theory of "deconstruction" was incorporated into graphic design, initiating its entry into the postmodern scene. Deconstruction, as we learned from Jacques Derrida in *Grammatology*, is the technique of breaking down a "whole" in order to reflect critically on its parts. When using this method, the designer affirms that different interpretations will be discovered within the fabric that holds a message together.

The linearity of modernism implies a separation between the viewer and the viewed, corresponding to Romanyshyn's model of vision that describes a "withdrawal of the self from the world".[19] It is a design philosophy that dismisses the "creativity of viewing"[20] in favor of an ordered creative process on the part of the designer. In contrast, typographic deconstruction demands that a viewer takes part in the interpretation of a message by considering the interplay between words, letters, images and texture.

As a design methodology, deconstruction may seem meaningless and purposeless because its readability is secondary to its attempt to engage the reader and elicit a visual response. Yet, far from endorsing "design for its own sake," more designers are endorsing the sort of communication that will "promote multiple rather than fixed readings" and "provoke the reader into becoming an active participant in the construction of the message".[21] In the 1980s, the Cranbrook Academy of Art embraced this strategy of visual organization:

> "The Cranbrook theorist's aim, derived from French philosophy
> and literary theory, is to deconstruct, or break apart and expose,
> the manipulative visual language and different levels of meaning
> embodied in design."[22]

Whereas modernism's goal of achieving objectivity and universality captured the essence of print culture, typographic deconstruction is aligned with the technological advances occurring in the digital realm. As a style, the layered,

unfinished, simultaneous feel of deconstruction has replaced the metaphor of speed inherited from the industrial age.[23]   But deconstruction is not so much about style as it is about a new understanding of how we experience text in the digital landscape. It does not simply address the new *look* of design but a new way of *looking* at design.

By considering communication design within the context of literary theory, graphic design is situated in the society that creates it. Along with reflecting the cultural mood, the theory of deconstruction highlights yet another one of those familiar Western binary oppositions that went unchallenged by the Modern Movement — the writing/speech dichotomy. As explained by Drucker, structural linguists culled speech in utterance because of its perceived time-based immediacy and purity.[24] Unlike the truthful spontaneity of expression, writing was viewed as an inferior copy of speech, farther removed from interior consciousness and therefore seen to contain no linguistic value.

It is clear by now that modernism implicitly adhered to this distinction in its drive to keep viewers looking "through" text. In a context where speech is privileged, graphic design only makes matters worse. Twice removed from the meaning of the word, the stylized letterform strays even farther from the initial thought. This aberration was detected by the Bauhaus and later outlawed by high modernism at mid-century.

In the same way that language functions as a system in structural linguistics, structuralist typography is based on a font family rather than on the individuality of letterforms. As Ellen Lupton explains in *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design:*

> "Fonts created at the Bauhaus were a "typographic analogue for structural philosophy and linguistics... by shifting the emphasis from the individual letter to the overall series of characters, structuralist typography exchanged the fixed identity of the letter for the relational system of the font. In the twentieth century, modernism invested this mode of formal manipulation with ideological significance by replacing the silicitous novelty of advertising display faces with a visual assault on mass culture and the middle classes."[25]

The writing/speech dichotomy is understood by Derrida as encapsulating the Western drive for closure. He argues against the distinction between "live" speech and "dead" letters which structural linguists had constructed in an effort to link truth with the voice closest to the self. Like Baudrillard and Barthes, Derrida shows that truth was an illusion in Western thought, since both writing and speech have no final meaning.

As well, Derrida argues that writing affects the way we think and speak. The text remains open and there is just deconstructive difference. As Ellen Lupton explains, "[a] work of design can be called deconstruction when it exposes and transforms the established rules of writing, interrupting the sacred "inside" of content and the profane "outside" of form".[26] The idea that it is

not the written words, *per se*, but the disorganization of graphic elements that can extend meaning, is a powerful manifestation of Derrida's theory.

This blurring of "inside" and "outside" recalls Burnett's theory of "projection", which incorporates the view that words and images are not the sources of meaning. Like Burnett, contemporary designers argue that a seeing audience is not made up of receptors of images (and words), but capable of engaging in an interpretive "space". As well, they view typography similarly to the way Burnett regards imagery — that it "should address our capacity for intuitive insight and simultaneous perception, and stimulate our senses as well as engaging our intellect".[27] The "meeting point of desire, meaning and interpretation"[28] is now part of a viewer's textual experience as well. The layering, texturing, and overall fluidity of typography and imagery that ensues from new media technologies have affected the way we take "in" information. The self is absorbed into the act of viewing, the eye is embodied and the window is open.

Designers who implicitly acknowledge that viewing is an act of projection have been creating an arena where the imagination can reign. In such instances, words no longer follow a horizontal path from left to right, there is no consistency in kerning (letter spacing) or leading (line spacing), the words are partially hidden and the fonts are abstract. As a result, the eye roams, looking

into the printed page or glowing screen, where meaning is revealed through an evaluation of the entire space.

In our digital landscape, we do not "design and invent our world" in accordance with a particular vision"[29] but reinvent our world and ourselves each time we encounter a visual message. Reading requires that we use our intellect, but the new typography also encourages a "shifting movement from awareness to knowledge, to desire and its negation".[30] It has become a process of construction and of deconstruction.

In keeping with the idea that projections are "potential meanings,"[31] deconstruction compels each viewer to interpret a message in his or her own way. And this is precisely what contemporary designers find exciting about the creative process. As stated by Californian type designer, Jeffery Keedy,

> "If someone interprets my work in a way that is totally new to
> me, I say fine. That way your work has a life of its own. You
> create a situation for people to do with it what they will, and you
> don't create an enclosed or encapsulated moment."[32]

Similar to the way postmodern architecture used ornament in an attempt to engage the imagination,[33] typographic deconstruction is sometimes decorative in its attempt to engage or amuse a reader.[34] The computer generation has become accustomed to this way of reading, this way of looking *into* space. The designer blurs the line of legibility, underscoring the open text and confirming that the only knowable truth is that truth itself is an illusion.[35]

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Designers are now manipulating type and imagery in order to engage the viewer and beckon interpretation. Ultimately, the distinction between "designer" and "viewer" is blurred, as whoever looks into the space takes part in the creativity of viewing. In the digital realm, the designer is also the viewer, as implied by the following statement by April Greiman, whose "hybrid imagery" brought her fame in the eighties:[36]

> "I've just begun to explore the rich possibilities of being able to design in space. By this I mean that a document, a file is not 'site dependent' but rather is a global object capable of simultaneous creation from many different locations and sources."[37]

The implication of this statement — that a designer loses control over the work — is a distressing prospect for designers who came of age before computers became integral to the way we function in society. These traditionalists who uphold the ideals of modernity are apprehensive of new technologies and are not particularly concerned with the desires of younger viewing audiences. They overlook the fact that lucid and instantly intelligible messages are not necessarily appealing or engaging to a target a market that grew up on CD-ROMs and video games. Accustomed to decoding words, our youth culture revels in the creativity of looking.

