

The influence of the postmodern graphic design genre on contemporary graphic design as analyzed in the context of generic participation

by

Michael E. Outhouse

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Graphic Design

Program of Study Committee:
Alan Mickelson, Major Professor
Paul Bruski
Kevin Amidon

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2013

Copyright © Michael E. Outhouse, 2013. All rights reserved.

UMI Number: 1551839

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 1551839

Published by ProQuest LLC (2014). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW	1
CHAPTER 2 DEFINING POSTMODERN CRITICAL THEORY AND GRAPHIC DESIGN	10
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY & DATA ANALYSIS	19
CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.....	64
REFERENCES.....	67

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sincerely appreciate the assistance and patience of the College of Design faculty that guided me through my journey at Iowa State University. Special thanks to my thesis committee for their cooperation and time to help me craft this thesis. To my family, friends, and loved ones that always supported my efforts at Iowa Sate University. I could never have done this without the help of so many caring and thoughtful people.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of Postmodern graphic design on contemporary graphic design. Another goal was to clearly define Postmodern graphic design in relation to practice and theory. A qualitative method utilizing rhetorical criticism, specifically generic participation, provided the framework for an analysis of specific Postmodern and contemporary designers. The results were mixed, but indicated that traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre continued to have some influence on contemporary graphic design.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem researched in this thesis is, does contemporary graphic design reflect a substantial influence of Postmodern graphic design principles? The proposed hypothesis of this thesis is; if Postmodern graphic design traits exhibited by iconic designers like Ed Fella, Neville Brody, and Stefan Sagmeister are qualitatively influential in the contemporary practice of graphic designers like the Ames Bros., Wolff Olins, and Michael Bierut, then Postmodern graphic design traits continue to be an important factor in design, rather than an ‘intellectual fad’ or outdated theory. This thesis examines the issue in the context of rhetorical criticism, specifically generic participation, by first analyzing three postmodern designers to establish four major traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre, and then examines contemporary graphic design to understand how it shares similarities of the Postmodern graphic design genre. The designers selected for this thesis represent a broad range of cultural influences, and thus offer wide insight into the rhetoric of Postmodern and contemporary graphic design. By analyzing the qualitative influence of Postmodern graphic design on contemporary graphic design, it’s possible to gain a better understanding of Postmodernism’s importance in current graphic design practice.

For graphic designers, Modernism and the Swiss Style, or, International Style dominated much of the 20th century, and it wasn’t until the 1980s that Postmodernism became a widely recognized, yet often misunderstood, form of expression.

Postmodernism is often characterized by conflicting ideas and notions of what the term itself actually means, and for certain critics the Postmodern movement was simply a short lived style (Poynor 8). Regardless, Postmodern cultural ideals were widespread across Europe and especially America in the 1980s and 1990s. The roots of Postmodernism are often linked to literary analysis, although as a form of visual expression it was first demonstrated in architecture beginning in the 1950s, and then as a growing movement in the 1970s. For some designers, Postmodernism was an opportunity to break free from the supposed confines of the modern movement, and forge a new form of visual expression. However, as Rick Poynor explains in *No More Rules*, “The widespread assumption now, outside the academy, is that postmodernism has gone the way of so many other intellectual fads. Many people never understood what it was supposed to mean and even the most knowledgeable observers are sometimes inclined to treat it with suspicion” (Poynor 8). If Poynor’s observation is correct, that Postmodernism has gone the way of so many other fads, then an analysis of contemporary graphic design should result in clear differences from the Postmodern graphic design genre.

When searching peer-reviewed journal articles pertaining to Postmodernism, one will find literally thousands of results from architecture, literature, political and social sciences, and even theology. However, when searching for peer-reviewed journal articles pertaining to Postmodern graphic design, one will discover a stunning lack of published research. In fact, while Postmodern graphic design is perhaps one of the more ubiquitous forms of Postmodern cultural expression, there does not exist even a single

peer-reviewed journal article that examines the most common features of Postmodern graphic design. Is there something about Postmodern graphic design that makes it less worthy of academic research? Is it such a poorly understood topic that scholars do not even attempt to explain it, leaving the bulk of the discussion to take place in less rigorously reviewed publications like pop culture magazines and newspaper editorials? But there is not only a lack of peer-reviewed journal articles of Postmodern graphic design, as Rick Poynor relates a similar issue pertaining to books, in *No More Rules*, “despite a certain amount of discussion in magazines and chapters about postmodern graphic design in a few books, there has, surprisingly, never been a book devoted to the topic...Critical introductions to postmodernism and the arts routinely deal with literature, architecture, fine art, photography, pop music, fashion, film, and television, but they show little sign of even noticing, still less attempting to ‘theorize’, any form of design, despite its obviously central role as a shaper of contemporary life” (Poynor 10).

Furthermore, when reading academic articles and texts regarding Postmodernism, one will immediately notice a common issue – every serious examination of Postmodernism also includes a detailed definition of what the term itself actually means for that particular author. Why is it that one cannot simply discuss Postmodernism without first providing a detailed explanation of its meaning? For the last three decades of the 20th century, wasn’t Postmodernism a dominant cultural and academic force in Western society? The term was used with great enthusiasm by the news media during that time to describe all sorts of artistic, political, and social science

endeavors. Ask someone to explain Postmodernism, and you are likely to have a totally different discussion with every person you ask, if they are able to explain it at all.

The critics of Postmodern theory are comprised mainly of two groups; those that claim Postmodernism remains an influential cultural theory, and those proposing new theories that supplant Postmodernism. In *The Postmodern*, Simon Malpas writes a mostly favorable critique of Postmodernism and claims that, “Postmodern theory and culture provide important means by which one can understand the opportunities and challenges that today’s globalised world presents us with” (Malpas 3). Malpas’s view is echoed in Frederic Jameson’s earlier work *Postmodernism*, however Jameson takes a distinctly less positive view of Postmodernism and relates it to the development of Capitalism. He explains that Postmodernism is a “cultural dominant” and that Postmodernism, “is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which ‘culture’ has become a veritable ‘second nature’” (Jameson ix). Many critics of Postmodernism relate it to the end of modernism as Hal Foster writes in *The Anti-Aesthetic* that, “The project of Modernity is now deeply problematic” (Foster ix). Critics of Postmodernism like Jürgen Habermas argue for modernism’s continued intellectual and cultural prominence, as explained in the essay *Modernity—An Incomplete Project*, “I think that instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity” (Foster 11).

Even as critics and theorists claim the end of Postmodernism, there are surprisingly few texts offering new contemporary theories. Contemporary critical theorists like Alan Kirby proclaim the demise of Postmodernism by describing it this way in *Digimodernism*, “it can be argued with absolute assurance that a day will come when postmodernism is over as an appropriate or useful category to define the contemporary, even if some of its traits were to survive. It will only be a question of working out when this happened” (Kirby 5). Even more directly, Kirby proposes that Digimodernism, “has decisively displaced postmodernism to establish itself as the 21st century’s new paradigm” (Kirby 1). It’s interesting to note that although Kirby explains that one need only decide when Postmodernism ends, he doesn’t actually declare when Postmodernism ends. Another contemporary theorist, Raoul Eshelman, proposes in *Performatism* that, “We are now leaving the postmodern era with its essentially dualist notions of textuality, virtuality, belatedness, endless irony, and metaphysical skepticism and entering an era in which specifically monist virtues are again coming to the fore” (Eshelman xi). But even these new criticisms of the contemporary condition often compete with each other, seeking to be the new dominant view. In certain passages of *Digimodernism*, Kirby even goes so far as to directly refute, by name, Eshelman and his ideas in *Performatism*. If there is a new contemporary cultural paradigm beyond Postmodernism, it’s not at all clear what it is and what it means.

However, not all contemporary scholars are convinced of Postmodernism’s eminent decline, like Kirby argues, or status as an intellectual fad, like Poynor explains. Simon Malpas writes in 2005, *The Postmodern*, “In recent years, the postmodern has

seemed less omnipresent, and yet the concepts, ideas and categories deployed by its exponents are still crucial to many of the key debates in contemporary culture” (Malpas 6). Malpas continues his opinion about the relevance of Postmodernism this way, “What is certain, however, is that, in whatever ways the terms are employed by critics, it has vital things to tell us about how we engage with and are shaped by our cultural milieu today” (Malpas 6). The contradictory views of Postmodern and contemporary theorists and critics, and the certainty of their opinions, are part of a larger, fractured narrative regarding the role of Postmodernism in contemporary culture and design, and necessitates an attempt to clarify the issue. This thesis is a small piece of the puzzle in an effort to bridge the disjointed views of Postmodernism’s supposed decline or longevity.

One of the distinguishing historical elements of Postmodern graphic design is that it was, in part, a direct result of the study of Postmodern critical theory at graduate programs like Cranbrook Academy of Art during the early and mid 1980s (Poynor 50). Katherine McCoy writes in *Cranbrook Design, The New Discourse*, “‘Correct’ form and the univalent ‘universal’ criteria of Modernism are often rejected, reflecting the pluralistic cultural fragmentation of our post-Modern, post-industrial, milieu. The look and structure of graphic form is underplayed in favor of verbal signification, valuing symantic expression over syntactic style” (McCoy 17). One of the design methods practiced at Cranbrook was deconstruction. In the essay *Deconstruction and Graphic Design*, in the text *Design Writing Research*, Ellen Lupton writes that, “Deconstruction belongs to both history and theory. It is embedded in recent visual and academic culture, and it describes a strategy of critical form-making which is performed across a range of

artifacts and practices (Lupton 3). However, Cranbrook does have its critics, like Stephen Heller in his infamous 1993 essay *Cult of the Ugly* that serves as a polemic against the development of Postmodern design. Heller lambasts McCoy and the Cranbrook graduate program as an experiment that resulted in design that can only be described as ugly, and as experimenting simply for the sake of rebelling against the perceived restrictions of modernism (Bierut 155). Ironically, Heller later softened his tone towards Cranbrook in an essay in *Design Literacy* in which he wrote that, “Cranbrook’s influence did not come from launching manifestoes; it developed by creating a stimulating environment where graphic experimentation altered the conventional practice of graphic design” (Heller 259).

Critical texts regarding more recent contemporary designers are practically nonexistent. The information gathered for this thesis pertaining to contemporary designers comes almost exclusively from the designers’ personal websites, and newspaper or online journal interviews like aiga.org, the online journal *Creative Review*, wolffolins.com, the seattletimes.com, and *Mountains and Minds* magazine published online by Montana State University. These sources are admittedly less academically rigorous than peer-reviewed research journals or texts, but all attempts have been made in this thesis to provide unbiased information regarding contemporary designers and design practice.

