

Author: Raquel Pelta

Gender: F

Title, Position and Institution: Ph D, Professor, Elisava School of Design – University Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona).

Address for correspondence: Alcalá, 124 – 5° D – 28009 MADRID (SPAIN)

Telephone: 34 607 95 20 23. E-mail: [raquelpelta@inicia.es](mailto:raquelpelta@inicia.es) or [rpelta@uoc.edu](mailto:rpelta@uoc.edu)

Theme: 1

Title of the paper: **Design and Graphic Designs, 1984-1999. The North American Debate.**

The aim of this paper is to offer an overview of the perceptions of North American graphic designers through their own writings, provided that, as it is stated further on, these writings are what best exemplify the postmodernism of resistance described by Hal Foster in his book *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*<sup>1</sup> as the position taken by those who have attempted to deconstruct the Modern Movement in opposition to the *status quo* which had appropriated it, transforming into an “official” culture.

The critical tone of such writings prompted an intense debate, the consequences of which have been reflected in current graphic design. The grasp and analysis of this debate allows us to better understand the profession, and at the same time perceive it as a cultural discipline in which its participants are capable of reflection and do not merely possess a series of practical abilities applicable to the commercial field.

Graphic design underwent profound changes in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As is widely known, between 1984 and 1985 several crucial technological advances were achieved, as the appearance of Macintosh computer by Apple, among others.

Technology was not, however, the sole agent that contributed to these changes. Perhaps the computer acted as a catalyst, accelerating the transformation process, but there already existed the grounds of a critical examination of a good deal of the Modern Movement principles which had been highly relevant to design since the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The results stemming from this critical examination have been grouped under the term “postmodernism”, although a more detailed analysis reveals that there are actually several different approaches within this grouping. In broad terms, and according to Hal Foster, the field of graphic design encompasses both a “reactive” and a “resistance” or “opposition” postmodernism. As far as I can see, the second, far from representing a superficial reaction to the Modern Movement, has proved to be an intriguing reflection not only on what it represented, but also on the course that graphic design would follow in the future in our information society spoken about by authors like Manuel Castells<sup>2</sup>.

As has been the case in other areas of culture, this “postmodernism of resistance” has moved outside the box of the modernist project with the aim of modifying the social context. The movement has been especially prolific in its bibliographic production in the field of graphic design, a situation which can be endorsed by the numerous articles published between the 1980’s and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as by a certain depth of theoretical reflection, especially if we compare it to what had been the critique of graphic design up to that moment, limited to very specific fields such as typography, and subordinated to that of architecture and industrial design.

It is important to point out, however, that this “literary” bounty was by no means generalized, neither geographically nor among all graphic designers. We could even go so far as to say that it was a phenomenon limited to North America in that, although in the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, H. (ed): *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays in Post-Modern Culture*, Bay Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Castells, M.: *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol I, *The Rise of Network Society*, Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996; vol. II, *The Power of Identity* (1997), among other works.

the western world we can encounter “postmodernism of (resistance)” as a way of thinking, the same cannot be said of theoretical lines of argument which, in comparison to the North American expostulation, have been neither as constant nor as abundant, leading us to believe that this “postmodernism of resistance” is, in effect, a manifestation limited primarily to the United States.

To document this statement, I would like to refer to the deductions gathered from the ideas set forth in a significant number of testimonies published in books and magazines, proffered in particular by professionals living in the United States. Among those who stood at the forefront of this line of thinking in graphic design during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we can find Katherine McCoy, Andrew Howard, Tibor Kalman, Jeffery Keedy, Phil Baines, Steven Heller, Abbott Miller, Karrie Jacobs, Ellen Lupton, Rudy VanderLans, Zuzana Licko, Adrian Shaughnessy, Andrew Blauvelt, Anne Burdick and Moira Cullen, to cite but a few, followed in a much lesser degree, at least in coverage, by the British (Rick Poynor and Max Bruinsma, for example, editor of *Eye*), Dutch, German and French.

Moreover, and although some of the most interesting texts were published in British magazines such as *Eye*, we must still take into account that the majority of these contributors were American and that some of the more “militant” texts were published in another U.S. magazine, *Emigre* (although it was run by Dutchman Rudy Van der Lans), which became the standard-bearer of this “postmodernism of resistance”. This magazine undoubtedly represented the intentions of a “new criticism” which opted to steer clear of technical and commercial aspects, typical of the majority of specialized publications, and sought to treat graphic design as a cultural discipline, on equal grounds with regard to other cultural manifestations.