The disregard for what form of design is alluring and captivating to this audience results in an inability to find the appropriate design "solution". Vignelli's remarks are most memorable:

"One should not confuse freedom with responsibility. It's like freaking out in a sense. The kind of expansion of the mind that they're doing is totally uncultural."[38]

Vignelli is referring to the typographic treatments found in *Emigré* Magazine, a publication now considered a benchmark of superior design. Clearly, Vignelli's reaction is due to his adherence to a design methodology that is not audience-centered.[39] Henry Wolf also has an adverse reaction to the "computer-generated stuff". In comparing some deconstructed text to the work of legendary designer, Paul Rand, he states, "here there are lines going through the words, running in, running out, different kinds of type. The designers want to be unique — so this is what they come up with".[40] The value of Wolf's work stems from its successful conveyance of a single, clear message through visual metaphor. And since it is doubtful that he ever had an idea that could be improved by a computer, it is understandable that his malaise lies in the fact that bad design is sometimes the result of the infinite possibilities of 1's and 0's.

The aging legends of the graphic design community would agree that "post-modernism has replaced a faith in renewal with parody, quotation, pastiche, and an uneasy alliance with technology".[41] But it is *their* uneasy alliance with technology that fuels their discontent. Their position is based on the belief that technology does not touch us in a positive way, that it should remain outside the realm of creativity because it only serves to undermine our ability

to think by ourselves. Like Romanyshyn, they believe that "technology has eclipsed the life of imagination more than it has been its realization".[42] They do not recognize that technology often creates the conditions for the designer and the viewer to experience new ways of looking — both can delight in the technology without being bound by it.

The debate between "good" and "bad" design is animated and destined to continue. But it is not just interesting from the perspective of design critique; It reinforces the fact that our interaction with new technologies generates new kinds of cultural meaning. Deconstruction in design reveals how we use technology to make ourselves heard, inviting us to contemplate what it is we are saying.

[1] Romanyshyn, Robert. *Technology as Symptom and Dream.* New York: Routledge Press, 1989. 97.

[2] McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968. 269.

[3] Ibid. 141.

[4] Poynor, R. Poynor, Rick, et al, ed. "Type and Deconstruction in the Digital Era." *Typography Now: The New Wave.* Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 12.

[5] McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy.* op cit. 135.

[6] Burnett, Ron. *Cultures of Vision: Images, Media and the Imaginary.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 36.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. 36-7.

[9] Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible World: Experimental Typography and Modern Art. 1909-1923.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 65.

[10] Ibid. 94.

[11] See State typeface, Figure E.

[12] Clough, Rosa. cited in *The Visible World.* op cit. 117. See an example of Marinetti's work, Figure D.

[13] Drucker, J. op cit. 95.

[14] Romanyshn, R. op cit. 199.

[15] McLuhan, M. *The Gutenberg Galaxy.* op cit. 278.

[16] Brody, Neville. http://www.type.cp.uk/fnet/fuse/statesamp.html.

[17] Lanham, Richard. *The Electronic World: Democracy, Technology and the Arts,* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. 94.

[18] Brody, N. op cit. See State typeface, Figure E.

[19] Romanyshn, R. 42.

[20] Burnett, R. 135.

[21] Poynor, Rick, et al, ed. "Type and Deconstuction in the Digital Era." *Typography Now: The New Wave.* New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 10.

[22] Ibid. 14. See an example of typographic deconstruction, Figure F.

[23] Riehle, Jürgen. "Imagery in the Networked Age." *Graphis.* 309.53 (1997): 97.

[24] Drucker. J. op cit. 37.

[25] Lupton, Ellen, et al. *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design.* Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 1996. 58.

[26] – – –. "A Postmortem on Deconstruction?" *Design Culture: An Anthology of Writing from the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design.* Ed. Steven Heller, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1997. 114.

[27] Poynor, R. op cit. 17.

[28] Burnett, R. 136.

[29] Romanyshn, R. op cit. 41.

[30] Burnett, R. op cit. 135.

[31] Ibid. 185.

[32] Keedy, J. *Typography Now.* op cit. 10.

[33] Venturi, Robert, et al. *Learning from Las Vegas.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1961. 131.

[34] Poynor, R. op cit. 15.

[35] Baudrillard, J. *Seduction.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 34.

[36] See an example of April Greiman's work, Figure G.

[37] Greiman, April. "April Greiman." *Designers on Mac.* Ed. Diane Burns. Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing Co. Ltd., 1992. 85.

[38] Vignelli, M. "Massimo Vignelli vs. Ed Benguiat (Sort of)." *Print* XLV.V (1991): 91.

[39] McKoy, Katherine. "Katherine McKoy on Design Education." *Design Dialogues.* Ed. Steven Heller, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1998. 136.

[40] Kaplan, Michael. "The Visual Thinker Henry Wolf." *Graphis.* 293.50 (1994): 67.

[41] Abbott, Miller J., et al. "A Natural History of Typography." *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design.* Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 25.

[42] Romanyshyn, R. op cit. 6.

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PERFORM ANCE + SPECTACLE

Performance by Stuart Sherman

Table Top and Floor SPECTACLES

November 17, 1987
Tuesday, 8:00pm
deSalle Auditorium

stuart sherman

IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL AGE

CRANBROOK ACADEMY OF ART

Stuart Sherman is a performance artist, sculptor,
theatre and filmmaker whose activities in three different media
share a common vocabulary of object relations.

November 18, 1987 Wednesday, 10:00am deSalle Auditorium

V. Rethinking Deconstruction

"At the simplest level, our exposure to any medium conditions us physically and psychologically to respond to its different modalities, if only to be in a position to relate to it."[1]

Deconstruction, as a style of fragmentation and dissolution, has dramatically shifted the standards of "good" design. But more importantly, it has encouraged designers to consider their work within a wider cultural context. By exposing the underlying value system of modern design, postmodern critical activity has revealed that the modern graphic form — far from being a neutral visual device — is culturally inflected. As shown, transparent alphabets coincide with modernity's cultural drive to create a transparent world.

Similarly, typographic deconstruction is an expression of our current cultural mood. It not only looks different from modern design, but underlying its form is the idea that meaning is unfixed. As well, the blurring of type and image mirrors the boundary negotiations that have become part of our everyday lives. Even if postmodernity is understood as a time designation, postmodern thought encourages us to reflect on the binary systems that were once deemed "natural". We now realize that oppositional dichotomies were culturally constructed to facilitate the production of meaning.