Since Postmodern critical theory is now being challenged by new forms of critical thought, can one assume that contemporary design traits are influenced by new critical thought and academic study? Any such connection is unclear and, in fact, certain

contemporary critical theorists like Alan Kirby in *Digimodernism*, argue that technological advances have supplanted any connection designers might have with critical theory (Kirby 1). But how do graphic designers form new modes of thinking based on technological advances rather than critical theory? While it's true, due to technological advances, 21st century graphic design has expanded into new media design and other platforms of visual expression, it's simply because those media didn't exist in the 20th century, not necessarily because of new critical theory. So, as Postmodernism supposedly fades from academia and culture at large, does that necessarily mean that Postmodern graphic design is now a relic of a bygone era? Such large issues are beyond the scope of this investigation, but perhaps a more focused examination of the influence of Postmodernism on contemporary design can serve as a starting point for a rethinking of the relationship between design and critical theory.

Chapter 2 of this thesis explores the definition of Postmodern critical theory, the academic relationship of theory with Postmodern graphic design, and the aesthetic manifestation of Postmodern graphic design. The historical analysis in Chapter 2 establishes support for the set of traits that define the Postmodern graphic design genre described in Chapter 3. It seems necessary to provide extensive historical context for the research in this thesis. Without first providing this context, much of the information in the rest of the thesis could easily be misconstrued. Chapter 3 of this thesis analyzes the specific design traits of three Postmodern designers; Ed Fella, Neville Brody, and Stefan Sagmeister. These traits provide a qualitative framework, or rhetoric, of the Postmodern graphic design genre for the analysis of three contemporary designers; Wolff Olins, the

Ames Bros., and Michael Bierut. The historical significance, and the criteria for the selection of each designer for this thesis is explained in detail, as are examples of work from each designer. Chapter 4 is the thesis summary and conclusion. It not only answers the hypothesis regarding the influence of Postmodern traits on contemporary design, and Postmodernism's decline or longevity, but also addresses some of the larger concerns raised throughout the thesis.

CHAPTER II

DEFINING POSTMODERN CRITICAL THEORY AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

Attempts to pinpoint a specific definition of Postmodernism yield a wide array of possible meanings. While there are some general Postmodern concepts that cross the boundaries of various theories and practices, like the lack of distinction between high art and popular culture, Postmodernism evolved into different forms and meanings depending on its various manifestations of cultural expression (Malpas 20). For example, the definition of Postmodern literature is significantly different from Postmodern political science, which is significantly different from Postmodern fashion, and so forth. As Malpas explains in *The Postmodern*, “Unfortunately, finding such a simple, uncontroversial meaning for the term ‘postmodern’ is all but impossible. In fact...this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge. Not only might such a simple definition miss the complexities of the postmodern, it would be in danger of undermining the basic tenets of what makes it such a radical and exciting area of contemporary critical thought and artistic practice” (Malpas 4).

Casting aside attempts to over-simplify the meaning of Postmodernism, there remain some fundamental concepts upon which one can build a better understanding of Postmodernism. Parody and pastiche are two traits commonly associated with Postmodern expression, and according to seminal Postmodern critic Frederic Jameson, pastiche is one of the most important aspects of Postmodernism (Malpas 135).

Postmodern parody simultaneously borrows from another's work and explores its absurd nature, while pastiche appropriates another's ideas and styles without any inherent mockery of the borrowed work (Malpas 135). Poynor builds on the ideas of parody and pastiche as central to understanding Postmodernism in *No More Rules*, but like most critics of the Postmodern condition, he includes Modernism as part of his analysis, "Originality, in the imperative modernist sense of 'making it new', ceases to be the goal; parody, pastiche and the ironic recycling of earlier forms proliferate. The postmodern object 'problematizes' meaning, offers multiple points of access and makes itself as open as possible to interpretation" (Poynor 12). However, the Postmodern use of parody and pastiche is not the random result of theorists and artists striving for enigmatic forms of expression. It is, in fact, a central part of the relationship between Modernism and Postmodernism.

Any attempt to understand Postmodernism without at least a cursory examination of Modernism misses key elements in the development of Postmodern theory. "Many commentators point out that postmodernism is a kind of parasite, dependent on its modernist host and displaying many of the same features – except that the meaning has changed. The products of postmodern culture may sometimes bear similarities to modernist works, but their inspiration and purpose is fundamentally different. If modernism sought to create a better world, postmodernism – to the horror of many observers – appears to accept the world as it is" (Poynor 11). Poynor's description of postmodernism borrowing and changing the meaning of modernist and other earlier sources, is a nod to the practice of parody and pastiche. Modernism's aspiration "to

create a better world” refers to the massive destruction across Europe during the first World War, and the rise of modernism to lead us out of the darkness of global conflict with the clarity of an Enlightenment era inspired notion of a simple, rational, and universal message that *form follows function*.

One of the first graphic design pioneers to question, and experiment with, the Modernist ethos was Wolfgang Weingart. As an apprentice typesetter in Basle, Switzerland, Weingart knew all of the Modernist rules of the International Style, or Swiss design and typography by heart (Poyner 20). The beloved use of the grid by Modernist designers to construct orderly layouts was a feature that Weingart routinely bent to his own imagination (see Figure 1). “He exposed sections of the grid, violating its purity with jagged outlines, torn edges, random shapes and exploding sheets of texture” (Poyner 22). Overlaying such deconstructed grids, Weingart “stretched words and lines until the text came close to being unintelligible” (Poyner 20). As Weingart explained, “It seemed as if everything that made me curious was forbidden: to question established typographic practice, change the rules, and to reevaluate its potential. I was motivated to provoke this stodgy profession and to stretch the typeshop’s capabilities to the breaking point, and finally, to prove once again that typography is an art” (Poyner 20).

It’s important to note Weingart’s comment regarding typography as an art in relation to Modernism. The modernist graphic design formula is one that essentially removes the personal expression of the designer from the overall equation of the design process. In this sense, Modernist design has a tendency to dehumanize its content. As

Niels Diffrient claims in his 1990 essay in *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*, “It can be argued that Modernism also had meaning. But the meaning most often was in expressing the materials, function, and process rather than the subtleties of human interaction. This often resulted in a kind of dry neatness, devoid of the essential messiness and ambiguity of the human condition” (McCoy 11). Diffrient continues his Modernist critique by writing, “The obvious challenge, in both graphic design and product design, is to enhance the meaning while not totally abandoning the framework that unites the whole. In short, it is a simple matter of priorities: which has primary call on the design elements, relationship to the person involved or expression of the structural components” (McCoy 12). So, the results of Weingart’s experiments with Modernist principles were, in part, to expose the relationship of the person involved, and to push the design process towards something more akin to art, rather than a calculated process of expression of the structural components. Not long after Weingart designed his modernist experiments in the 1970s, he began to spread his message in a lecture series at the art academies of Europe and the United States, essentially planting the seeds of a postmodern graphic design aesthetic.

However, it wasn’t until several years passed that Postmodern theory made its way into academic design practice. Jeffery Keedy attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art as a student from 1983–1985, and introduced his graduate colleagues to the post-structuralist work of Barthes and other theorists (Lupton 8). This interaction with critical theory at Cranbrook continued through 1988, and as program chair Katherine McCoy explains in a 1991 interview, “Theory had become part of the intellectual culture in art

and photography. We were never trying to apply specific texts – it was more of a general filtration process” (Lupton 8). McCoy further explains the impact of theory at Cranbrook, “New experiments explored the relationships of text and image and processes of reading and seeing, with texts and images meant to be read in detail, their meanings decoded. Students began to deconstruct the dynamics of visual language and understand it as a filter that inescapably manipulates the audience’s response” (Poynor 51). In *Design Writing Research*, Ellen Lupton details Cranbrook’s relationship with theory, and explains, “Theory thus provided both an intellectual background for abstract expression and a subject for research” (Lupton 8). This mixture of theory and design practice at Cranbrook was essential in the development of Postmodern design.

In 1990, the culmination of ten years of theory and design at Cranbrook was published in the book *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*. In the jacket sleeve of the book, Katherine McCoy continues to push the Postmodern emphasis of personal experience compared to Modernism’s focus on functionality, “Much of the recent work has been a challenge to the mute or neutral Modern design aesthetic that eliminates any reference to the life around a design. These are designs that celebrate life’s diversity, that bring technology out of its black box, and that engage the audience’s interpretative powers and participation” (McCoy cover). The book itself is designed as a Postmodern presentation, as Poynor explains in *No More Rules*, “Its design offered a striking and then highly unusual example of deconstructive tactics in action. A vertical fault line runs through each of the essays, splitting the text into two columns separated by a narrow gully. The right-hand column is set a millimeter below the left so that the reader’s eye,

as it travels along the line, must not only jump the text gap, but step down to the lower level” (Poynor 50).

The essays in *The New Discourse*, written by Cranbrook alumni and Katherine McCoy, shed light on the inner workings at the art academy during this pivotal time in the development of Postmodern design, and defend the movement from its critics.

Cranbrook alumnus Lorraine Wild writes in *The New Discourse*, “The critics continue to howl about this work, refusing to admit that maybe, just maybe, a small independent graduate program is precisely where such daunting research and invention in graphic design should occur... What is not widely understood is the honesty and unpretentiousness of the questions raised by the students in their work; they do not pretend to revolutionize graphic design but seek to participate in it as deeply as possible” (McCoy 36). Wild’s defense of Postmodernism is a rebuttal to the critique that the movement was simply an instinctual rebellion against the Modernist design ethos, lacking intelligence and respect for widely held design practices. In fact, according to the graduate students that attended Cranbrook in the mid 1980s, Postmodernism only seeks to push the boundaries encountered when adhering to Modernist tenets (McCoy 36). But the radical visual expressions of Postmodernism were not well greeted by everyone.

In his 1993 essay, *Cult of the Ugly*, prominent design critic Stephen Heller takes aim at what he sees as the inherent ugliness of Postmodern design, and makes particularly sharp comments about the 1980s graduate design program at the Cranbrook Academy of Art and its graduate design department co-chair Katherine McCoy. “The value of design experiments should not of course be measured only by what succeeds,

since failures are often steps towards new discoveries. Experimentation is the engine of progress, its fuel a mixture of instinct, intelligence, and discipline. But the engine floods when too much instinct and not enough intelligence or discipline is in the mix. This is the case with certain of the graphic design experiments that have emanated from graduate schools in the U.S. and Europe in recent years—work driven by instinct and obscured by theory, with ugliness its foremost by-product” (Bierut 155). But Heller didn’t complete his Postmodern critique only by chastising the initial academic focus of Postmodern design and its resulting ugliness. He similarly attacked the ensuing spread of Postmodern graphic design this way, “The problem with the cult of ugly graphic design emanating from the major design academies and their alumni is that it has so quickly become a style that appeals to anyone without the intelligence, discipline, or good sense to make something more interesting out of it. While the proponents are following their various muses, their followers are misusing their signature designs and typography as style without substance” (Bierut 159).

