Dumb

Are designers who proclaim the end of print and embrace the triumph of the image turning their backs on design's critical potential and cultural role?

By Will Novosedlik

There have been few times in history when the act of graphic design has given birth to fundamental social change. More often than not, design tends to follow rather than lead broader developments in society. One very significant exception to this rule was the work of Aldus Manutius, whose invention of the portable book at the end of the fifteenth century not only gave impecunious scholars of Latin and Greek literature access to the objects of their study, but created the vehicle by which the printed word could be spread far enough to establish the beginnings of universal literacy. Johannes Gutenberg may have invented the mechanics of print, but Manutius gave birth to print culture, and all of the social, political and psychological change that came with it.

As the present millennium draws to a close, it is just as fashionable to speak of endings as of beginnings, and as new media continue to divest printed text of its role as the primary medium of information exchange, the structure of information itself is being broken down into byte-sized chunks that have made the depth of verbal intelligence all but unnecessary. Print, which was once the vehicle of learning, is now considered by some to be old and in the way. Digital designer Mark Rattin, who works with Rick Valicenti at Thirst, was once quoted, while singing the praises of digital technology, as saying "The book just doesn't seem to have the power that it used to. We're persuaded much more easily and much more powerfully by a series of moving images empowered with sound and visual imagery. I think it's the fact that we've been so hyper-stimulated by the visual media: we have to understand that these new media are there and plug in."[1]

Plug in to what? An incoherent sea of random access stimuli looking for inarticulate recipients? No wonder writer Sven Birkerts has predicted that "In the near future verbal intelligence, which has long been viewed as suspect as the act of reading, will come to seem positively conspiratorial. The greater part of any articulate person's energy will be deployed in dumbing-down her discourse."[2]

The effect of these changes on how we communicate has spawned a flood of both lamentation and unbridled enthusiasm, depending on which side of the information highway you travel along. In the slow lane are critics such as Sven Birkerts (*The Gutenberg Elegies*) and Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *Technopoly*), while in the fast lane we find writers Alvin Kernan (*The Death of Literature*) and Robert Coover (*The End of Books*), not to mention Nicholas Negroponte and any of the other prosyletisers to be found in the pages of *Wired* magazine. Now, the graphic design community has stepped up to the line with the recent release of David Carson's somewhat self-importantly titled monograph *The End of Print*.

In recent years, many graphic designers have all too happily embraced the idea of the demise of print. Propelled by a shallow reading of the precepts of deconstruction, they have exchanged the tarnished coin of Gutenberg's realm for the cool currency of Negroponte's, abandoning the linear fixity of printed text for the non-linear polyphony of hypertext. The irony is that most graphic designers, including the most vocal harbingers of the death of print, still practise what they preach within the dimensions of the printed page. They have not migrated to cyberspace but have appropriated its forms for use in a medium that was never meant to accommodate them. In a reversal of McLuhan's dictum that the content of a new medium is the old medium that preceded it, the content of much contemporary graphic design is that of the medium that it claims to presage.

...e is a problem with the assumption ... a printed text is inherently a linear, ...ophonic fixed text and, conversely, ... a hypertext is uniquely non-linear, ...ed, or even polyphonic. While both ...ed texts and electronic hypertexts ...eate a particular kind of readerly ...action, as a function of their ...tures, they cannot automatically ... any more or less control over the ... of meaning within the text(s) ... number and quality of the voices ...ented. In both cases, authorial ...l remains either unchanged or ...mply expanded.

If graphic design is dissolving its bond with the 500-year history of print, what effect does this have on culture? If, as Neil Postman has said, to engage the written word "means to follow a line of thought . . . to uncover lies, confusions and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense . . . to weigh ideas, to contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another"[3] (in short, to encourage rationality), then what havoc does design wreak when it subjects printed text to the kind of fragmentation and manipulation that has become routine in the 1990s.

But the printed text does not in and of itself position readers in a critical way. And textual fragmentation does not necessarily preclude critical analysis.