With the help of computers, designers have blurred the boundary between type and image. Digitization, it seems, endorses this kind of aberrant behavior. As Sherry Turkle argues in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, "computers bring postmodernism down to earth".[2] Although her work focuses on the "postmodern" self in virtual communities, her analysis of the relationship between people and their machines unearths aspects of the creative process as well.

Turkle's research shows that computers are no longer being understood in terms of their "linear", "logical" and "hierarchical" structures. The modernist vocabulary, which was employed to achieve objectivity and universality, is being undermined by the fluctuating relationship between our technologies and us. In describing human experience within text-based virtual realities, she argues that "the distinction between people and machines has become harder to maintain".[3] Players in cyberspace are free to create male, female or non-gendered characters, clouding the distinction between the sexes as well. She explains how computers create a social arena where people can experiment with the multiplicity and heterogeneity of postmodern selfhood, diffusing the boundary between "biology" and "technology". For her, terminology such as "fluid", "nonlinear" and "opaque" more apply convey the instability of meanings in the virtual age.

Turkle also demonstrates how computers have undermined the modern conception of reality by distinguishing between "soft" and "hard" programming. Although she is describing masculine and feminine modes of working, her views are pertinent within the context of design, where computers are no longer viewed as cold calculating machines. Unlike "hard" mastery, which is analytical, abstract and supposedly objective, "soft" programming coincides with the postmodern view that the world is opaque, entailing a different relationship between programmer and machine. As Turkle explains, "hard mastery is the imposition of will over the machine through the implementation of a plan... In contrast, soft mastery is more interactive, more like the give-and-take of a conversationalist, a negotiator, an artist; try this; stand back; wait for a response; try something else".[4]

Turkle describes "soft" mastery as *bricolage* or "tinkering". Its improvisational, inductive style is flexible, non-hierarchical and involves an interaction with objects rather than abstract ideas. This terminology is borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory that contrasts the ways in which Western scientists and members of primitive cultures make sense of the world. The latter are *bricoleurs;* they arrange elements, which lead to unexpected results. They do not plan in the abstract but improvise with the concrete elements that surround them.

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"Hard" methods parallel the deductive modern design methodology of ordering information into hierarchies and arranging it within a modular system. Conversely, "soft" modes of working coincide with the experimental process of deconstruction, which involves moving elements around on a screen, intuitively copying, pasting and cropping. As Turkle explains, "a classical modernist vision of computer intelligence has made way for a romantic postmodern one. At this juncture, there is potential for a more welcoming environment for women, humanists and artists in the technical culture".[5] The user-friendly Macintosh computer sanctions this "soft", intuitive approach, encouraging designers to deviate from the modern path.

Allucquère Rosanne Stone's provocative work, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, also entertains the idea of a fusion between "humanity" and "technology". Pushing conceptual limits, Stone elaborates on "cyborg envy":

> "In the case of the computer, a desire literally to enter into such a
> discourse, to penetrate the smooth and relatively affectless
> surface of the electronic screen and enter the deep, complex, and
> tactile (individual) cybernetic space or (consensual) cyberspace
> within and beyond."[6]

Interestingly, designer Neville Brody expresses a similar longing to fuse with his electronic toolbox.

"What I really want on the Macintosh is a virtual reality interface
— armholes in either side of the box so you can reach in and
move logos around; a real paintbrush so that you can feel the
texture of the surface underneath."[7]

The manner in which designers have integrated technology into the

creative process has had far-reaching effects on the way our society speaks to

itself visually. Designers do not actually desire to cross the human/machine

boundary — Stone herself acknowledges that we will always remain grounded in

our physical selves. But her understanding of how we use technology helps us

recognize new meanings that are being constructed in the virtual age.

Ultimately, Stone shows that new boundary negotiations encourage

us to dispute conceptions of the world which were valid within the

framework of bourgeois modernity.[8] Her analysis of the theoretical implosion

of boundaries between the "social" and the "technological", "biology" and

"machine", "natural" and "artificial", etc, is intended to reveal how our

"hallucinations" in cyberspace are forcing us to rethink the way power is

constituted in "real" life. As Stone states,

"I am interested in prosthetic communication for what it shows
of the "real" world that might otherwise go unnoticed. And I am
interested because of the potential of cyberspace for emergent
behavior, for new social forms that arise in circumstances in
which body, meet, place and even space mean something quite
different from our accustomed understanding."[9]

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To a lesser extent than those who create virtual personae, designers have become constituted by the machines they use. Even when they conceptualize on paper before tinkering on their screens, the distinction between the creative and the technical process has become harder to establish. This is especially the case in Web design, where graphic elements are programmed into place, rather than manually repositioned on screen. As artist/technician, the web designer balances creative expression with the technical limitations of the new medium.

In "Playing with Code", Kendal Karam explains that "the tools of design have passed from the physical world of rulers and print into the ephemeral world of movement, light and logic sequences".[10] Whether in virtual communities or in design studios, digitization breaks down traditional ways of thinking and working. Type becomes image, artist becomes technician, humanity becomes technology. Newly formed relationships between our bodies, our selves and our technologies reveal and challenge the structure of meaning outside cyberspace. There is just something about digitization that makes postmodern ideas more tangible within different levels of social life.

As argued "postmodern" design reveals the construction of new social meaning. But somehow the view that it also liberates viewers slipped into the

discourse. Legibility may not be the same as communication, but it is not plainly obvious that deconstruction in print enhances visual experience. Modernism was looked upon by a younger generation of designers as a kind of tyrannical order that controlled the visual path of the reader. But deconstruction, in the fixed medium of print, can be equally coercive.

Deconstruction has been useful in exposing the underlying value system of modern design, but does a multi-layered, fragmented design actually "address our capacity for intuitive insight and simultaneous perception and stimulate our senses as well as our intellect?"[11] Does the layering and texturing of type and image open new possibilities for the viewer? Or does it simply legitimize the creative expression of the designer? Defenders of the modern movement have made this very argument, but their criticism was lost in the rhetoric of social responsibility.

The issue is not whether design ought to be an outlet for creativity, but whether designers can defend their practices on the basis that it results in more freedom for the viewer. Deconstruction undermined linear models of communication but design alone does not open new viewing experiences. For all its conceptual breakthroughs, deconstruction cannot get beyond the technology through which it is channeled. As Walter Ong notes in *Print, Space and Closure, Communications in History*, the printed word is embedded in space.

Once a word or image is "locked into position" the viewer is forced to interpret a surface that has been framed in a particular way. Modern or postmodern, print is fixed.