It’s particularly ironic to note that Heller’s harsh words regarding Postmodern design have softened over the years, indeed, even directly contradicting his earlier Postmodern critiques. In Heller’s 2004 second edition of *Design Literacy*, he writes, “Accused of being a cloistered atmosphere polluted by its own freedoms, the graphic design program at the Cranbrook Academy of Art was certainly in the forefront of design criticism from the late 1970s through the 1990s...but, in fact, Cranbrook’s influence did not come from launching manifestoes: it developed by creating a stimulating environment where graphic experimentation altered the conventional

practice of graphic design” (Heller 259). Heller’s multiple opposing views of Postmodernism only serve to contribute to the fractured narrative of Postmodernism’s relevance in contemporary culture and graphic design. If prominent critics like Heller can have a change of heart regarding Postmodernism, then perhaps Postmodern theory and practice remain viable aspects of contemporary design culture.

Postmodern theory and practice is a complicated topic regardless of the specific context. In an effort to strip away some of the more esoteric language often encountered when researching Postmodern theory, this thesis attempts to present information in an unambiguous manner. A few core traits of Postmodernism in general, as presented in this thesis, are; the lack of distinction between high art and popular culture; borrowing from previous movements like Modernism using parody and pastiche; personal expression rather than a focus on process and functionality; and open-ended interpretation of meaning. One of the first graphic designers to break from Modernist practices was Wolfgang Weingart in the 1970s. His use of type and the grid established the early aesthetics that would later develop into Postmodern graphic design.

Postmodern critical theory was a central part of the development of Postmodern design at graduate programs like Cranbrook Academy of Art in the early and mid 1980s. This was largely an effort of the students under the guidance of program chair Katherine McCoy. Even if the concepts of Postmodernism were not fully understood by the public at large, the movement promptly spread from the academic design workshops at places like Cranbrook, and became ingrained in Western culture for the remainder of the 20th century.



Figure 1. Weingart's work exhibits the early aesthetics of Postmodern design such as the exposed grid and distressed typography.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

There are specific challenges when attempting to analyze visual works, like graphic design, from different eras. This is especially so when Postmodernism is part of the analysis because it has always been a controversial issue in the design profession and often provokes strong personal opinions both positive and negative (Poynor 10). Eliminating emotional bias from the research process is a crucial component for any valid analysis of Postmodern graphic design. Because of potential emotional bias, certain data analysis methods were deemed unsuitable for the methodology of this thesis.

One method considered, but ultimately discarded, for this thesis is a direct survey questionnaire regarding the work of living and practicing Postmodern and contemporary designers. However, such an approach is likely to introduce the personal bias of the designers into the analysis. Rick Poynor explains the difficulty of simply attempting to categorize designers as Postmodern in *No More Rules*, “Few graphic designers have been eager to define their output as postmodern. Many designers producing work that relates to postmodernism and its themes would reject the term vehemently... For other designers, postmodernism is too closely identified with a particular historicist style of architecture current in the 1980s and it is consequently rejected on grounds of aesthetic taste as much as anything” (Poynor 10). Using a survey questionnaire would first require researching self-identified Postmodern graphic designers, or else risk including an analysis of designers that may not even consider their work to be Postmodern.

Additionally, regardless if a designer is willing to accept such a label or not, there are certain designers and work that are widely considered by critics and scholars to be part of the Postmodern graphic design canon.

Another possible methodology for this research is a one-to-one comparison of Postmodern designers and contemporary designers. However, this thesis seeks to examine the broader influence of Postmodern design traits on contemporary design. The data of a one-to-one comparison would not likely be applicable to an entire genre, or at the very least would lead to an attempt to extrapolate generalizations based on individual data results. For a one-to-one comparison to be relevant on a broad scale requires dozens, if not scores of such comparisons, and yet remains likely to introduce personal bias into the process. It is hard to imagine such comparisons of a visual medium remaining entirely objective, and without the personal opinions of the researcher influencing the data analysis.

The methodology for this thesis attempts to avoid as much as possible the pitfalls of biased data analysis. To do this means not gathering data directly from postmodern and contemporary designers, nor directly comparing the designers. Instead, this thesis utilizes an approach developed in rhetorical criticism, known as *generic participation*. Sonja K. Foss explains generic participation in *Rhetorical Criticism* as, “A critic who engages in generic participation determines which artifacts participate in which genres. This involves a deductive process in which you test an instance of rhetoric against the characteristics of a genre” (Foss 143). So, for this thesis, the “artifacts” are the graphic design works of the Postmodern and contemporary designers selected for analysis. The

“genre” established in this thesis is the Postmodern graphic design genre. The “rhetoric” to be tested in this thesis are the traits of contemporary graphic design artifacts. This method is conducted in three steps. First, the genre of Postmodern graphic design is established by describing its organizing principles and stylistic strategies. Second, the organizing principles and stylistic strategies of certain artifacts are described. As stated previously, the artifacts selected for examination are examples of work by Postmodern and contemporary graphic designers. Third, compare the characteristics of the artifacts with those of the genre to discover if the artifact belongs in that genre (Foss 143).

This qualitative method of rhetorical criticism allows one to see a general framework of the influence of Postmodern graphic design traits on the work of contemporary graphic designers. As certain contemporary design artifacts are deemed to either adhere, or not adhere, to the Postmodern graphic design genre, the influence of Postmodernism can be seen as either continuing or declining in contemporary graphic design. While it is tempting to try and quantify such an analysis, it is simply not something that can be standardized in a systematic manner that measurements and hard data typically provide.

Before selecting Postmodern designers for this methodology, certain criteria must be met regarding each designer’s influence or importance to the Postmodern design movement, and the cultural impact of their work on the rest of society. While there is an inherent bias in claiming that certain designers are *more* influential or important than others, there is much less in claiming that certain designers *are* influential and important figures in the Postmodern design movement. This thesis makes no claims regarding the

relative influence of any designer compared to another, and seeks only to select designers that represent a broad range of the cultural impact of Postmodern design. The Postmodern designers selected for this generic participation analysis are Ed Fella, Neville Brody, and Stefan Sagmeister.

Ed Fella was among the graduate students at Cranbrook Academy of Art during the early years of Postmodern graphic design. His importance to the graduate design program at Cranbrook cannot be overstated. Poynor summarizes Fella's importance in *No More Rules*, "Fella had a marked influence on a generation of designers, both in the United States and elsewhere. By 1990, his experiments were beginning to be publicized more widely and this work continued throughout the decade" (Poynor 56). Some of Fella's Postmodern work to first appear in the public sphere includes a poster series he created for the Detroit Focus Gallery (see Figures 2 and 3). After completing his studies at Cranbrook, Fella opted for a teaching position at the California Institute of the Arts in 1987 rather than pursuing another career in commercial design. In 2007 Fella was recognized by the AIGA, American Institute of Graphic Arts, for his lifelong design efforts and awarded the organization's prestigious AIGA Medal. His work is on display at the Museum of Modern Art and the National Design Museum in New York.

Fella's selection for this data analysis is mainly due to his influence in the early development of Postmodern graphic design, and for his dedication as a design educator at CalArts, where he is retiring at the end of the 2013 spring semester after 25 years of work. His designs commonly ignore the rational Modernist approach with an application of typography that at first glance appears to have been designed by an uneducated artist

(Poynor 56). But Fella believes that Modernist design, “was becoming smarter and slicker and that the moment had arrived when this ‘conceit’ must be punctured” (Poynor 55). Fella’s response was to make designs based on the practice of carefully considered irregularity, even though the final result has a strong sense of spontaneity. He explains his approach in *No More Rules*, “In fact the irregularity is rigorously thought out, based loosely on deconstruction. If deconstruction is a way of exposing the glue that holds together western culture, I thought ‘What is it that holds together typography? It’s space’” (Poynor 55). Fella’s practice of irregularity is one of the dominant aesthetics of postmodern design, and is a key characteristic of the Postmodern graphic design genre analyzed in the data analysis of the methodology for this thesis. This trait is important because it is not merely an aesthetic choice, but something based on Fella’s consideration of critical theory and design practice. While many designers continue to copy this trait purely for stylistic purposes, Fella utilized planned irregularity of space and type as an extension of his theoretical knowledge.

One of the most recognized postmodern designers of the 1980s, especially regarding pop culture, is British designer Neville Brody. In *No More Rules* Poynor writes, “Neville Body was one of the decade’s most visible and influential design figures and his prolific output helped to define the preoccupations of 1980s ‘style culture’” (Poynor 151). While attending various British art colleges in the mid 1970s, Brody’s work was influenced by punk rock, and he subsequently designed record covers for several New Wave British bands in the early 1980s. Throughout the 1980s, Brody also worked for influential British magazine publications like *The Face* and *Arena*. However,

Brody was mostly an unknown entity in the United States until 1988 after the publication of the book *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody* (Poynor 33).

Typography is a career-long passion for Brody, as shown by his creation of two dozen typefaces, including typefaces used in newspaper publications like *The Times* of London. *Research Studios* is Brody's personal workshop and has branches in several of the most diverse and style conscious cities in the world including Paris, Barcelona, New York, and Berlin. He is currently the head of the Communication Art & Design department at the Royal College of Art in London.

Brody's design sensibilities were critical of the 1980s and 1990s pop culture style, and its supposed negative impact on Postmodern design. Poynor explains in *No More Rules* that while Brody was working for *The Face* magazine in the mid 1980s, "it was clear to Brody that money could indeed control style as he watched marketing, advertising and fellow designers assimilate his inventions, stripped of any deeper critical content, as signifiers of fashionable youth culture" (Poynor 152). However, rather than abandoning style culture, Brody immersed the corporate world with design work utilizing custom typography to humanize culturally influential brands like Sony, Nike, Dom Perignon, Apple, Microsoft, MTV, Philips, Bentley, and Deutsche Bank. In 1988 Brody designed a full-page article for *The Guardian* in which he wrote, "In the end, design will eat itself. Culture is not a bottomless pit that can be infinitely ransacked – it needs a purposeful present, *lived* experience with which to nourish its context and vocabulary" (Poynor 152). Brody's development of custom typefaces reflects the unique qualities of design for corporate clients, and strives to add meaning to culture and style

that is often approached in a purely shallow manner. The traits of custom designed type and the critical examination of pop culture are perhaps some of Brody's most important contributions to Postmodernism because of its inherent intention to the development of pop culture in a meaningful manner.