Such work is often labelled in design journalism as exemplary of deconstruction. But where deconstruction began as a mode of inquiry designed to expose the influence of the structures of language on the creation of meaning, it became appropriated by designers as

1. Patrick Coyne, "Thirst", *Communication Arts*, September/October, 1994, p. 130.
2. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994, p. 129.
3. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 51.

a mere style to the point where, in the words of Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, it is now used "casually to label any work that favours complexity over simplicity and dramatizes the formal possibilities of digital production."[4]

The timely arrival of digital technology, which allows a degree of image/text manipulation unthinkable only ten years ago, has merged with the abuse of techniques pioneered by North American schools such as Cranbrook and CalArts to render an aesthetic of apparent richness and complexity. Upon closer examination, however, what passes for depth dissolves into vacuous ambiguity due to a complete lack of analytical rigour. As "style", deconstruction adds up to no more than an arena for self-expression, which is precisely the kind of romantic notion that its literary originators sought to destroy.

I know of very few graphic designers or critics who have actually read a book by Derrida, which makes all the claims and references to deconstruction highly suspect. I agree that ambiguity has been misunderstood by legions of designers and students who seem to favour the non-committal safety of fuzzy ambiguity – "it can mean whatever you want it to" – over ambiguity's strategic value (as used in literature) to enhance or extend meaning, which is not a by-product of unclear intentions but the result of careful consideration.

Rick Valicenti, for one, seems to be fixated on the allure of his own stylistic bravado, uttering such solipsisms as "In the future, we're going to find the designer's portfolio being preferred much like Ralph Lauren's clothes. Clients won't just go to the designer to get the job done . . . They'll go because of the look."[5] In the preface to *The End of Print*, musician David Byrne compares David Carson's work to rock music, claiming that it communicates "on a level beyond words . . . a level that bypasses the logical, rational centers of the brain and goes straight to the part that understands without thinking".[6] Statements like these not only reveal a flippant disregard for the power of language but promote a kind of mental lassitude which values reflex over reflection, image over idea, and superfluity over substance.

PERVERSE VISUAL RHETORIC

The effect that this kind of design has on culture can only be erosive. Once an ally of verbal intelligence, the content of printed text is here treated with indifference, even contempt. Text becomes yet another toy in the nursery of self-amusement, and does nothing to advance the potential for designers to participate in the growth of knowledge. In the work of these and other latter-day "decon" designers, typography is not for us to comprehend but merely to apprehend, a mute prop in the perverse visual rhetoric of dumbing-down, a kind of silly putty which can be sliced, diced, debased and imploded upon itself to the point of near meaninglessness. By divesting language of its historical power to communicate and engender understanding, we forfeit design's power as a civilising force and retreat into the darkest recesses of Plato's famous cave.

Most of the stuff I have seen that would fit this category of typographic effects is rather banal in its content or of no real consequence to the sum of human knowledge. The vast majority of books in print today still subscribe to the basic layout invented centuries ago: top to bottom, left to right, line to line, recto to verso.

The evocation of Plato's cave is revealing. The distrust of images which abounds in literate culture – and this essay – can be traced to Plato's Republic, where the arts were banned because they engaged in visual myth-making.

Is this kind of verbicide merely a misreading of deconstruction's original agenda? If so, how did that agenda become analytically starved to the point of stylistic narcissism? In an article that appeared in *Print* magazine in 1990, writers Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte claimed that: "We live in a deconstructed world, a world agitated by more and more complexity, where the attention span diminishes hourly (turning us into a society of information grazers), and values appear to change weekly. It is inevitable that heretofore clear and supposedly resolved notions about what design does and the way it does it will begin to blur and ultimately reshape themselves."[7] If we do live in such a world (and I am reluctantly inclined to agree that we do), is it inevitable that we must succumb to the forces that have brought it about? Positioned in this way, design is absolved of any responsibility it might accept as a formative cultural and intellectual force and is seen instead as a mirror of its environment. By choosing to adapt rather than lead, design simply justifies the popular criticism which has always been levelled at it – that it is all surface and no depth.

Depth is the key to the development of knowledge and understanding, and printed text has always engaged serious readers at a level that encourages the development of depth. If we have turned into a society of information grazers with a diminishing attention span, as is believed by Toronto designer Bev Tudhope, who recently defended his use of word-bytes by saying that readers no longer have the time to look for important information "hidden in acres of type", perhaps it is pertinent at this point to examine how we got this way, and what role design has played in the process.

4. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, "Deconstruction and Graphic Design", *Design Writing Research*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p. 10.
5. Interview with Rick Valicenti, *Communication Arts*, March/April 1989, p. 90.
6. Lewis Blackwell, *The End of Print: The Graphic Design of David Carson*, London: Laurence King Publishing, 1995, p. 8.
7. Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte, "A Brave New World: Understanding Deconstruction", *Print*, November/December 1990, p. 81.

