## Abstract

The analysis of the application or non-application of the philosophical theory of Deconstruction to magazine design, typographical design, and general graphic design has been a topic in graphic design magazines and at graphic design seminars since the mid-1980s. This book pays homage to the design style and the proponents of the style while finding a historical influence to the style. The relationships between advancing technology and expanding screen culture and the growth of interest in Deconstructive design is also discussed.

Apocatastasis

A man once mentioned Deconstruction to me. He said that magazine designers sometimes adopted this theory in the design of their magazines almost as a crutch. He said that the Deconstructive magazine designer didn't care about the rules of design. He implied that the Deconstructive magazine designer utilized this style because he couldn't utilize the other styles effectively. I can't thank that man for the intense anguish he has laid upon me in my quest for a definitive Deconstructive frame to surround magazine design, but I can thank him for the opportunity he placed in my face. I think I have always cared about what is visual in life. I think I have always had some form of aesthetic. But until I began writing, neither was fully realized...

Instead of reading the page, we often graze it: we flip through publications back to front, front to back, out from the middle, page hopping among ads, pictures, texts, pretexts, and sidebars, teased from item to item by pull-quotes and enlarged, decorative capital letters. We emerge with many impressions, some facts, and pieces of stories and personalities. But we have been entertained more than educated.

There is an ecology of words, pictures, graphic devices, sequences, space and spacing — a balance that makes a publication readable. But readability is often no longer a given. Many publications provide a perceptual environment, usually a diverting one, where their readers become viewers experiencing the visual tensions of pages designed more for style than for content. Each page, like a poster, stands on its own. The magazine, in particular, is a hand-held gallery.

Victor Hugo believed that the invention of the printing press killed the creation of personal letterforms. George Steiner believed the advent and development of photography killed the printed word, that the photograph took away its descriptive role, and that the presence of a photograph on a page overwhelmed the fragile presence of the word.

Graphics, liberated by new technologies and pressed by competition from other media is threatening both the text and the photograph with aggressively designed pages that mix and cut words, photographs, and graphic devices, creating a page of design rather than a page of text. The reader no longer settles in, but rather skims the page; thoughts — rather than being developed — remain impressions. The style and anesthetics of a page are usurping the meaning traditionally communicated in words and images. And graphic design is the chief instrument used in the theft. "Reading a

magazine just for its design is as valid as reading one for its content," says Helene Silverman, art director of Metropolis.[1]

Once viewed as a service art, graphic design has, during recent years, emerged as a strong, independent force on the printed page. In many magazines, most newspapers, and increasingly in books, the texts, photographs, and illustrations are being arranged by designers to capture the attention of the reader and to achieve sensuality. Pages become seductive paintings; the more graphically elaborate books are like pictures in an exhibition. Graphic design has emerged as an independent art, but too often sacrificed to this independence is the legibility of the other arts that design supposedly presents: writing, illustration and photography.

Television has influenced print designers by conditioning audiences for the fast read, entertainment, and the rapid presentation of perceptual events. Music videos have made viewers tolerant of disjointed, nonlinear visual formats.

Unless readers — overstimulated by print and screen graphics — are for some reason committed to a particular text, it is likely that they will become bored. "Critics have persuasively argued that extraordinary doses of visual stimuli are needed to engage a viewer brought up on television," writes Steven Heller. "Though the major concern of typographic design in any period is to create an inviting environment for communications, an elegant setting alone is apparently no longer sufficient."[2]

Inspired by television, film and computer graphics, designers have also reacted against the elegant setting itself, against what has been called the sterility of the Modern Movement. "Shattering the constraints of minimalism was exhilarating and far more fun that the antiseptic discipline of the classical Swiss school," writes designer Katherine McCoy. "After a brief flurry of diatribes in the graphic design press, this permissive new approach quickly moved into the professional mainstream."[3]

Challenged, even inspired, by other media, and liberated from Modernism by eclecticism, an increasing number of periodicals are asserting themselves visually. Entertainment Weekly and RayGun are prime movers in the drive for a visual voice, both catering to vastly different audiences but correctly targeting their design technique.

The cumulative effect of these liberated graphics on writing is that, on the most visually aggressive pages, thoughts are not carried beyond their place in a composition because pages no longer encourage and cultivate a long attention span.

The reader's eye falls on a picture, then on a block of text, then on an ad and a caption, as at a buffet. In many magazines it is even difficult to distinguish between editorial copy and advertisements; in some, ads themselves are a substantial part of the editorial information.