Not all postmodern design pioneers began their careers in the 1980s, as Stefan Sagmeister, considered a late-postmodern designer, had his start as a professional designer in the early 1990s. After completing his studies at the Pratt Institute, Sagmeister established his own design studio in New York in 1993. Some of his most famous work includes Grammy award winning design collaborations with musicians like Lou Reed, Aerosmith, The Rolling Stones, and David Byrne. Never one to shy from controversy, Sagmeister's commissioned poster announcing the 1997 AIGA Annual Conference in New Orleans, featuring images of chickens running with their heads cut off, drew the ire of several long time association members (Heller 356). In 1999 Sagmeister once again shocked the design world with his poster for an AIGA sponsored seminar at Cranbrook Academy of Art, featuring a nude photo of Sagmeister's torso with all of the seminar information carved into his skin (see Figure 4). This poster is now part of the collection at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. Regardless of his AIGA controversies, Sagmeister was awarded the prestigious AIGA medal in 2013.

Creative design solutions are the hallmark of Sagmeister's work, however as Stephen Heller writes in *Design Literacy*, "Sagmeister objects to experimental work that is really dysfunctional. While some may apply the word "experimental" to Sagmeister's own work, he insists his design solutions are built on equal parts intuition, play, and the

desire to rise above the mundane” (Heller 355). While certain critiques of Postmodernism condemn it as meaningless style, Sagmeister pushes his own work beyond stylistic considerations and instead promotes *concept* as the key component of successful design (Heller 355). Sagmeister explains the fallacy of the emphasis of form rather than concept in *Design Literacy* as, “gorgeously produced beautiful fluff designed by people who have no opinions on nothing whatsoever” (Heller 355). For Sagmeister, design is a process driven conceptual experience that he hopes will delight his audience rather than simply inform them about a particular issue, event, or product (sagmeisterwalsh.com). Design as a conceptual experience is important not only because it’s a critical distinction between modernism and Postmodernism, but because it seeks to engage the audience as active participants in the work.

Based on the design practices and work of Fella, Brody, and Sagmeister, it is possible to establish a set of Postmodern graphic design traits and apply them as criteria for the Postmodern graphic design genre. The Postmodern graphic design genre as established in the data analysis of this thesis consists of these traits:

1. Planned irregularity of space and type
2. Use of custom type
3. Critical examination of pop culture
4. Design as a conceptual experience

It’s important to note that these traits are more than mere aesthetic choices. While there are definitely certain aesthetic traits specific to Postmodern graphic design, the goal of this research is not to search for contemporary design that simply *looks* like Postmodern

design, but rather to search for contemporary design that exhibits traits based on Postmodern theory and practice. However, these criteria are not individual traits found only among the work of the Postmodern designers selected for this thesis. In fact, these traits are found in the work of many other Postmodern designers. Indeed, the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre established in this thesis are found in the work, or artifacts, of other iconic Postmodern designers like David Carson, April Greiman, Jeffery Keedy, Tibor Kalman and many others (see Figures 5 through 8). So, while this method of generic participation only focuses on three specific Postmodern graphic designers, the established traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre apply to a much wider audience than just the designers discussed in this data analysis.

It's also important to note that the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre as established in this thesis are not necessarily unique to Postmodernism, nor are they the sole traits of the genre. These traits were selected, in part, because they support two goals of this thesis, to explore the relationship between Postmodern design theory and practice, and to research the relationship between Postmodern design and contemporary design on something more than just an aesthetic basis. For the purpose of this thesis, and in the context of Postmodern theory and practice, these traits are deemed to be the most important traits of the Postmodern design genre because they are exhibited widely in the work of Postmodern designers, and because these traits are supported by concrete historical evidence.

Before selecting contemporary designers for this methodology, certain criteria must be met regarding each designer's influence or importance to the contemporary

design movement, and the cultural impact of their work on the rest of society. While there is an inherent bias in claiming that certain designers are *more* influential or important than others, there is much less in claiming that certain designers *are* influential and important figures in the contemporary design movement. This thesis makes no claims regarding the relative influence of any designer compared to another, and seeks only to select designers that represent a broad range of the cultural impact of contemporary design.

There are many possible factors when determining important contemporary designers. Several design publications like *Communication Arts*, and *Print*, purport to showcase only the best contemporary work, and there are numerous design contests, some more prestigious than others, for both amateur and professional designers. However, AIGA, formerly known as the *American Institute of Graphic Arts*, is regarded as the top professional organization for designers and thus carries significant weight when determining important and influential contemporary designers. The AIGA Medal is awarded annually to designers that make a significant contribution to design in the United States, but this does not necessarily reflect only contemporary design work. In fact, several of the designers mentioned in this thesis are AIGA Medal recipients, including Wolfgang Weingart and Stefan Sagmeister, both of whom received the AIGA Medal in 2013 (aiga.org). The *AIGA 365 | Design Effectiveness* competition is a juried selection process with thorough criteria and entry preparations that showcase the best work in contemporary design. Selections are added to the AIGA archives and the Denver

Art Museum archives. However, the criteria for competitions like *AIGA 365* do not necessarily reflect the broad range of cultural influences sought for this thesis.

For this thesis, designers were selected not only regarding quality of work, but also in an attempt to convey the wide range of cultural influence graphic designers wield in modern society. There are three main areas of cultural influence considered for this thesis, commercial or corporate culture, pop culture, and professional design culture. The contemporary designers selected for this data analysis are Wolff Olins, the Ames Bros., and Michael Bierut. Wolff Olins is a highly sought after design agency for corporate clients, and their recent work reflects some controversial design choices. Many people who likely don't recognize the Wolff Olins name are more than likely to recognize Wolff Olins' work. The Ames Bros. are a pair of designers from a niche market of promotional concert posters, initially posters for the band Pearl Jam. Their work for Pearl Jam led to their status as underground design icons, and has since expanded to include several more clients. Pearl Jam's connection to pop culture is undeniable, and the Ames Bros. work exemplifies contemporary pop culture. Michael Bierut is not widely known outside of professional design culture, but his body of work and his prolific writing about professional design culture make him a "designer's designer". These designers were selected for this methodology not solely because of awards or other recognition, but because of their broad contemporary cultural influence.

Wolff Olins Data Analysis

Established in 1965 by Michael Wolff and Wally Olins, Wolff Olins is a brand consultancy with locations in London, New York, and Dubai (wolffolins.com). Both Wolff and Olins have since left the agency, but more than 150 designers, strategists and account managers currently work for the agency. In the 21st century, Wolff Olins has designed campaigns for the world's most influential brands, including GE, Unilever, USA Today, Microsoft, the Smithsonian, Mercedes-Benz, and the London 2012 Olympics (wolffolins.com). Patrick Burgoyne writes in the online *Creative Review*, "Since the 1970s, Wolff Olins has been at the centre of most of the key developments in visual communication. Founders Michael Wolff and Wally Olins have earned guru-like status within modern corporate communications" (creativereview.co.uk). The current chairman of Wolff Olins, Bryan Boylan, explains how Wolff Olins approaches client relationships and design, "Our approach is based on results and something that's appropriate for the circumstances of the client. Intuition is important because all rational will get you is rational. There has to be space for thinking and rethinking and imagination" (creativereview.co.uk).

Wolff Olins was established in an era when the hegemony of Modernist design inexorably lead to homogenous work, but the contemporary Wolff Olins is far from a bastion of Modernism. In the online *Creative Review*, Patrick Burgoyne writes, "Inevitably, Wolff Olins' best work is in the cultural sector, but perhaps their most important achievement is in the way they've moved branding away from the tyranny of petty rules and suffocating diktats, into something more fluid and expressive"

(creativereview.co.uk). However, the design results of this “fluid and expressive” work have not always met with wide approval. The London 2012 Olympics branding campaign (see Figure 9) by Wolff Olins was criticized heavily in the media, and chairman Bryan Boylan even received intimidating phone calls due to public hatred of the brand (creativereview.co.uk). How does the London 2012 Olympics design campaign, and other Wolff Olins design work compare to the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre established in this methodology? In this data analysis each Postmodern graphic design genre trait is compared to current Wolff Olins artifacts, with visual examples or verbal statements from Wolff Olins either supporting or contradicting the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre.

Planned irregularity of space and type

It’s unclear if the design work of Wolff Olins follows this trait of planned irregularity of space and type. While some artifacts, like the London 2012 Olympics campaign appear to adhere to this trait, other artifacts like the RED Aids fundraising campaign (see Figure 10) clearly don’t. One of Wolff Olins’ most ambitious projects was the 2009 rebranding of Aol. (see Figures 11 and 12). There is an enormous variety of Aol. logos all designed around a simple Aol. wordmark. However, many of the logo designs were created by artists outside of the Wolff Olins agency, and there are several video versions of the Aol. logo as well (wolffolins.com). Wolff Olins did not direct many of these images, and many of them appear to take advantage of planned irregularity of space and type. Clearly Wolff Olins is not a monolithic design agency,

with some of their work exhibiting a more traditional modernist appeal, and some of their work pushing the boundaries of contemporary design considerations. The chairman of Wolff Olins describes the agency's work as intuitive and fluid branding, but there are not any published statements from designers at Wolff Olins related to planned irregularity of space and type as a common design practice (wolffolins.com).

Use of custom type

Wolff Olins is a branding consultancy dealing with many of the world's most established brands, so there is not always an opportunity to create custom type when working with such universally recognized forms. However, in several cases Wolff Olins clearly uses custom type as a design trait as shown in the London 2012 Olympics campaign, the New York City branding campaign (see Figure 13), and the Macmillan Cancer Support campaign (see Figure 14). These artifacts reflect one of the more ubiquitous traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre, and custom type has become a rather popular trait in contemporary graphic design. It's a simpler process to use custom type to promote clients that don't have a well known presence, and it offers a unique design solution for clients looking to stand apart from other brands. Modernist design is known for its reliance on widely available typefaces like Helvetica and Futura, while postmodern designers appear willing to utilize a broader range of type options, including custom type.