Interestingly, while the formal proposals of these North American designers have been widely spread internationally and have been followed by a good number of professionals worldwide, their “intellectual” overtures are not nearly as well-known. In fact, there are many who would still believe, at least in Spain, that it was just another aesthetic experiment which had cropped up within the recurring classicist-baroque cycle, with the sole object of self-expression. Thus were they generally understood and imitated, not only in Europe but in the United States as well, giving rise in many cases to superficial results which were notably different from the ideas which had spawned the original production.

A closer analysis of the intentions of these “post-modernists of resistance”, however, reveals that this was not the case.

Here we must also consider that, as far as the acceptance – or rejection – of postmodernism is concerned, very few graphic designers have wished for their work to be labeled “postmodern”, perhaps due to the generally negative connotations this term has had. In the Anglo-Saxon domain, then, we can find differences between British professionals, quite reluctant to include their work under the umbrella of post-modernism, and North Americans who, on the contrary, seem to be in general agreement with the classification.

It is difficult to know why the Americans have taken to postmodernism with a greater liking than the rest of their colleagues. I believe that this aspect is somehow related to the way in which the ideals of the Modern Movement were interpreted in the United States. As Milton Glaser mentioned in an article dating from 1987, from the 1950’s, i.e. shortly prior to the arrival of some of the European representatives of the Modern Movement, the concept of “good design” was identified with “good business”, a theory which rang true for the business world. Big businesses therefore assimilated the aesthetics of the Modern Movement, but not the social ideals.

This would explain perhaps why the phenomenon of the Modern Movement was “made official” sooner and more conclusively in the United States than in other parts, as well as why the reaction to it was stronger there than in European countries, which had witnessed a

very different economic, political and social development. It would likewise justify the strong anti-brand reaction of these designers throughout the decade of the 90's, the result of which has been a greater and clearer critical position (and here I refer back to existing publications) than that which can be observed in other parts of the world.

I will come back to this point further on, but I would first like to comment that, from the North American point of view, the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close with a critical vision present in idealistic publications such as the "First Things First Manifesto 2000", or summed up in certain works such as the billboard which, while created by British artist Jonathan Barnbrook, was mastered for the annual AIGA Conference in Las Vegas. On it we can read the following quote from the now-deceased artist Tibor Kalman: "Designers, stay away from corporations who want you to lie for them."

But allow me for one moment to put aside the topic of social commitment in order to touch briefly on the issues that interested those designers, and what their contributions have been to the field of graphic design.

In order to establish a framework, let us say that these issues arose from a debate, a "small war" in the words of Steven Heller,<sup>3</sup> that made it to the specialized press and in which two stances came head to head. On the one hand, the opinion of a young, school-taught generation that championed new paraliterary practices, in keeping with a broad vision of the task of the graphic designer, for whom they claimed the role of critic, historian and theorizer. This opinion consequently upheld the widening of faculties and the intent to do away with the limits between creative and critical forms. In opposition we have the "designosaurs", as polemic designer Jeffery Keedy dubbed them, who were "the representatives of the archetypal twentieth-century design ethic that held sway after World War II. With its Eurocentric ideals, rationalistic dogma, old boy affiliation, corporate association, and fading mythology [...]."<sup>4</sup>

Despite this rhetoric, Heller thought that the gap between the two generations was neither ideological nor philosophical, or even methodological, but stemmed rather from the fact that the "modern" group was reluctant to "open its arms and warmly embrace unconventional work."<sup>5</sup> It may be then, that this clash did not exist as such between modernists and postmodernists, but was rather a manifestation of the typical differences between generations.

As I see it, a verbal and "literary" confrontation did indeed exist but, if we go by what has been published, except in the case of methodological issues, we can say that there was not such an enormous gap between "postmodernists of resistance" and the supporters of the Modern Movement. It may be, then, that Steven Heller was correct in his assessment, at least as regards the ideas of the designers addressed in this paper.