Ong's argument does not only convey that fragmented type can be as limiting as text on a grid within the media of print. It also reveals that communications technologies cannot easily be detached from the culture that makes use of them. Ong writes,

> "By removing words from the world of sound where they had first had their origin in active human interchange and relegating them definitely to visual surface, and by otherwise exploiting visual space for the management of knowledge, print encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thinglike, impersonal and religiously neutral. Print encouraged the mind to sense that its possessions were held in some sort of inert mental space."[12]

Unlike the spoken word that preceded it, and the electronic word that is currently transforming modes of communication, print compartmentalizes and specializes. Joshua Meyrowitz makes the same argument in *Medium Theory*, claiming that the intensity and involvement of engaged members of oral society was replaced by an individualistic, introspective, isolated way of being in the culture of print. Elaborating on McLuhan's views, he argues that the printed word created informational boundaries that caused segmentation in society. Meyrowitz explains,

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"the whole world begins to be seen as a machine with distinct parts...[it] depends on the division of labor, separation of social spheres, segmentation of identities by class, occupation and so forth. People are separated into distinct places in order to homogenize them into groups with single identities: students, workers, prisoners, mentally ill...print leads to an emphasis on stages, levels and ranks. The world comes to seem naturally layered and segmented."[13]

These arguments demonstrate that a fundamental connection exists between humanity, society and the creation of new media technologies. Keeping this in mind, postmodern arguments, which maintain that the viewer is "liberated" by new graphic forms, do not tell the whole story. The literal boundaries of the printed word reflect the conceptual ones that underlie the modern world-view. To get beyond these borders requires a different kind medium — not just a different kind of design.

The fluidity, flexibility and adaptability of digitization have fostered a new way of presenting information. But only recently has computer-mediated communication created the conditions for viewers to playfully and creatively reconstruct what they see. Deconstruction offers a new kind of textual experience that can break the shackles of modern thought — when it is transmitted on the digital screen. As Meyrowitz explains, in global electronic culture, media technologies are reminiscent of oral societies. They promote simultaneity of action, perception and reaction and sensory experience replaces

abstract print knowledge. Thinking is no longer linear, and distant analysis is supplanted by emotional involvement.

Deconstruction, in a theoretical sense, may be a richer and more accurate representation of the way we visually experience the world, but this graphic form cannot get beyond the limitations of the medium in which it is produced. Print is static and encourages a sense of closure. And deconstruction within this medium can be a limiting experience indeed. As Ong argues, "print had an effect on the mentality of the West" and undoubtedly, the digital screen will have another. [14]

As mentioned, the implicit justification for deconstruction is that it opens more possibilities for the viewer. For example in *The End of Print*, David Carson's art direction of magazines such as *Ray Gun* and *Beach Culture* is defended on the basis that today's audience does not need visual direction. [15] It is argued that whereas most magazines "want their readers to know what to expect, to know where to look and how to read through a page", these publications establish "a different relationship with the reader". [16] Yet the deconstructionist approach, when applied to the immovable word, inhibits experience as well. This point is articulated by Kevin Fenton in "The New Typography Muttering in Your Ear":

"In its quickness to interpret, and its occasional expressionistic frenzies, the new typography denies the reader the opportunity to experience a text for himself. It feels like someone is standing over your shoulder while you read, underlining some passages, italicizing others, muttering through yet others."[17]

Deconstruction, like modern design, imposes a particular reading. The former is certainly more thought provoking, but it can also be disruptive. Carson states that although he enjoys creating "modes of communication", he doesn't enjoy communicating. His delight in reducing legibility is perhaps more controlling than the modern agenda to create universal typefaces and grids. Carson's personal vision is imploded onto the page, opening up new possibilities, yet closing off others. As Ong states, "the visual surface [of print] is charged with imposed meaning".[18] Ironically, when print is the medium that touches the viewer, a minimalist design and a transparent alphabet may leave most to the imagination.

The integration of digitization within communication design has caused designers to think critically about modernism. But postmodern ideas such as textual deconstruction are more relevant outside the realm of print, where each viewer can experience text and images on his or her own terms. Critical dialogues over the last decade have undermined linearity and direct communication and these ideas are made manifest in electronic text, where

the boundaries between center and margin, designer and viewer and between texts themselves dissolve.

Electronic text, and hypertext in particular, includes its beholder, inviting the reader to experience form and content in a simultaneous rather than in a successive way. Electronic text has no beginning and no end and it is this lack of sequential order that ultimately opens new possibilities for the viewer. In *The Electronic World: Democracy, Technology and the Arts*, Richard Lanham describes the volatile electronic word.

> "Hypertext is a nonlinear means of electronic expression in
> which the textual surface is given a third dimension by embedding
> further kinds of information beneath the surface. A changing
> symbol or typeface lets the reader know that a hypertext is
> concealed beneath that text. And of course there are texts behind
> those texts. The reader's path through such interreferentiality
> soon becomes totally nonlinear and, if not totally unpredictable,
> certainly 'chaotic'"[19]

The viewer becomes the center of investigation in a hypertextual world that is nonlinear, modifiable, open-bordered, and intertextual. On their Macs in the 1980s, designers "doodled with impudence", free to dissolve or fabricate meaning as they explored new graphic possibilities.[20] With CD-ROMs and especially on the Internet, the viewer can also begin to explore and play. The electronic word beholds its viewer, inviting participation in an interactive process of discovery. Dynamic rather than static, emerging rather than fixed,

chaotic rather than predictable, active rather than passive, open rather than closed, digital text truly promotes the deconstructionist approach of using language and imagery to create open-ended meaning. It is here that the viewer is truly in control.

Without denying that new juxtapositions of type and image promote different kinds of experiences in print-based media than transparent words and legible typefaces, deconstruction in graphic design is realized by the digital signal. As argued, deconstruction in print can also destroy the "space" between the reader and the text, preventing viewers from experiencing text for themselves. Conversely, the digital medium undermines the designer's visual authority as it encourages readers to explore textual space. Kevin Fenton argues that while "modernists may have overvalued clarity, the new expressionism overvalues ambiguity"[21] But in the digital realm, the ambiguity of deconstructionist typography is offset by the increased freedom of viewers to direct their own paths of investigation. Designers can still be "visual editors", but the communication is less forced.[22]

Media theorists argue that technology plays a deterministic role. But regardless of the causal direction, the interplay between design, society and technology is apparent in print and digital cultures. This is the linchpin of this discussion. The canonical, fixed, authoritative text that produced a passive

reader goes hand in hand with the linear visual system of modern design. The fixation on logic, rationality and closure in Western culture corresponds to an "unselfconscious" typographic style that does not obstruct the transmission of meaning. Conversely, in the digital realm, type becomes unfixed and so does meaning. As Derrida suggests, "one cannot tamper with the form of the book without disturbing everything else in Western thought".[23]

Lanham claims that when text is unfixed it becomes less sacred. Suddenly the entire foundation of Western culture is called into question by a digital medium that calls for active readers who are empowered to alter or delete text and link virtual passages to other works. Notions of "authenticity", "originality" and "rarity" are also reconsidered in light of changing media technologies. The authority of the writer and the designer is undermined, as readers alter layouts on their screens, rewrite texts, and click on links to find information of their own choosing. As Lanham argues, "the electronic universe's playful attitude toward typographical convention drives the print-based imagination mad".[24]

Although it is debatable whether deconstruction in print actually liberates the viewer, this approach to visual communication has helped designers reevaluate what they do by looking beyond the parameters of their profession. This practice also shed light on the convergence of visual signifiers, cultural

shifts, and technological developments. Whether the finished form is in print or

in pixels, digitization gave birth to deconstruction in design. Some will insist it is

simply a stylistic trend, but we are nonetheless transformed in the process.