Critical examination of pop culture

Wolff Olins does not appear to clearly adhere to Brody's critical examination of pop culture, as they are always most concerned about growing their client's brands. While there may be some designers at Wolff Olins that think their work is part of a critical examination of pop culture, there is nothing inherently obvious about this trait being part of formal practice at Wolff Olins. However, Wolff Olins' work, like the rebranding of AOL, is an example of "crowdsourced" design, and as such is a reflection of pop culture if not a critical examination of pop culture. This particular trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre is more difficult to ascertain unless there is clear evidence as shown either by artifacts or explicit statements made by the designers.

Design as a conceptual experience

Much of Wolff Olins' design work is flexible, meaning that clients can custom tailor the presentation of the work like the London 2012 Olympics, and the New York promotional campaigns. The 2009 AOL rebranding campaign is another example of Wolff Olins creating design as a conceptual experience. Many of the AOL logo videos show a white background with a white AOL logo that only becomes visible when animated design elements form a figure/ground relationship with the AOL logo. These animated design elements have lots of variety, so there is not just a single standardized AOL logo video (wolffolins.com). When explaining the design process of Wolff Olins, chairman Bryan Boylan claims, "we start exploring, and that's where intuition comes in. All in all, from beginning to end, it's a creative process, as opposed to a step-by-step,

logical process. Because if you only followed a logical process you'd inevitably arrive at a dry answer. Some of the answers we arrive at are beyond logical processes”

(creativereview.co.uk).

Wolff Olins Data Analysis Results

The data analysis of Wolff Olins shows that certain artifacts adhere to the traits of *use of custom type* and *design as a conceptual experience*. However, it is unclear if these artifacts adhere to *planned irregularity of space and type* and *critical examination of pop culture*. These mixed results show that while Wolff Olins does utilize certain features of Postmodern design, there does not appear to be an overall conscious effort to make these traits a regular part of their work. Even so, there are several artifacts that share a majority of the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre as established in this thesis. This indicates that Postmodern graphic design traits continue to have an impact on the work at Wolff Olins. Perhaps certain traits of the Postmodern genre are more applicable for contemporary designers searching for new forms of expression. Custom type and creating design as a conceptual experience might be key traits for contemporary designers striving to push the boundaries of design.

Ames Bros. Data Analysis

The Ames Bros. design agency is comprised of two men that are neither brothers, nor are they from Ames. Rather, as Ames Bros. partner Barry Ament explains in an interview with *Mountains and Minds* magazine, “It's an Acme-type of generic name that

we actually thought about changing and pseudo-changed a few times, but always came back to. There's not a lot of flair to it, but it's a solid, old school, real generic name, that I think has worked for us" (montana.edu). While the agency name is intentionally generic, the unique illustrative work of designers Barry Ament and Colby Schultz is anything but generic. Ament and Schultz met in 1990 at Montana State University, and largely due to Ament's sibling relationship with Jeff Ament, the bass player of Pearl Jam, by 1995 the pair was responsible for designing promotional posters for the iconic Seattle grunge band. The Ames Bros. long lasting relationship with Pearl Jam, and their subsequent work on hundreds of promotional posters for the band, established the Ames Bros. as underground design icons of American pop culture. The 2007 book, *Pearl Jam vs. Ames Bros: 13 Years of Tour Posters* catalogs 229 of the Ames Bros. promotional posters for Pearl Jam (seattletimes.com). By the late 1990s, the Ames Bros. were building upon their early success with Pearl Jam, and designing work for global corporate brands like MTV, Nike, Absolut, and Mini Cooper (seattletimes.com). More recently the Ames Bros. are establishing their own clothing company featuring new design work from the Montana born artists.

Ames Bros. design is highly illustrative, and draws from a wide array of subject matter including, "geography and politics, superheroes and cowboys, tractors and lawn mowers in styles both futuristic and retro" (seattletimes.com). Their work often revolves around a central idea, albeit one that may only make sense to either Ament or Schultz, as they explain in a 2007 *Seattle Times* interview, "You can't just have a guy, you have to have a guy with a thing. We strive not to do the same thing twice, and try to make

something for everyone” (seattletimes.com). Unless the Ames Bros. are working together on a very large project, Ament and Schultz tend to work separately, while providing critiques and opinions on each other’s work (montana.edu). Their work retains certain contextual parallels, but as Ament explains, “I think you can look at our body of work and see a common thread. We've always tried to push ourselves to do something stylistically different than the last thing that we did” (montana.edu). How does the Ames Bros. design work compare to the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre established in this methodology? In this data analysis each trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre is compared to current Ames Bros. artifacts, with visual examples or verbal statements from the Ames Bros. either supporting or contradicting the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre.

Planned irregularity of space and type

Even though much of the type in the Ames Bros. design work is made by hand, overall their work appears to lack the planned irregularity typical of Fella’s design approach. However, this does not seem to be an intentional design choice by the Ames Bros., but rather a result of their creative illustration style. The Ames Bros. poster designs frequently focus on one central figure without leaving much open space on the page. This makes it challenging to utilize irregular space and type when compared to the open space in many of Fella’s designs. While the Ames Bros. often focus on one figure, Fella’s work considers the entire page as a design element, using the negative space of the page just as effectively and efficiently as the positive space. It is unclear regarding

how this particular trait adheres to the Postmodern graphic design genre in the context of the Ames Bros. work. It could be argued for certain artifacts that the visual results of the Ames Bros. creative work does adhere to this trait, but since there is not any clear evidence or statements made by the Ames Bros. to support this trait, the final result must be considered unclear.

Use of custom type

Much of the Ames Bros. design work incorporates custom hand made type as shown in their poster for the music group The Black Keys (see Figure 15) and promotional poster for a live theater presentation of Dr. Faustus (see Figure 16). Even some of their work for large corporations like Nike (see Figure 17) and Harley Davidson (see Figure 18) make use of custom made type. As stated previously in the data analysis of Wolff Olins, use of custom type is becoming a popular contemporary graphic design trait. The Ames Bros. not only illustrate central figures in their designs, they often illustrate the type. Rather than creating entire functional typefaces like Brody, the Ames Bros. create only the type they need to complete a specific design. However, it appears clear that the Ames Bros. designs adhere to this particular trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre.

Critical examination of pop culture

Even as the Ames Bros. have become part of American design culture, other than some of their illustrated visual references to cultural icons, there is no evidence that

suggests they practice any *critical* examination of pop culture in the same sense that Brody describes in *Arena* magazine. In interviews with the *Seattle Times* and the Montana State University magazine *Mountains and Minds*, neither Ament nor Schultz make any claims supporting or refuting a critical examination of pop culture as part of their design process. Instead, the Ames Bros. work is more of a pop culture generator, fusing design with music and popular brands like Nike and Harley Davidson. It does not appear that the work of the Ames Bros. adheres to this particular trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre.

Design as a conceptual experience

Much of the Ames Brothers work is open to interpretation, and lacks the typical Modernist ethos of a clear visual message, but it remains unclear if their work is intended as a conceptual experience. Having “a guy with a thing”, as Ament and Schultz explain, is not exactly on par with the same type of conceptual experience as Sagmeister practices with his work. Neither Ament nor Schultz have explained any further intent regarding the conceptual experience related to their work in published interviews or on their own website. For Sagmeister, design as a conceptual experience results in much more than just visual expression and style, it is a mentally engaging process. It’s possible one could argue that the Ames Bros. work is designed as a conceptual experience due to the wildly illustrative manner of their work, but it is almost always done with a commercial and promotional intent. Commercial design is not often noted for its strength as a deeply conceptual experience. Since there is no clear evidence or statements from

the designers regarding this trait, it is a less biased opinion to claim that it is unclear if the Ames Bros. work adheres to this particular trait of the Postmodern design genre.

Ames Bros. Data Analysis Results

The data analysis of the Ames Bros. is mixed. For the trait of planned irregularity of space and type the results were unclear, meaning there is no clear evidence shown in design artifacts refuting or supporting this trait, and that for certain artifacts the argument could be made either way. Additionally, neither Ament nor Schultz has made statements in published interviews regarding this particular issue when describing their own work.

For the trait of use of custom type, it appears clear that artifacts of the Ames Bros. do adhere to this particular trait of the Postmodern design genre. Most of the type used by the Ames Bros. is illustrated specifically for certain designs, but never transformed into a functional digital typeface for public use. This trait can also be seen in several examples of Wolff Olins' work, but not nearly to the extent of the Ames Bros. work. There are many visual examples of this trait in the Ames Bros. work, and Ament and Schultz discuss their illustrative style in published interviews, so it's difficult to fathom any argument contradicting the findings of this result.

The Ames Bros. work does not appear to adhere to any critical examination of popular culture, but rather it is more of a participation of popular culture. This is a somewhat surprising result considering that their most well known client, at least initially, was the band Pearl Jam and the band's outspoken lead singer Eddie Vedder.

The Ames Bros. main focus of their expansive work for Pearl Jam seems to follow a strictly promotional aspect, rather than any potentially controversial critical cultural issues. Examples of their more recent works do not appear to deviate much from this established approach.

Creating design as a conceptual experience is likely something that can only be achieved when it is the desired intent of the designer. It is unclear if the Ames Bros. works are part of a broader conceptual experience, but there is no clear evidence to support that it is. In this regard, the Ames Bros. often approach the design process with somewhat vague notions of what the final product will exactly entail. While this does lead to work with a strong spontaneity and charm, it does not lend itself to any sort of conceptual experience.

Even with such a mixed result, it's fair to claim that since at least some of the Ames Bros. artifacts adhere to the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre, that Postmodern design principles continue to have some effect on their work and process. Traits with an unclear relationship do not constitute a repudiation of those traits by the Ames Bros. It simply means that there is not enough decisive evidence to either support or contradict certain traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre. The only trait of the Ames Bros. work that clearly did not adhere to this genre was the critical examination of popular culture. In a strictly aesthetic sense, the works of the Ames Bros. might appear to exhibit more traits of the Postmodern design genre, but there is much more to this type of analysis than merely considering the superficial surface of an artifact.