Within this framework we must establish the interest that the designers of this "younger generation" referred to by Heller held for fields "outside" graphic design, and in doing so it is possible to understand their approach to the theories of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, two French thinkers who received maximum attention not from European graphic designers, as could be expected due to geographic proximity, but rather from the Americans.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Heller, S.: "Design is Hell", in Bierut, M.; Drenttel, W.; Heller, S.; Holland, DK, *Looking Closer. Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, Vol.II, Allworth Press, 1997, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Heller, S., op. cit., "Design is Hell", p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> We mustn't forget that these designers began to gain recognition through the designs made by the students at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, directed by Katherine and Michael McCoy, at the end of the 1970's. While Cranbrook was not the only school to apply the concepts of poststructuralism to graphic design it was undoubtedly the most important. Other schools such as the California Institute of Arts (CalArts) in Valencia (California) or the Cooper Union School of Art in New York, between 1981 and 1985, also began to interpret the theory of literary criticism and to translate this into images. At the Cooper Union School, professors Hans

It was Jacques Derrida who perhaps had a more direct influence on this generation. Beginning in 1966, when Derrida participated in an important symposium held at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, his ideas spread throughout the United States, first in the fields of philosophy and literary criticism and later, in the 1970's, in the field of design.

We could say that the conscious application of his "theory" of deconstruction to graphics is, yet again, a phenomenon limited to design in North America. While European designers of the 1990's adopted many of the formal solutions associated with this school of thought, it was more to imitate whatever arrived from North America by way of books and magazines than an actual desire to put into practice the concepts of the French philosopher, many of which remained virtually unknown to the majority of European designers.

It is quite significant, then, that the greatest number of texts devoted to explaining and spreading the ideas of deconstruction and its application to graphic design, although still quite few in number, were written in the United States. This fact verifies the relevance these concepts obtained and the desire of some to circulate them for the greater understanding of those professionals who were possibly not abreast of what was being discussed in the intellectual circles that had cropped up at schools and universities.

Among these publications we can point out the article by Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte entitled "A Brave New World: Understanding Deconstruction" (*Print*, 1990); the introductory text by Rick Poynor found in the book, *Typography Now: The New Wave*,<sup>7</sup> which deals with the issue between modernists and postmodernists within the typographical debate; one of the chapters in the work *Design Writing Research*,<sup>8</sup> by Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller, in which they established a relation between deconstruction and graphic design; and finally, in the more recent *No More Rules*<sup>9</sup> (2003) by Rick Poynor.

North American designers who attempted to apply the concept of deconstruction to the field of graphic design started from the premise that, if literary criticism could decode the verbal language of a novel, design could certainly do the same. The viewer was thus able to discover and experience the complexities of the language and to explore the relation between text and image and the processes of reading and vision. One of the phenomena prompted by the influence of poststructuralism was the incorporation of content as part of the language or, in other words, as a fundamental part of the language of graphics provided that it is now understood as something from which form must necessarily derive – form which is not neutral but rather full of connotations, representing an essential component of the receiver's construction/destruction of meaning.

From this perspective the designer commits to the content, becoming in essence an author. This commitment will lead not only to a greater self-expression, but will also compel the designers to reflect and take a firm stance – in other words, a more active role.

Yet again, it has been the North American designers who have championed a personal vision of design with more convincing arguments, moving away from the modern vindication of neutrality. Katherine McCoy, Rudy VanderLans and Tibor Kalman, among others, advocated a model in which the role of the designer was not limited to solving problems; here the designer actually became an added author of content, critically conscious of the message and assuming a role that had before been associated with art and literature. This view has

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Haacke, George Sadek and P. Adams Sitney encouraged students and professionals associated with the center, among them Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton, to consider graphic design in terms of language and culture. The result was a series of graphic proposals that endeavored to formally explore the relationship between writing and design, theory and practice and form and content.

<sup>7</sup> Poynor, R.; Booth-Clibborn, E. (ed.): *Typography Now: The Next Wave*, London, Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Lupton, E.; Miller, A.: *Design Writing Research. Writing on Graphic Design*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Poynor, R.: *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003.

provided a line of reasoning for many current designers, not limited to North America, and in some instances has resulted in a vindication of the social commitment of the profession, while in others it has led to the development of a type of behavior we could call “artistic” in the most traditional sense of the word.

As was the case for decades in other fields such as linguistics, the field of graphic design had not yet identified the possibility of dealing with matters outside design itself, in part due to a certain influence of scientific methodology, and in part because, parting from the notion that the purpose of design was to offer solutions to problems, the design itself was subordinated to the specific needs of the client. With the appearance of post-structuralist theories, graphic design began to incorporate topics and concerns that had until then been limited to the realm of philosophy, linguistics and literature. We can find a specific example of this in the text by Lupton and Miller, “Disciplines of Design. Writing with Foucault”,<sup>10</sup> dedicated, as the title itself indicates, to Foucault. This work is a foray into the philosophy of this author and his book *Les Mots et les choses. Archéologie des sciences humaines* (Gallimard, 1966),<sup>11</sup> and addresses the issue of the limits defined between disciplines, establishing a parallelism between certain concepts of the French philosopher and graphic design.