New design forms crystallize cultural ideas, if only for a moment.

[1] de Kerchove, Derrick. "The New Psychotechnologies." *Communication in History*. 2nd Ed. Ed. David Crowley. and Paul Heyer. White Plains: Longman Publishers, 1991. 329.

[2] Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1993. 18.

[3] Ibid. 21.

[4] Greenberg, Jill. "Sex, Lies and Avatars". *Wired*. April 1996: 161.

[5] Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen*. op cit. 63.

[6] Stone, Allucquere Rosanne. Will the Real Body Stand Up?: Boundary Stories About Virtual Cultures." *Cyberspace: First Steps*. Ed. Michael Benedict. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991. 108-9.

[7] Brody, Neville. "Neville Brody." *Designers on Mac*. Ed. Diane Burns. Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing Co. Ltd., 1992. 17.

[8] Stone, A. op cit. 109.

[9] Stone, Allucquere Rosanne. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996. 37.

[10] Karam, Kendall. "Playing with Code." *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*. 16.2 (1998): 27.

[11] Poynor, Rick, et al, ed. "Type and Deconstruction in the Digital Era." *Typography Now: The New Wave*. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 17.

[12] Ong, Walter. "Print, Space, and Closure." *Communication in History*, op cit. 121.

[13] Meyrowitz, Joshua. "Medium Theory." *Theory Today*. Stanford, 1994. 64.

[14] Ong, W. op cit. 120.

[15] See examples of Ray Gun layouts, Figure H.

[16] Blackwell, Lewis and Carson, David, ed. *The End of Print: The Graphic Design of David Carson*. USA: Chronicle Books, 1995. No page reference.

[17] Fenton, Kevin. "The New Typography Muttering in Your Ear." *Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*. Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1997. 32.

[18] Ong, W. op cit. 119.

[19] Lanham, Richard. *The Electronic World: Democracy, Technology and the Arts*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. 94.

[20] Ibid. 42.

[21] Fenton, K. op cit. 39

[22] Poynor, R. op cit. 17.

[23] Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1981. 3.

[24] Ibid. 36.

R AYGU N,

ISSUE NUMBER 19 OF THE BIBLE OF MUSIC + STYLEANDTHE END OF PRINT

JESUS

AND MARYCHAIN

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VI. Modernism Revisited

"The strangest thing is happening to Modernism. It has become
the new warm and fuzzy place. We miss it like we miss meatloaf.
We want it back."[1]

In another era, when symmetrical, ornamental and decorative forms

filled the visual landscape, modernism was the deliverer. Even when it was

reconceptualized at mid-century, modernism stood for progress and human

empowerment. It was about making order out of chaos so that we could exist

in harmony with each other and our surroundings. As for the aesthetic, it

was believed that something beautiful happens when form follows function.

Typographer, Eric Gill, wrote early in the century, "[o]f beauty there need be

no lack, for the beautiful is that which pleases being seen, and those things are

pleasing when seen which are as nearly perfect as may be in their adaptation to

function".[2]

If we reflect for a moment on modern design, it is not the ideal, nor the

aesthetic that offends us, but the tone of its supporters. We do not like the way

it is superimposed from above, creating categorical distinctions between "high"

and "low", "distinguished" and "vulgar", or "beautiful" and "ugly". We do not like

the detachment of modern designers who communicate to society on their

high horses, maintaining an "aesthetic disposition" in their organization of visual

space. But, it cannot be disputed that the modern ideal to improve the human condition never wavered. How can we stay mad?

In an effort to gain more control over the creative process, designers beat modernism to the ground. But considering the graphic hodgepodge on the Web, suddenly modernism holds the promise of a kinder digital interface. Web sites that follow a carefully designed grid are not only aesthetically pleasing, but are also easier to browse. In a medium with no beginning and no end, it is easy to lose one's place. Modern methods may in fact help viewers get to where they want to go — wherever that might be. As shown earlier, computers have brought postmodernism down to earth. But they are also bringing modernism up from the grave.

Anthony Giddens argues that heading into postmodernity would mean "the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity towards a new and distinct type of social order".[3] Perhaps virtual communities challenge his analysis, for modern conceptions of "space" and "place" are being reevaluated as human interaction is increasingly meditated by technology. But within the digital disorientation of text and images, a modern approach to structuring information can be quite valuable.

In most cases, people do not stumble on websites by accident. Rather, users are invited to visit a site by some other medium such as direct mail or TV advertising. "The goal of a website is not to get them there but to keep them

there", says web designer, Sichon Domrongchai.[4] Although it has been argued that movement, interaction, engagement and visual entertainment is the recipe for a successful website, if the information is not easily accessible, users will not come back.

In their article, "Design Online", Bonnie Wyper and Stephen Greco argue that in our "postmodern, multimedia world", people want to access their information interactively.[5] Unlike the static, linear text of the printed book, scrolling, multiple screens, pop-up boxes and hypertext are examples of the "seductive freedom to manipulate elements in a virtual world".[6] But at the same time, there are lessons to be learned from the way we have traditionally structured information in print. Interactivity is not the same thing as limitless possibilities and fancy graphics alone do not constitute a user-friendly website. Communication design is about structuring information in a practical way for the end user, whether it is fixed or fleeting.

By now there is a general acceptance that there is no single reality. And we are no longer preoccupied with slippery "modern" and "postmodern" terminology. Keeping in mind Bernstein's understanding of our "modern/postmodern" *Stimmung*, if ever these two schools of thought could live side by side, it is on the Internet. Electronic text undermines notions of "hierarchy", "linearity" and "closure" and blurs the boundaries between authors and readers,

designers and viewers, and texts themselves. It invites interaction, keeping in mind our dwindling attention span. And it enables viewers to be at the center of their investigations by providing links outside a central text. But at the same time, websites must be constructed so that users can access relevant information in an efficient way. Hello modernism.