Michael Bierut Data Analysis

Michael Bierut is highly regarded among the design profession as one of the most knowledgeable and prolific designers in the industry. Paula Scher, one of Bierut's partners at Pentagram in New York, describes him as, "having a brain like a giant compendium," and, "He absorbs and retains everything and pulls it out at the appropriate moment and uses it to its maximal effect. There isn't a day that goes by when I haven't asked Michael what he knows about anything and what he thinks about everything. If knowledge is power, then Michael Bierut is the most powerful person in the entire design community" (aiga.org). Bierut graduated from the University of Cincinnati's College of Design in 1980, but is not considered a Postmodern designer. Perhaps that's because during the emergence of Postmodernism during the 1980s, Bierut worked for ten years at Vignelli Associates, headed by Massimo Vignelli, widely regarded as a staunch advocate of Modernist design philosophy (aiga.org). Bierut is the founder of the online design journal *Design Observer* in which he writes essays bridging culture with design. He has won countless design awards, including the prestigious AIGA medal in 2006. Bierut is co-editor of the five-volume series *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, and authored his own collection of essays in *79 Short Essays on Design*, published in 2007 (aiga.org). His work is in the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Bierut's work is known for its application of Modernist aesthetics, but also occasionally for its humor. One of his design tenets is "don't avoid the obvious", which seems contradictory to Postmodern design (the99percent.com). Clarity of message is one

of the key components of his work, as shown by his design of a voting ballot in 2000 (see Figure 19). This design clarity perfectly complements the desire of large corporations to promote their messages to the public, and Bierut's design of the Citi logo reflects this (see Figure 20). Bierut also designed a signage system for Lower Manhattan in 2001, helping to guide tourists to public transportation, museums, and famous landmarks (see Figure 21). How does Bierut's design work compare to the Postmodern graphic design genre established in this methodology? In this data analysis each trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre is compared to current Michael Bierut artifacts, with visual examples or verbal statements from Bierut either supporting or contradicting the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre.

Planned irregularity of space and type

There is no supporting visual or published evidence that shows Bierut utilizes planned irregularity of space and type as a conscious design choice, in fact it is quite to the contrary. Most of the visual evidence presented in Bierut's work, and comments in his writing and public speaking appearances contradict this particular Postmodern trait. Much like Stephen Heller's essay that was extremely critical of Postmodernism, Bierut published *David Carson and the End of Print* as part of his essay collection in *Seventy-nine Sort Essays on Design*. Perhaps one of Postmodernism's champions of planned irregularity of space and type, Carson is not shown much respect in Bierut's essay. In his writing, Bierut questions everything from Carson's personal background and motives, to the intelligence of people who enjoy Carson's work. So it should come as no surprise

that Bierut does not share a trait like planned irregularity of space and type with the likes of David Carson and many other Postmodern designers. It is safe to claim that Bierut's work does not adhere to this particular trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre.

Use of custom type

In a handful of cases, like the design of the logotype for the game Guitar Hero, Bierut and other designers at Pentagram created a new typeface based on their design of the logo (see Figure 22). However, it is much more common for Bierut to utilize more standard typefaces rather than custom type. Therefore, the rare cases that Bierut uses custom type still does not warrant a clear result for this particular Postmodern design trait. There is an artifact that adheres to this particular trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre, but there is not enough evidence to conclusively claim that Bierut's body of work supports this trait of custom type. There are several possible reasons one could speculate as to why Bierut does not avail himself of custom type like some of his contemporary peers, but perhaps it is related to Bierut's design experience with Modernist designers earlier in his career.

Critical examination of pop culture

Bierut is known for his essays linking culture and design, as shown by his writing on the *Design Observer* website. His design work may not always reflect this Postmodern graphic design trait in the same manner as Brody's work, but it is clear that underneath the surface of his work, Bierut employs a vast archive of opinions and

observations pertaining to the critical examination of pop culture and its relationship to design. For this reason, it seems fair to claim that overall Michael Bierut's work does adhere to this particular trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre. With the proliferation of social media and new media in the 21st century, it seems almost unfathomable that any contemporary designer's work would not in some manner be influenced by the critical examination of pop culture.

Design as a conceptual experience

Bierut's designs do not typically involve design as a conceptual experience in the same manner as Sagmeister's work often does. However, there are certain cases, like his designs for the interiors of New York elementary school libraries (see Figure 23), and the Minnesota Children's Museum (see Figure 24) that reflect an approach to design as a conceptual experience (the99percent.com). Because of his variety of work, and because he has not explicitly written or commented in a manner contradicting this Postmodern design trait, the result for this particular trait is unclear regarding the Postmodern graphic design genre. For a designer like Bierut, and as a partner at the Pentagram design agency, it's likely that his clients are not always searching for a solution that utilizes the conceptual nature of design. In the 1980s and 1990s, it seems that some clients were more willing to let designers express their designs in a radically conceptual context.

Michael Bierut Data Analysis Results

The data analysis of Michael Bierut shows just one of the traits, critical examination of pop culture, adheres to the Postmodern graphic design genre. Two of the traits, use of custom type and design as a conceptual experience, remain unclear. One of the traits, planned irregularity of space and type, does not adhere to the Postmodern graphic design genre. While there is some evidence that Postmodern traits continue to influence Bierut's work, it is not much of a surprise that, for the most part, Bierut practices design in a non-Postmodern manner. It's important to note that while many design genres likely exhibit the trait of critical examination of pop culture, this trait is particularly apparent in artifacts of Postmodern design. So although Bierut's work does not exhibit very many traits of the Postmodern design genre, it can be argued that even just one shared trait is a significant result.

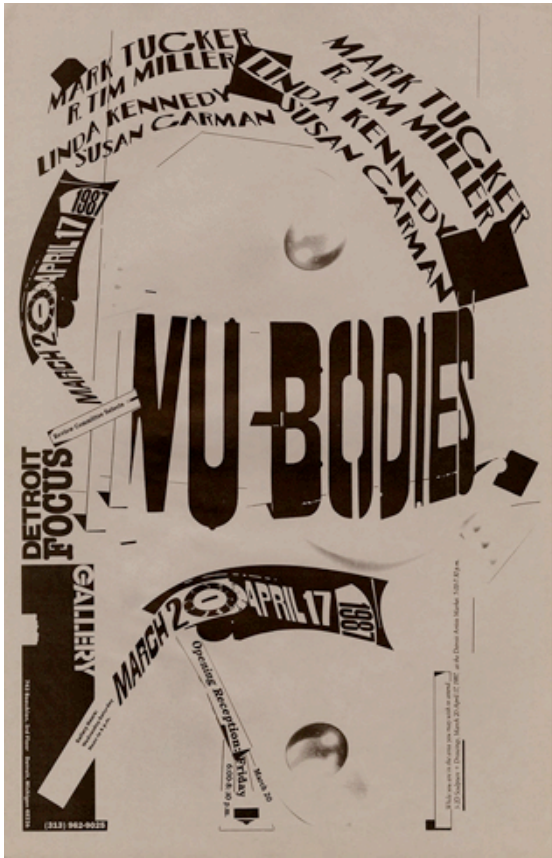


Figure 2 & 3. Ed Fella Detroit Focus Gallery, 1987. This work exhibits the trait of planned irregularity of space and type.

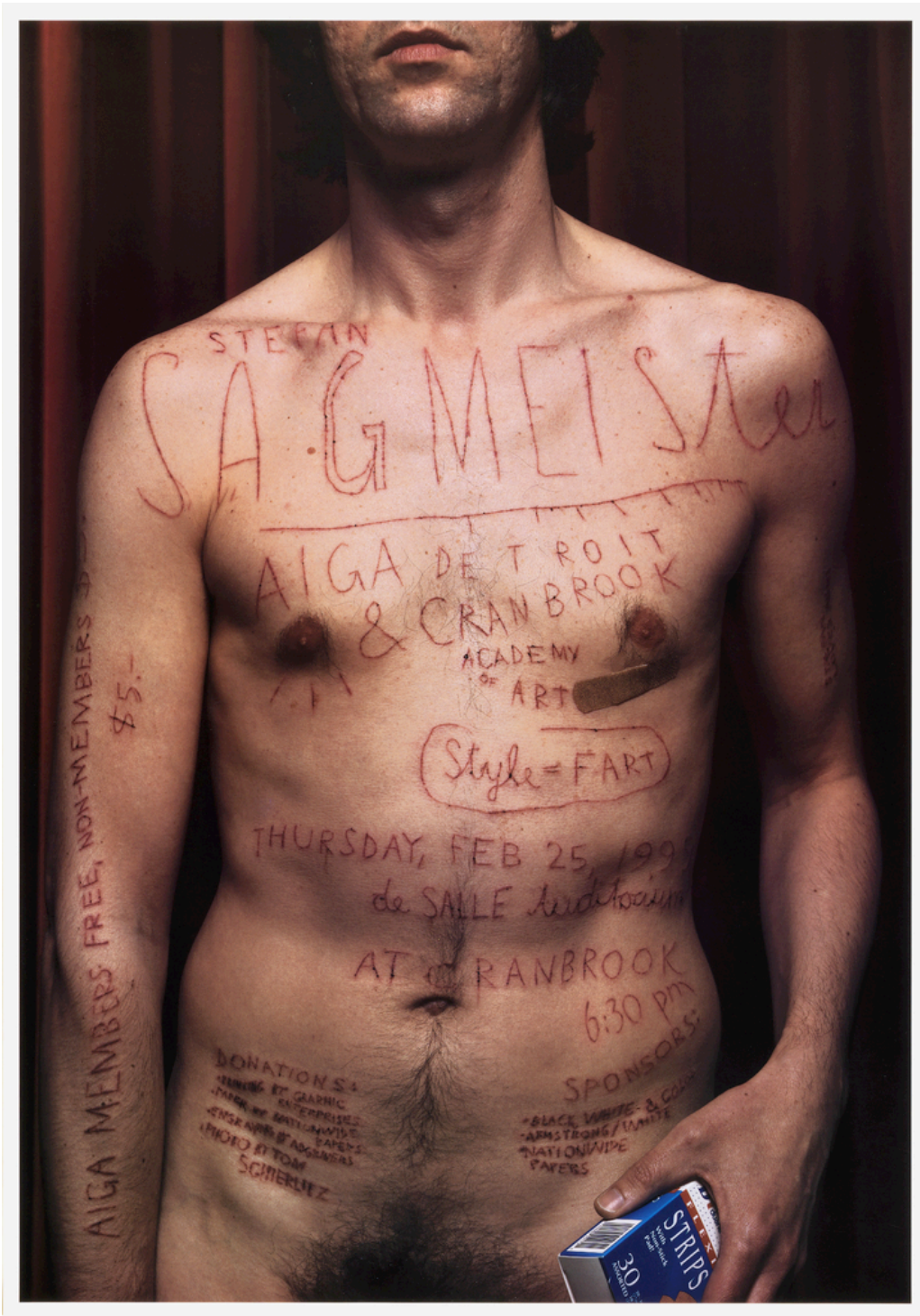


Figure 4. Stefan Sagmeister AIGA Seminar poster. This controversial poster shows the extent of Sagmeister's belief in the power of design as a conceptual experience.



Figure 5. David Carson promotional surf poster. This design exhibits all four of the Postmodern design traits established in this thesis.