Another of the consequences of adopting the theoretical corpus of poststructuralism was the realization of the designers that it had become imperative to establish a certain cultural groundwork on which to take a stand in the light of a discipline which no longer believed in all-encompassing theories. For some, like Moira Cullen, it was essential to develop a true design community equivalent to more entrenched fields like art and architecture.<sup>12</sup> And the only way of achieving this was to create a dynamic theoretical, critical and bibliographical body. As has been previously mentioned, this approach championed a broadening of the faculties of the designer and a softening of interdisciplinary boundaries.

During the last twenty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, North American graphic designers approached the theory convinced that it was not possible to produce design without the existence of a prior discourse. And in the trend set by Roland Barthes, for whom the theory is not at odds with specificity concretion, it was thought that the first thing to take into consideration in writing theory is how to relate it to the practice of design. Steve Bakers proposed, for example, that the appropriate way of writing for the study of graphic design should be, in and of itself, an attempt to reconcile the visual with the verbal.<sup>13</sup>

In line with Barthes’ way of thinking, the theory has been conceived of as an ongoing self-criticism and progressive discourse which could indeed be revolutionary, or at least which formed part of a commitment not only to the profession itself but to society in general, in that a more insightful perception of design could have a greater positive social impact.

Designers have also stressed the need to build a well-founded criticism of design, making a formidable effort to create their own lexicon, while at the same time vindicating a space for the voice of the designer.

The result has been a significant corpus of texts written by graphic designers and specialized critics through which we are now able to discover not only what they personally believed, but also the ideas of the important professional sector they were addressing and that followed them, thanks to a series of periodicals on design.

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<sup>10</sup> Lupton, E.; Miller, A.: “Disciplines of Design. Writing with Foucault”, in op. cit., pp. 66-70.

<sup>11</sup> This work was translated into English under the following title: *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*.

<sup>12</sup> Cullen, M.: “We are What we Write”, published in 1993 and included in Heller, S.; Finamore M.: *Design Culture. An Anthology of Writing from the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, New York, Allworth Press, pp. 211-212.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Poynor, R., “Introduction”, in Lupton, E.; Miller, A.: op. cit., pp. viii-ix.

Through this has evolved a defense of the intellectual designer, similar to the advocacy of the scientific designer in the past, which essentially champions a more significant place in society for graphic design and graphic designers, as well as an attempt to penetrate the cultural circles that had rejected the producers of what was considered a tool of corporate promotion, which in general gave rise to products even more ephemeral than those created in other fields of design.

One aspect we can mention is, as Victor Margolin<sup>14</sup> has appropriately pointed out, that US designers began first to realize the need of having a history of their profession, and later considered how they wished this history to be documented, and later considered how they wished this history to be created.

A significant part of the theoretical reflections published in specialized journals centered on and formally established the field of typography, an area of special interest to North American designers, who were particularly energetic in their opposition to the ideas held by International Style,<sup>15</sup> which took hold in the 1960's in the United States where it was adopted by important design studios dedicated to corporate graphics. It was these studios, among them Unimark, which took on the task of systematizing and standardizing the campaigns of some of the largest corporations in the world, such as Xerox, Ford and Steelcase.

Notwithstanding, it should again be pointed out that the designers who were most critical of this went not against the foundations of the Modern Movement but rather against the traditionalist reformism of the 1930's, as well as against those aspects related to the "objective and impersonal presentation" characteristic of New Typography, which persevered in the Swiss School and later became an official corporate style devoid of the social ideology which encouraged the modern school of thought.

It is true that some of the principles of modern typography were brought into question, such as the exclusion of ornamentation championed by "elementary design", standardization (and with it the universality which led to an attempt to create universal alphabets), the search for objectivity and impersonality, the pre-eminence given to geometric typographical styles, a rejection of the handwritten word, legibility as the primary end and a reduction of design elements to the bare minimum. Other principles remained, however, such as the idea that the aim of any typographical piece is communication, an idea upheld by Moholy-Nagy in 1923<sup>16</sup> and which has always been present, for example, in the work of David Carson.