The page on which graphics support and enhance rather than compete with the word and image is the exception — not the rule — in some publications, even though much is known about what makes text and photograph packages inviting and easily legible. Supportive graphics help texts do what words and illustrations do best, allowing them to carry reader imaginations to other words. Hyperactive graphics, on the other hand, hold the reader to the world of a page that has itself become a fantasy. "Reading today is for many primarily a visual experience," comments Steven Heller.[4]

The effect of graphic design in some publications, then — even when it is "good" design — is the break-up of the text. The result affects no less than how we think: the broken page delivers impressions and sensations, but it does not lead the reader into the depth that carefully elaborated ideas, crafted writing and layered passages can create in a quiet sequence. There is a strong tendency to construct each page as a freestanding unit.

The surrender of text to design can also be seen in books about visual arts, where texts are often treated as visual blocks subservient to pictures. In the most graphically oriented books each page is a design that may or may not have words, and texts are left for introductions playing a minor role. Books about graphic design are notorious for having little or no text — they are simply a portfolio of full-page designs.

The conflict, finally, is primarily between verbal culture and visual culture.

Paul Rand, a father of modern American graphic design, suggests that the tendency to consider pure form and visual relationship on a page as independent of content resulted from abstract post-World War II art. The page became distinct from content, "forcing attention on the design of the total surface," he has written.[5]

The revolutionary design by the Russian Constructivists in the 1920s became everyday, page-by-page commercial reality in magazines. Especially in the 1960s, with the rise in influence of Swiss design, letters within a word themselves became subject to typographic manipulation. Letters were appreciated for their visual character; words grew from within, with typographical shifts between letters.

April Greiman, a leading contemporary "new wave" graphic designer, says she tries to paint a word with letters. The result is publications that can be read in almost any direction with the same comprehension — the articles are short and, like the pages on which they appear, freestanding. The buildup of meaning within the publication does not depend on linear sequence.[6]

If the impact of writing is lessening on the page, the best designers are adapting as a new type of writer. Greiman, for example, layers verbal and visual images in what she calls "information texture," so that words and pictures are complementary. Other designers, especially those applying Deconstruction like David Carson of RayGun magazine, believe everyday experience is made up of different, disassociated experiences and beliefs. They construct pages with multiple texts and juxtaposed narratives in which meaning is comprehended in nonlinear ways. Different orders of information are presented simultaneously; parallel blocks with related and unrelated texts additively sculpt the page. Fragmented pages force readers to configure their own meanings and create the connections.[7]

But these designers — whose work has expanded the boundaries of the field — have also emerged as role models for others who want to think of themselves as artists, rather than service designers. Many appropriate very thoughtful work, viewing the elements on a page as visual objects rather than as meanings. Their goal is not to be a servant of the text but an expressive and experimental artist.

Although graphic design holds its origins in word, it no longer resides in it. Its independence from the word has led it to thrive free of both words and pictures. Writing has become the service art.

Supporters of the expanded role for graphics speak of visual literacy. In this view all the world is a text for anyone who can read it. But it seems that in the pursuit of visual literacy, literacy of the plain old verbal kind is eroded by small graphic detonations that disrupt the flow of meaning. It's true that screen culture — television, movies, and the computer — has heightened our visual expectations, expanded our appetite for surprise, and placed demands on the printed page to be entertaining. But the necessity to retain the attention of the reader on the page has altered the quality of the attention itself.

The difficulty with hyperactive pages is that they eventually exhaust the eye. The irony is that the pages designed not to be boring, are. Shock has disappeared.

A case can be made for a return: neutralized designs that de-aesteticize the page and serve the thoughts conveyed by the words. It is tempting but hardly realistic considering our overwhelmingly strong advertising culture.

It seems we need a compromise: transforming the traditional page into a contemporary one yet retaining the message in graphic context. The simplicity and quietness of this design makes it a small voice in a what is an otherwise visually competitive arena. The mind all to often tends to follow the eye, and the eye, all too often, seeks the publications that pulse with visual energy.

# Sources

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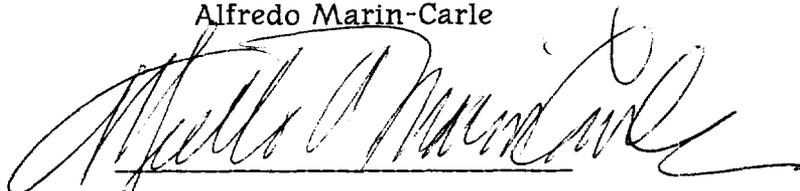
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