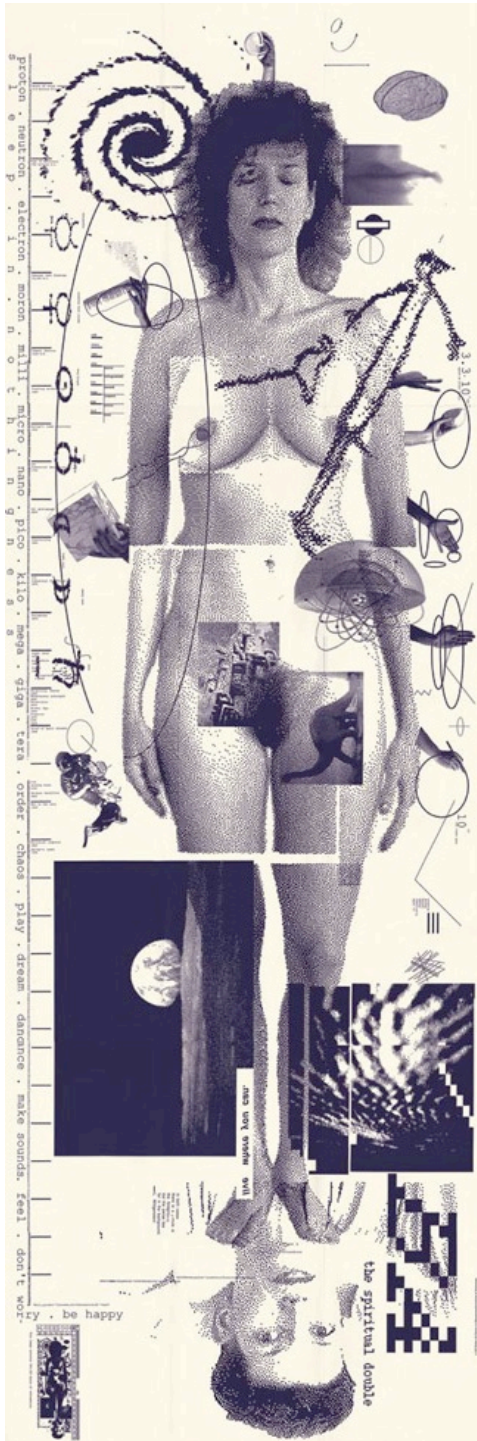


Figure 6. April Greiman self-portrait poster. This design exhibits all four of the Postmodern design traits established in this thesis.

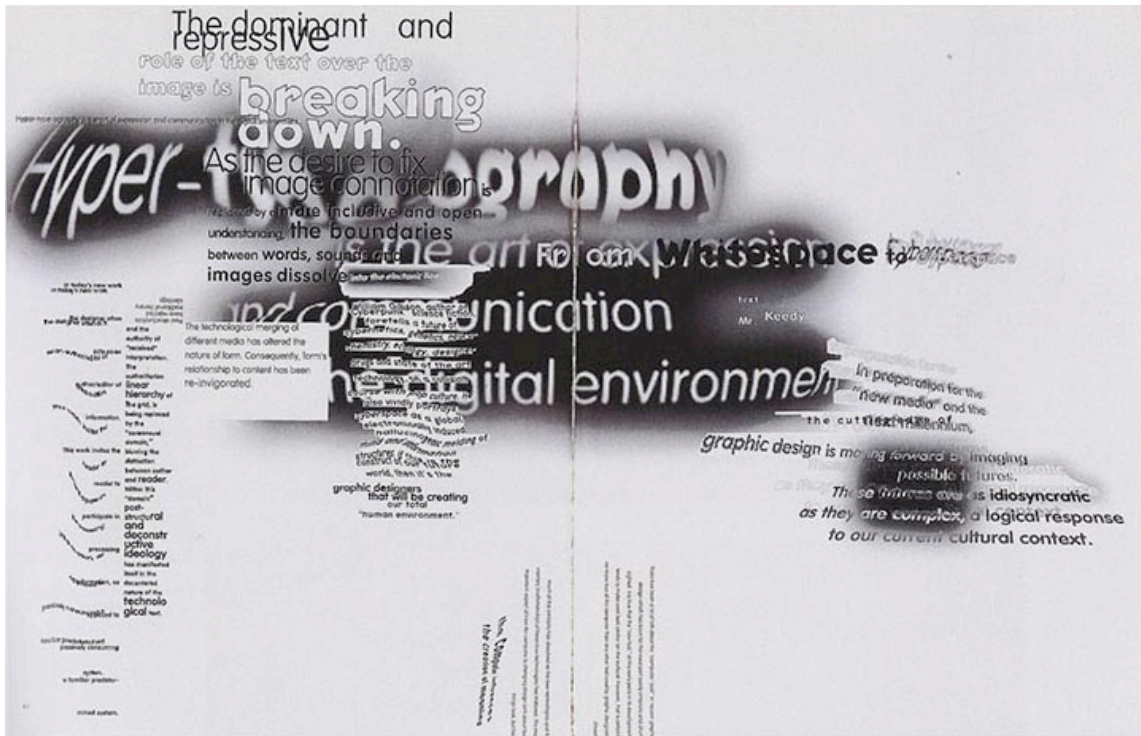


Figure 7. Jeffery Keedy magazine spread. This design exhibits all four of the Postmodern design traits established in this thesis.



Figure 9. Wolff Olins London 2012 Olympics Campaign. This controversial design created a media sensation for the Wolff Olins agency.



Figure 10. Wolff Olins (RED) Aids Awareness Campaign. This design lacks the trait of planned irregularity of space and type exhibited in the London 2012 Olympics brand.



Figure 11. Wolff Olins AOL branding Campaign.



Figure 12. Wolff Olins Aol. branding campaign.



Figure 13. Wolff Olins NYC Branding Campaign shows custom type with several different versions of the NYC letters.



Figure 14. Wolff Olins Macmillan Cancer Support Campaign shows custom type to help humanize the content of the design.



Figure 15. Ames Bros. The Black Keys promotional concert poster design shows the trait of custom type.

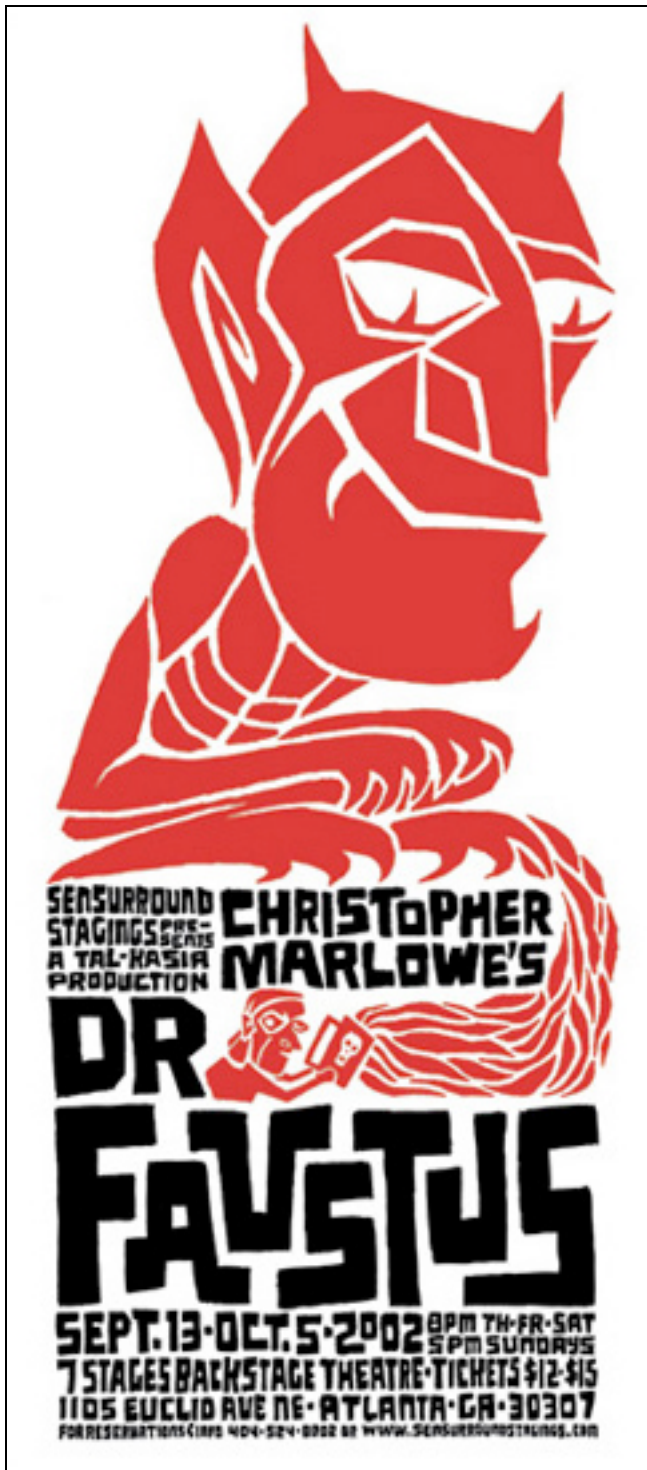


Figure 16. Ames Bros. Faustus design



Figure 17. Ames Bros. Nike design shows custom type.

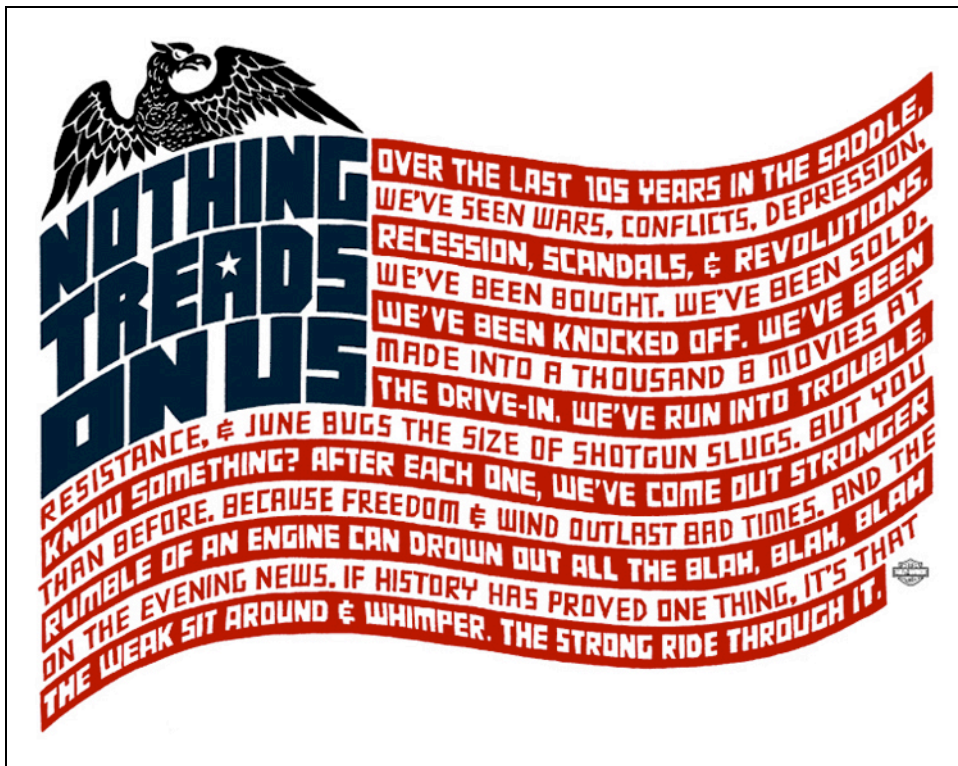


Figure 18. Ames Bros Harley Davidson ad shows custom type.