When modern principles are transposed to the digital surface, something amazing happens — the composition does not appear dated. The elements on the screen look *designed* rather than *arranged*, suggesting that someone with skill in the art of presentation organized the information. As discussed above, it is not simply the format of a page that may limit visual experience, but the immovable printed word. Given that the digital medium itself allows for an intensified, active, viewing experience, modernism can be revisited within the context of this new technology — especially now that deconstructed typography is beginning to look a little stale. As one critic put it, "[t]he image of the digital age as visual overlap and simultaneity is on the verge of turning conspicuous as a slightly misplaced look".[7]

Designer, William Drenttel, recently spoke on embracing modernism in design as a starting point.[8] Although his lecture, "Better Living Through Geometry: Reflections on the New Modernism", may have left some wondering what was so new about it, Drenttel was simply suggesting that modules can help present complex information more clearly. He argued that

on the Web there is even more of a need for an underlying structure and

information management. His thinking is that grids — rather than icons —

keep the user in control.

Modernism is not new, but our approach to it can be. This does not

entail that structure should always form content, or that quirky T-26 typefaces

are off-limits. But to use Richard Saul Wurman's terminology, designers are

"information architects". According to Wurman, a designer should manage

information with the goal of creating meaning or understanding".[9]

Not surprisingly, Wurman is cynical of the kinds of software which

"seduce designers to turn information into singing, dancing, 3-D cartwheeling

"whatzits".[10] In our overloaded, frenetic, digital environment, some would

argue that designers have a renewed sense of social responsibility. Wurman

explains his position:

> "I've chosen to call myself an information architect... I mean
> architect as in the creating of systemic, structural, and orderly
> principles to make something work — the thoughtful making of
> either artifact, or idea, or policy that informs because it is clear.
> I use the word information in its truest sense. Most of the word
> information contains the word inform, so I call things information
> only if they inform me, not if they are just collections of data,
> of stuff."[11]

Although Wurman makes the distinction between information

architecture and modernism, describing the latter as "a formality and an

arrangement", rather than a "deep way of understanding" the similarities are apparent.[12] Leaving aside the form of modernism, the ideology of improving the world through rational problem solving resounds in his design philosophy. Information architecture is modernism without the modernist, an ideal without the ideology. As Natalia Ilyin points out in her insightful article, "Warm, Fuzzy Modernism", "modernist designer or architect seeks to make sense of life. Making sense of it all is very much an ideal notion".[13] Without trying to push the comparison too far, what is relevant to this discussion is the resurgence and relevancy of modern principles within the context of new communication technologies.

As in other media, such as *Raygun* Magazine, different websites have different objectives. Some of them aim to provide a visual experience rather than be a source of information. But as the Internet develops as a commercial tool, websites are geared to ensure repeated visits. Designer, Clement Mok, kept this in mind when designing the Microsoft Network. In addition to creating the user-interface and branding of this on-line information service, the design created "a sense of place for the user — a place where people would want to be again and again".[14]

It has been expressed repeatedly that the Web should be treated differently than print. Wyper and Greco argue "the Web medium will be different enough from print to require the rethinking of some basic, even

unconscious, design principles.[15] Martim Pflaum argues in "Indigo Images",

"What looks good in print, is by no means as effective on screen.

The requirements are different. Internet design is compressed design".[16]

Sam McMillan explains that in websites designed by Red Sky Interactive,

"experience is everything" and it is "nothing like reading a book".[17] The

list goes on.

Although a website should not be approached with a print mentality,

there are lessons to be learned from the printed word. This point is implicit in

Domrongchai's admiration for the website, salon.com. When asked about his

favorite site, he chose one that is modeled on a traditional newspaper format —

somewhat of a surprise, given that his own work has a flair that is indigenous to

the digital medium.[18] His reasoning is that a printed newspaper is not read

linearly. Readers glance here and there, skipping to the sections that interest

them most, focussing on some articles and glancing at others. For Domrongchai

and a growing number of designers, a structured, accessible system online puts

the user in control. And coincidentally, this way of structuring information is an

outgrowth of print culture.

A successful website is intuitive and seamless, enabling users to access

information upfront and get to the content without the clutter. The navigation

must be clear so that the user does not get lost in the experience. As Darcy

DiNucci claims in "Design and New Media: Getting There from Here", "the art

of interface design requires creating tools that help users understand how to move through information... You need a map to travel, and today's websites are woefully bad at providing directions. Buried links and graphic-loading times only lead to frustration."[19] And in "Electronic Design", Michael Rieter exclaims, "Users and netsurfers are hedonists. They want fast actions and reactions. Unergonomic search routines or tedious long visual build-up of screen layout on graphically rich sites cause them to look elsewhere for faster fun".[20] The Web is a new design environment, but the logical arrangement and analytical organization of information takes its cues from information hierarchies that were established in print. Despite all the fancy time-based graphics, interface design on the web is secondary to site architecture.[21] Interactivity alone does not open new possibilities.

On the Internet, readers can choose from several navigational paths and move in unlimited directions but the user only remains in full control when sites are constructed with hierarchies in mind. In "Building for the Future", Mike Laye explains that when participants do not know where they are going, or what they will see, users experience a lack of control and a sense of helplessness.[22] When the site architecture is undeveloped, the experience becomes more Of a "mystery tour" rather than an empowering exploration.[23] Ironically, within this context, an anti-hierarchical medium can be an unfulfilling and limiting experience. Jay Bolter claims, "although books won't disappear, the idea and the

ideal of the book will".[24]   Perhaps it is the other way around. The form of the

book may in fact one day disappear, but from a design perspective, the ideal of

structuring information in a way that mirrors a traditional print format may not.

Smart website architecture can overcome one of the biggest challenges

on the Internet — to continuously update content without having to redesign

the site each time. As explained by Ken Coupland in "The Electronic Brochure

Gets a Makeover", changing material "is just another headache at studios where

Web-trained staffers are already very much in demand, and protective of their

creative time".[25]   Information hierarchies and grids not only allow designers to

focus their creative energies on developing new sites, but they allow clients to

modify content on their own. For example, Razorfish, Inc., constructs websites

with a publishing tool that enables their customers to modify content without

undermining the established hierarchies. Templates with organizational structures

are created so that the design is not compromised when someone without

design training updates the information.