The primary vehicle of communications today is not the image alone, but the combination of images and text in a relationship in which the text tries to anchor and determine the meaning of the image, or otherwise provides an interpretation to what we see or supplements what we read. Positioned against the image, the text retains a privileged status that is simply given, accepted without question as the de facto standard against which images will be judged. "Logic and concept" are placed on the side of the text. The "textualisation" of the image – its translation into words, its reduction to language metaphors, the recourse to semiotics – has so heavily influenced our critical understanding of images that it impedes the development of a theory of the image which is not somehow doomed to be a failed version of verbal language.

In a book entitled *The Image*, author Daniel J. Boorstin argues that since the latter part of the nineteenth century, the image has supplanted the word as the primary vehicle of communication. Technological advancements in the movement of information, from telegraphy to television, have made the meaning-centred discourse of printed text far too slow a medium to meet the demands of an information-hungry public and the exigencies of an industrial economy bent on profit. The "graphic revolution", as Boorstin refers to the combined inventions of photography and telegraphy, allowed for a rapid proliferation of images that could deliver a message with far greater speed and emotion to far greater numbers of people than mere text ever could. And like all technologies, it not only provided new ways in which information could be delivered, but profoundly altered the way in which that information was interpreted. The increased volume of imagery and the speed of its delivery demanded shorter attention and a quicker reaction. Under such conditions, as Sven Birkerts has written, impression and image take precedence over logic and concept, presentation structures reception, and expectations about how information is organised eventually change.[8]

In step with these developments, typography in the early part of this century became less verbal and more visual, and print culture became less about reading and more about looking. Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism and De Stijl all attempted to bend visual form to the task of communication. Most readers of this magazine will be familiar enough with the typographic experiments of this era, a time during which artists, poets and designers sought to free type from its utilitarian status as a neutral carrier of language and turn it into expressive visual form. The nascent concepts of visual communication that characterised these movements later formed some of the tenets of the graphic curriculum at the Bauhaus. As Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller have pointed out, part of the legacy of the Bauhaus is the attempt to establish a "language of vision, a code of abstract forms addressed to immediate, biological perception rather than to the culturally conditioned intellect".[9] It was seen as a language analogous to, but distinct from, verbal language.

Lupton and Miller also remind us that it was this focus on vision as "an autonomous realm of expression" that is largely responsible for the hostility towards verbal language which is common to post-war design education. Without an interest in verbal language, design became so focused on visual form that Paul Rand could say "a design student whose mind is cluttered with matters that have nothing directly to do with graphic design is a bewildered student."[10] Rand's obsession with form was symptomatic of his time, and it was perhaps epitomised by the emerging discipline of corporate identity, in which the simplest of forms were employed to symbolise the most complex of corporations. In the late 1950s, the *Harvard Business Review* could say that "the image ... negates the complexities of the modern diversified corporation. But this does not make it any less workable as an operational tool. In fact, it is the reality which creates the need for illusion."[11]

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the heart of the matter

Thus we have image standing in for reality, creating a mask of believability in a world where people have neither the time nor the desire to ask difficult questions. Although it would be wrong to say that our historical bias towards the power of visual imagery has produced an entire profession of myopic image-makers, it has in many designers produced a marked lack of interest in critical thinking. It is precisely this kind of intelligence, satisfied by its fixation on visual form, that is ideally suited to the disciplines of corporate and brand communications. In commercial and consumer culture, a deeply critical mind is inimical to success. As Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's* magazine, so succinctly puts it: "The success of the American Dream, like the success of MasterCard and the Republican Party, presupposes the eager and uncritical consumption of junk in all its commercial declensions."[12]

Although I may not agree that every consumer product is a form of junk, I cannot argue with the inference that commerce is fuelled by the rapid, unquestioning consumption of huge quantities of manufactured goods and services. The language of branding, which is primarily visual and heavily designed, must be as laconic as possible in order to drive this consumption. It therefore must bypass "the logical, rational centers of the brain and go

8. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, p. 122.
9. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *The ABC's of △□○: The Bauhaus and Design Theory*, New York: The Herb Lubalin Study Center of Design and Typography, 1991, p. 22.
10. Paul Rand, *Design, Form and Chaos*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 217.
11. Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1994, p. 120.
12. Lewis Lapham, *Hotel America: Scenes from the Lobby of the Fin de Siècle*, London and New York: Verso, 1995, p. 182.

straight to the part that understands without thinking". Not surprisingly, what drives magazines like *Ray Gun*, *Speak* and *Blur* off the magazine racks at alternative book stores is the same magic that moves soup tins and dog food out of the supermarket.