Palm Beach County, Florida		Official Ballot	
Electors for President and Vice President Choose one group.			
President	Vice President		
George W. Bush	Dick Cheney	▶	<input type="radio"/>
Al Gore	Joe Lieberman	▶	<input type="radio"/>
Pat Buchanan	Ezola Foster	▶	<input type="radio"/>
Ralph Nader	Winona LaDuke	▶	<input type="radio"/>
James Harris	Margaret Trowe	▶	<input type="radio"/>
John Hagelin	Nat Goldhaber	▶	<input type="radio"/>
Harry Browne	Art Olivier	▶	<input type="radio"/>
David McReynolds	Mary Cal Hollis	▶	<input type="radio"/>
Howard Phillips	J. Curtis Frazier	▶	<input type="radio"/>
Monica Moorehead	Gloria La Riva	▶	<input type="radio"/>

November 7, 2000		General Election	
A vote for the candidates will actually be a vote for their electors.			
Political Affiliation			
<input type="radio"/>	1	Republican	
<input type="radio"/>	2	Democrat	
<input type="radio"/>	3	Reform	
<input type="radio"/>	4	Green	
<input type="radio"/>	5	Socialist Workers	
<input type="radio"/>	6	Natural Law	
<input type="radio"/>	7	Libertarian	
<input type="radio"/>	8	Socialist	
<input type="radio"/>	9	Constitution	
<input type="radio"/>	10	Workers World	

Figure 19. Michael Bierut ballot design shows clarity and organization.



Figure 20. Michael Bierut, Citi logo shows clarity of design.



Figure 21. Michael Bierut, Lower Manhattan Signage System shows organization and clarity.

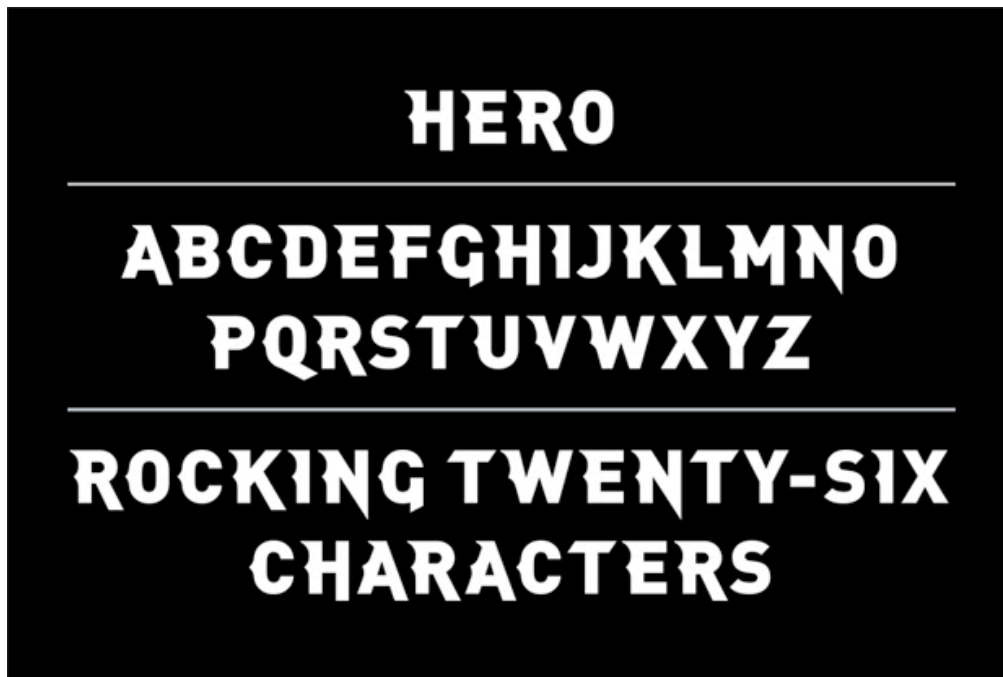


Figure 22. Michael Bierut & Pentagram, Guitar Hero custom typeface.

L!BRARY

Figure 23. Michael Bierut NYC Elementary School Library campaign promotes design as a conceptual experience.



Figure 24. Michael Bierut Minnesota Children's Museum campaign promotes design as a conceptual experience.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The problem researched in this thesis is, does contemporary graphic design reflect a substantial influence of Postmodern graphic design principles? The proposed hypothesis of this thesis is; if Postmodern graphic design ideals exhibited by iconic designers like Ed Fella, Neville Brody, and Stefan Sagmeister are qualitatively influential in the contemporary practice of graphic designers like the Ames Bros., Wolff Olins, and Michael Bierut, then Postmodern graphic design principles continue to be an important factor in design, rather than an ‘intellectual fad’ or outdated theory as suggested by critics.

The overall results of the final data are mixed, meaning that artifacts of certain designers adhere to some of the traits of the Postmodern graphic design genre. For the first trait, *planned irregularity of space and type*, none of the designers adhere to this trait. It appears that this trait remains part of the Postmodern graphic design genre with little influence in contemporary design. This issue alone is worthy of its own further research as use of space and type is an essential component of graphic design, and is something that designers often spend years attempting to master. It seems natural for designers to gravitate to somewhat more predictable and comfortable uses of space and type. To go against this natural inclination and instead create planned irregularity of space and type is something that can only be a deliberate choice.

For the second trait of the Postmodern graphic design genre, *use of custom type*, the results are clearer with two designers adhering to this trait, and one designer with an unclear relationship to this trait. It appears that this particular trait continues to influence contemporary design. Perhaps there is a relationship between this aspect of typography and Postmodernism that is more universal than is commonly understood by design critics and scholars. Use of custom type is also an appealing method for designers to create unique forms for clients that want to separate themselves from competing identity systems, or to add visual interest for important messages. Custom type can also be applied with varying degrees of experimentation, ranging from minor adjustments to existing typefaces, to entirely new typefaces or handmade letterforms.

For the third trait, *critical examination of pop culture*, the results showed one designer adhering to this trait, and two designers with an unclear relationship to this trait. It appears that Postmodernism's relationship with pop culture as something worthy of critical examination still has at least some influence in contemporary design. As designers apply their craft to a wider array of cultural artifacts, it seems only natural that designers continue to examine the relationship of pop culture and design. It is difficult to imagine circumstances that would lead to a decrease in designers' interests in pop culture. With the explosion of social media and new media, designers have easy access to pop culture and can experience the rapid transition of Internet memes. All of these factors naturally seep into designers' appreciation and examination of culture.

For the fourth trait, *design as a conceptual experience*, the results are one designer adhering to this trait, and two designers with an unclear relationship to this trait.

This trait is one of the distinctions between something considered to be art or design. Fine artists frequently explore this trait as part of their creative process, while designers often have to maintain a careful balance between the message of the design and public interaction with the design. As design continues to push into new media and other forms of expression, it is likely that this Postmodern graphic design trait will gain more influence with contemporary designers. Perhaps this is one Postmodern graphic design trait that will have a strong relationship with all of the new technology developed in the early 21st century.

Does the mixed conclusion of this thesis mean that Postmodernism is no longer relevant in contemporary design? Not at all. This thesis shows that certain Postmodern design traits continue to influence contemporary design. As additional contemporary theory challenges the status of Postmodernism, and our society continues to change, it is inevitable that a new critical paradigm will come to dominate our culture and graphic design. However, it's clear that certain Postmodern design traits remain relevant for contemporary designers, and that the Postmodern graphic design genre is not simply a fad that ended abruptly at the end of the 20th century.

REFERENCES

- 99u. "Michael Bierut: 5 Secrets from 86 Notebooks" 99u. 20 May, 2013. Web. <<http://99u.com/videos/6056/Michael-Bierut-5-Secrets-from-86-Notebooks>>
- AIGA. 20 May, 2013. Web. <<http://www.aiga.org/>>
- Ames Bros. 20 May, 2013. Web. <<http://amesbros.com/>>
- Bierut, Michael. *Looking Closer, Critical Writings On Graphic Design*. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. Print.
- Bierut, Michael. *Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007. Print
- Brodeur, Nicole. "Ames Bros., Pearl Jam's Visual Chroniclers". *The Seattle Times*. 17 Dec. 2007. Web <http://seattletimes.com/html/musicnightlife/2004077636_jambook17.html>
- Burgoyne, Patrick. "Wolff Olins: Expectations Confounded". *Creative Review*. 27 Jan. 2008. Web. <<http://www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2008/january/wolff-olins-expectations-confounded>>
- Cantrell, Anne. "Get The Picture". *Mountains and Minds*. 10 Dec. 2011. Web. <<http://www.montana.edu/mountainsandminds/article.php?article=10385>>
- Eshelman, Raoul. *Performatism, or The End of Postmodernism*. Aurora: The Davies Group Publishers, 2008. Print
- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism, Exploration and Practice*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2009. Print
- Foster, Hal. *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New York: The New Press, 1998. Print
- Heller, Steven. *Design Literacy, Understanding Graphic Design 2nd Edition*. New York: Allworth Press, 2004. Print
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print
- Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism, How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*. New York: Continuum Books, 2009. Print.

Lupton, Ellen. *Design Writing Research, Writing On Graphic Design*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000. Print

Malpas, Simon. *The Postmodern, The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print

McCoy, Katherine. *Cranbrook Design, The New Discourse*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1990. Print

Poynor, Rick. *No More Rules, Graphic Design and Postmodernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Print.

Wolff Olins. 20 May, 2013. Web. <<http://www.wolffolins.com/>>