Massimo Vignelli, who is surely reveling in this revival of modern thought,

recently declared, "Designers: The Web needs you".[26]   No doubt, he is calling

out to a particular kind of designer who values structure above style. After two

decades of sneering at modern dogma, we can no longer reasonably deny that a

designer is essentially a problem-solver. As explained by the interface systems

director of the site, "Total New York", "Design on the Web, like design

anywhere else, is ultimately about the same questions. The problems are

different, but if you are a problem solver then there is so much you can do".[27]

Designers structure information — it is their job. Good designers have the

visual sense to balance the structure and make it interesting without digital

overkill. As Domrongchai remarks, "It's all about the content, you're a slave

to the content".[28]

In *The Electronic World*, Lanham explains that print represents a "severe

abstraction", and that hypertext makes us aware of the forced limits of

perception.[29] Electronic text is simultaneous rather than successive, making

it fundamentally different than the medium of print. But we should be careful to

avoid what Paul Duguid calls the "rhetoric of supersession".[30] Distinguishing

between "freedom of the individual" and "freedom of information", he argues

that by trivializing and dismissing the past, we miss out on the cultural lessons

taught to us by old communications technologies. An analogy with hinged doors

supports his point:

> "The supersession of the simple hinge by automated sliding
> technology long ago became a visual synecdoche for the triumph
> of the future. Yet while the sliding door still appears on the
> futurological screen, the millennia-old manual hinge endures
> all around us (even on our laptop computers and cell phones).
> One reason it survives, I suggest, is that despite its technological
> simplicity, time has given the hinge a rich social complexity
> that those who foresee its immanent demise fail to appreciate.
> Hinged doors, after all, are not just to be passed through; they
> communicate polysemiously. We can, for instance, expressly

throw them open, or slam them shut, hold them or let them swing, leave them ajar and hide behind them, satisfyingly kick, punch or shoulder them, triumphantly barge them open or defiantly prop them shut."[31]

Like the hinge, the printed word has something to teach us. Before demonizing the book, we must ask ourselves what we gain by being an "active" reader. Does this make us freer? According to Charles Taylor, an acclaimed thinker on human expression, "our attributions of freedom make sense against a background of more or less significant purposes, for the question of freedom/ unfreedom is bound up with the frustration/fulfillment of our purposes".[32] Taylor is conveying the idea that when we exercise our freedom, we are simultaneously making distinctions between obstacles that are insignificant and others that bring about our self-realization. This "thick" sense of freedom is connected to our ability to autonomously create our self-identities. Keeping this in mind, how exactly does defying the stable text emancipate the reader? Why is dynamic better than static? Emerging better than fixed? Simultaneous better than successive? No one has yet answered these queries.

In *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Literary Theory and Technology*, George Landow argues that the boundary of power is moving away from the author in the direction of the reader, modeling a post-modern anti-hierarchical medium of information.[33] But hypertext does not empower a reader when the path of investigation leads to nowhere. And access to more

information does not necessarily lead to more knowledge. As Saul Wurman points out, there is a distinction between data and information. He writes, "There's not been an information explosion; there's been an explosion of noninformation".[34] For him, information "informs", leading to a greater understanding.

The unfixed and interactive electronic word may encourage a more active reading process, but it does not necessarily lead to an informed or empowered reader. Websites must contain the appropriate relationship between relevant words and visuals to help the reader find meaning. The designer's associations must play against the user's interactions — otherwise the user becomes lost in the infinite pathways of an overloaded screen and the digital display ceases to be a rich experience. As Ilyin observes, "Today people read that grid as securing, not imprisoning. In an era of insane technological and social change, the Modernist revival of simple shapes, strong type and bold color communicates endurance and structure."[35]

The digital screen bespeaks postmodern thought, if postmodern design is understood as a non-linear, borderless and open-ended structure. Yet within the electronic world we must still be able to recognize what is meaningful. Technology is not simply a machine, but a set of practices informed by changing cultural needs.[36] In a world where raw data is omnipresent, access to it alone does not ensure the attainment of relevant information. As Bazin claims, within

the context of relativism and virtuality, "we must reinvent the public space of knowledge".[37] Revisiting modernism within this new digital environment can be liberating rather than limiting, when the goal is to become informed.

Dick Hebdige suggested that postmodernity is modernity without the hopes and dreams which made it bearable.[38] Leaving aside the idealism of making the world a better place, and the categorical distinction between "high" and "low" art, modern principles can ease the disorientation we sometimes experience in our indeterminate digital culture. Graphic design is no panacea, but it does offer the hope of making some sense of our informational world.

[1] Ilyin, Natalia. "Warm Fuzzy Modernism." *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*. 16.2 (1998): 4.

[2] Gill, Eric. *An Essay on Typography*. Boston: David R. Godine, 1936. 8-9.

[3] Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. 46.

[4] Unpublished interview, May 1999.

[5] Wyper, Bonnie, and Greco, Stephen. "Design Online." *Communication Arts*. May/June 1997. 22.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Riehle, Jürgen. "Imagery in the Networked Age." *Graphis*. 309.53 (1997): 98.

[8] Drenttel, William. "Better Living Through Geometry: Reflections on the New Modernism." Boston. Massachusetts College of Art, 20 May 1999. Also see http://jhwd.com.

[9] Wurman, Richard Saul, ed. *Information Architecture*. Switzerland: *Graphis* Press Corp. Zurich, 1996. 16.

[10] McMillan, Sam. "Report from ACD: Design for the Internet." *Communication Arts*. Jan./Feb. 1997. 134.

[11] Wurman, R. op cit. 16.

[12] — — —. "Richard Saul Wurman on Information Architecture." *Design Dialogues*. Ed. Steven Heller, et al. New York: Allworth Press. 200.

[13] Ilyin, N. op cit. 4.

[14] Wurman, R., ed. *Information Architecture*. op cit. 216-219.

[15] Wyper, B. op cit. 22.

[16] Pflaum, Martim. "Indigo Images". *Novum*. August 1998. 59.

[17] McMillan, Sam. "Designing the Experience at Red Sky Interactive". *Print* 40.7 (1998): 196.

[18] See an example of Domrongchai's website design, Figure I. Also see www. ingallsinteractive.com.

[19] DiNucci, Darcy. "Getting There from Here." *Print*. 52:5 (1998): 52.

[20] Rieter, Michael. "I-D Gruppe." *Novum*. Jan. 1998. 32.

[21] DiNucci, Darcy. "Think Different." *Print*. 53.1 (1999): 24.

[22] Laye, Mike. "Building for the Future." *British Journal of Photography*. Jan. 27 1999. 18.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Bolter, Jay. "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality and the Future of Writing." *The Future of the Book*. Ed. Geoffrey Nunberg. Berkeley and LA: U California Press, 1996. 255.

[25] Copeland, Ken. "The Electronic Brochure Gets a Makeover." *Graphis.* Nov./Dec. 1998.16.

[26] Richmond, Wendy. "The Art of the Temporary." *Communication Arts.* March/Apr. 1998.

[27] Gluskin, Lisa. "Brainshift." *Critique.* Autumn 1996. 92.

[28] Unpublished interview, May 1999.

[29] Lanham, Richard. *The Electronic World: Democracy, Technology and the Arts.* Chicago and London: The U of Chicago Press, 1993. 74.

[30] Duguid, Paul. "Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book." *The Future of the Book.* Ed. Geoffrey Nunberg. Berkeley and LA: U of California Press, 1996. 66.

[31] Ibid. 64.

[32] Taylor, Charles. *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. 179.