I doubt that Marvin Scott Jarrett, publisher of *Ray Gun*, *Bikini*, *huH* and *Blah Blah Blah*, would disagree with this statement. He has recognised a niche, discovered a formula that works in it and is milking it for everything it's worth. A page from *Ray Gun* might look a lot different from a box of cake mix or the spread from an annual report, but they are all agents of the same process; it is just that their targets are different. A Harvard business professor would simply call it good marketing.

Design, whether falsely deconstructed by its practitioners or blithely decoded by consumers, seems to be most successful when it avoids strategies that require verbal intelligence. In favouring a "language" of images over a language of words, it would appear that many designers have contributed significantly to the dumbing-down of culture so passionately lamented by writers like Birkerts and Postman. And, considering the unstoppable force with which printed text is being superseded by hypertext, what chance has design to make any future contribution to the development of knowledge?

If designers have contributed to the dumbing-down of culture it is not because they are obsessed with images or fragmenting text, it is because they have acted as the shapers of banal messages and dubious information – whatever its style. If many are suspicious of verbal language, theory and criticism, it could be because their interest in the visual has so often been marginalised or denigrated.

DESIGN AS AN INTEGRATIVE FIELD

Perhaps the only chance we have for achieving such a goal lies at the level of university education. Writing in *Design Issues*, the American design educator Gunnar Swanson recently put forward a case for transforming design into a liberal art. Using the Aristotelean model of liberal arts as subjects that are studied for their own intrinsic value and not merely to develop skills that will allow one to earn a living, he proposes that design become an academic subject, much as philosophy, sociology or psychology are today. Recognising that design education has until now been more a form of vocational training than of education, Swanson points out that design is an integrative field that bridges many subjects that deal with communication, expression, interaction and cognition: "Design should be about meaning and how meaning can be created. Design should be about the relationship of form and communication. It is one of the fields where science and literature meet. It can shine a light on hidden corners of sociology and history. Design's position as a conduit for and shaper of popular values can be a path between anthropology and political science . . . Designers, design educators and design students are in a more important and interesting field than we seem to recognize."[13]

The notion of design as a field of stud without practical application is unlike and undesirable. After all, it is the pract of graphic design – no matter how wan or limiting – that provides the basis for a theory of graphic design. This is not to say that the education of graphic designers needs to be tied so intimately professional practice that it cannot enga in activities which challenge design's social function, historical understandin or professional legitimacy. The calls fo graphic design to be a liberal art – a qu for academic legitimacy – need to be supplanted by strategies which foster "critical making", teaching when, how and why to question things.

Design has not only been integrative but also integral to the development of culture. But it still lacks the legitimacy of other more established subjects of academic study, and Swanson is right in saying that its concerns will not be seriously addressed by academia until it becomes an academic subject. There are, however, larger and more ominous obstacles to be overcome. Even if design could become recognised as a liberal arts subject rather than just a vocational skill, this would happen in a society that is growing increasingly inimical towards a liberal arts education. In a market-driven world, education is not so much seen as a process of developing an enquiring mind but of preparing oneself for gainful employment. An informed and thoughtful citizen is as likely to question a law, a product or a politician as to accept them, and such critical behaviour has the potential of being extremely unproductive in a growth-oriented economy. As Lewis Lapham has said: "We don't like, and we don't trust the forces of intellect – not unless they can be tied securely to a commercial profit or a scientific benefit."[14]

Clearly, designers are not the only ones with this problem, but until we can get beyond our preoccupation with visual imagery and begin to understand the effect that our work has had, and can have, on culture, we are doomed to play a Cinderella role on the stage of human development. Our culture may well be moving from text to hypertext, but by celebrating the "End of Print" we hypocritically mock the medium that Manutius gave us, throwing out 500 years of the history of ideas in the process. The currents of that history run deep. Design can choose to plumb the depths and chart a meaningful course into the future, or to float aimlessly on its surface at the mercy of millennial change.

Notes in the margin by Andrew Blauvelt

13. Gunnar Swanson, "Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art: Design and Knowledge in the University and the Real World", *Design Issues*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 1994), p. 59.
14. Lewis Lapham, *Hotel America*, p. 183.