If now, for modern typographers like Moholy-Nagy and Jan Tschichold (in his New Typography stage), the visual appearance of printed material must necessarily respond to new production methods<sup>17</sup> and reflect the demands of a "new era", which meant new requisites for both user and reader, the reaction of the "postmodernist resistance" designers to the computer was not much different in that, at least at the onset of this new technology, they were keen to delve into the new formal possibilities that informatics could offer. In this sense, some of their

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<sup>14</sup> Margolin, V.: "Design History in the United States, 1977-2000", in Margolin, V.: *The Politics of the Artificial. Essays on Design and Design Studies*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> We must not pass over the success achieved by Swiss designer Wolfgang Weingart in the United States in the 1970's. Between 1972 and 1973 he visited several design schools throughout the country, undoubtedly leaving his mark on more than one professional. It could be even be stated that he started a trend followed by figures as April Greiman and what is known as the "new wave" of design, which reached its peak at the beginning of the 1980's.

<sup>16</sup> Moholy-Nagy, L.: "Die neue Typographie" ("The New Typography"), published originally in Staatliches Bauhaus, 1923 and included in Beirut, M.; Helfand, J.; Heller, S.; Poynor, R.: *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design*, New York, Allworth Press, 1999, pp. 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> An example of this could be the use of flag text rather than justified margins, as it was thought that this type was better adapted to the type-setting machines of that era.

arguments were not entirely incompatible with those used by their predecessors from the Modern Movement.

If we put aside now the field of typography, other North American contributions we should consider are those related to the feminist perspective. It is in the United States where we can situate Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, who in 1973 wrote the articles entitled “Some Aspects of Design from the Perspective of a Woman Designer” and “The Women’s Design Program” (Icographic 6), while at the same time incorporating into her design different ways of working and points of view related to feminism. Marlene McCarty is another example of a professional designer who uses her communicative capabilities to deal with issues concerning women.

The United States was also the stage for one of the attempts to debate the existence of gender-influenced design: Janet Fairbairn’s thesis entitled, “The Gendered Self: Interviews with Fifteen Women”.<sup>18</sup> In it Fairbairn compiled the responses of fifteen women from different public and professional fields of design to questions on how this profession, education, artistic movements, regional areas, cultural traditions and the feminist movement had influenced their work and how these influences had been reflected in their design style.

In bringing this paper to a close, I would like to mention the relevance the debate on the social role of graphic design has had in the United States – a debate which took shape during the 1990’s and which was finally transformed during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century into a stance we could even describe as political. A symbol of this is undoubtedly the “First Things First Manifesto 2000” mentioned earlier on, which, following its publication in 1999, gave rise to a series of debates on the feasibility of the professional-social positions it defends.

If the decade of the 80’s and the beginning of the 90’s were moments of certain passivity for these issues, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in parallel with the development of a global resistance movement, a new graphic activism appeared, while the interests of designers broadened considerably to respond -as is logical- to a new social, political, economic and cultural situation. Since the 1970’s, pacifism and the traditional resistance to governmental power and to certain doctrines have been joined by feminist vindications, the fight against AIDS, the defense of animal rights, homosexual activism, environmental concerns, the issue of genetically modified food and the attack on multinational corporations, in particular on their most indisputable manifestation: the brand, as symbols of a new power which is growing at an alarming rate.

Fully aware that culture is a manner of social control, and that design represents a political and cultural tool –“a powerful way of controlling our collective conscience” in the words of Zuzana Licko<sup>19</sup>-, North American designers have begun to return to the former social theory of design, a theory whose roots are deeply entrenched in modern discourse, but now in a new, revised form. For although there has been a significant sector of professionals who have tried to disassociate themselves from this theory, there was another group which was vital enough not to be ignored. It is in the heart of this other group where we can discover an ongoing concern for the role of design in a changing society and a call to social responsibility which draws them away from the conservative nature of certain post-modernist points of view. And this attitude is most certainly linked to many of the ideals of the Modern Movement.

As a final note I would like to mention that in analyzing the points dealt with in this paper, we must be aware of how a certain local reality is capable of influencing other local realities, thus becoming a nucleus which, in this case, has set the mood for a significant part

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<sup>18</sup> Fairbairn, J.: “The Gendered Self”, in Heller, S.; Finamore, M.: *Design Culture. An Anthology of Writing from the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, New York, Allworth Press, p. 327.

<sup>19</sup> Licko, Z.: “Discovery by design”, *Emigre* 32, 1995.

of global graphic design, achieving this through its dissemination by printed medium. Let us not forget that in today's world, the field of publishing, at least as far as graphic design is concerned, is governed by production originating in the United States.