[33] Landow, George P. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology.* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1992. 70.

[34] Wurman, R. "Richard Saul Wurman on Information Architecture". op cit. 200.

[35] Ilyin N. op cit. 5.

[36] In *Feminism Confronts Technology,* Judy Wacjman argues that technology is composed of three interrelated parts; machinery, a set of practices and a type of knowledge. This triparte definition helps convey that technology is neutral, but our use of it is not.

[37] Bazin, Patrick. "Toward Metareading." *The Future of the Book.* op cit. 166.

[38] Hebdige, Dick. *Hiding in the Light.* London: Routledge Press, 1988. 195.

Fig. 1
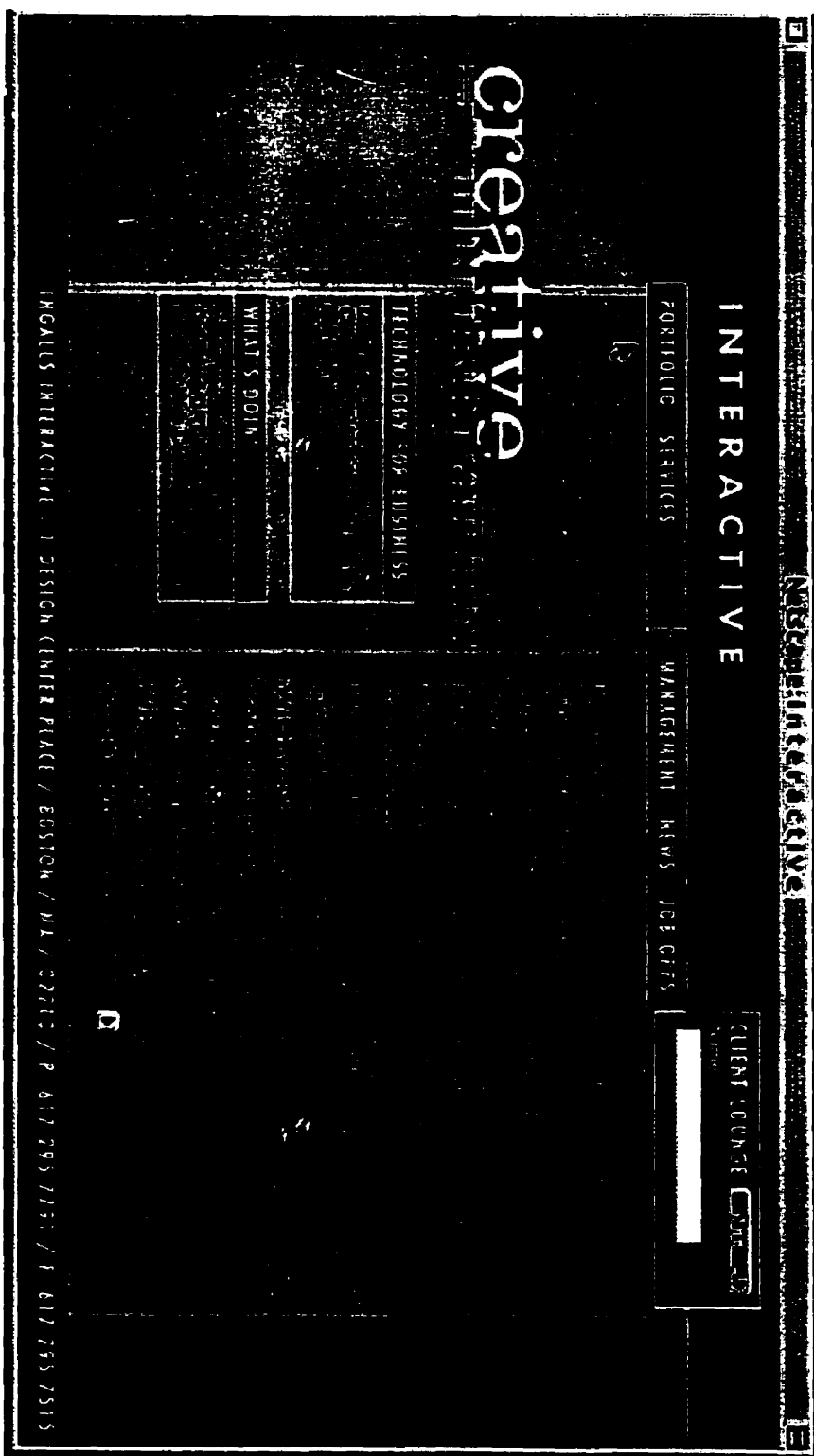
VII. In Closing

In tracing the fluctuation of graphic forms during the latter part of this century, this discussion has attempted to get beyond the aesthetic component of graphic design and situate the discipline within a wider philosophical and sociological context. The discussion began with a review of modernist principles and then launched into a postmodern critique of modern design. Yet later, it was demonstrated that typographic deconstruction contains a different set of limitations, when viewed within the static realm of print. This observation led to a closer examination of computer-mediated communication, which enables a reader to play a more active role in determining his or her path of investigation.

The central part of the discussion questioned whether an active reader implies an autonomous reader, and whether access to an infinite number of pathways results in the attainment of relevant information. Given the abundance of irrelevant data that is within our reach, it was suggested that a modern approach to new media could, in fact, empower viewers by filtering out what is meaningful from the binary mess. Although deconstructed forms flourish on the pixilated screen, modern principles of structure and hierarchy have resurfaced on the digital plane to help readers find a sense of place. Modern and postmodern design coexist in this new medium that delights in the blurring of graphical and theoretical boundaries.

In a recent interview, Ivan Chermayeff said that modern design is not a style, but a process.[1] Ellen Lupton made the same assertion, but she was talking about deconstruction.[2] Paul Rand said, "the quality of any work depends not on its style but on the special relationship between form and substance".[3] Modern or postmodern, in print or on screen, design is not about style. It is about solving a problem in a compelling way for a particular target audience.

Bad design is not due to the rejection of standards that were established by the modern design movement, nor is it the result of the way designers make use of new technologies. Bad design is decorative design. Its deficiency is caused by a designer's failure to think on a conceptual level and by the oversight that design, like its technological channel, is a medium.[4] That means that this art form is only significant when it manages to communicate an idea, becoming a cultural voice when somebody starts listening.

[1] Chermayeff, Ivan. "On Modernism Past and Present." *Design Dialogues*. Ed. Steven Heller, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1998. 146.

[2] Lupton, Ellen, and J. Abbott Miller. *Design Writing Research: Writings on Graphic Design*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. 10.

[3] Rand, Paul. "Typography: Style is not Substance." *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*. 12.1 (1994): 41.

[4] Kalman, Tibor, et al. "Good History/Bad History." *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*. Ed. Michael Beirut, et al. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 27.