

“GOOD DESIGN IS GOOD BUSINESS”

(Thomas Watson Junior, founder of IBM)

Is it the purpose of graphic design to be an uncritical servant of commercial interests?

Student ID: 0810859
Year: 2008/2009
Semester: 2
Module code: AC115011S

INTRODUCTION

“Graphic design is a creative process that combines art and technology to communicate ideas. “ (Poggenpohl, H., S., 1993)

Throughout the history people has always had a desire to visually express their ideas, fears, thoughts and later also elements of language. Signs, shapes, symbols and letters all served as tools of visual communication. With time came changes in technology which have had and continue to have an impact not only on the process of creating and developing visual communication, but also on its role in society and its influence on the ever increasing commercial (corporate) value. Within the commercial interests, graphic design can be a powerful tool.

In this essay I shall try to identify different approaches to the question about the purpose of graphic design: is it supposed to be an uncritical servant of commercial interests or is it supposed to be first and foremost the promoter of the principles of good graphic design. I shall try to establish this by identifying differing approaches in the work of two eminent graphic designers, Paul Rand and Abram Games. I will present their points of view, their work and discuss in what ways they might be seen as exemplifying differing approaches to graphic design described above. I shall try to find adequate and most suitable definitions for specific terms.

The relationship between the graphic designer and the corporate world has changed since the time when the two graphic designers discussed here were active. A discussion of these changes will also be a part of this essay. It will provide insight into how these issues present themselves to the current generation of graphic designers.

DEFINITIONS

In order to explore the question into detail, it is necessary to define and discuss relevant terms. Their discussion will also serve as an exploration of how design, and in particular good design relates to its commercial element and how this blend developed in the first place.

Graphic design as a profession and its derivative graphic designer have not been around very long. "It is believed that the American typographer William Addison Dwiggins first coined the term 'graphic design' in 1922, in order to distinguish different kinds of design for printing." Ansley (2001, p.6) However, although the term itself was there already quite early, the profession as such did not yet exist in the 1920s. "As a profession, graphic design has existed only since the middle of twentieth century; until then, advertisers and their agents used the services provided by 'commercial artists'." Hollis (1994, p.8).

What about 'good design'? What determines it and how does it relate to corporate interest? "Rand (1993, p.20) says that "good design is not based on nostalgia or trendiness. Intrinsic quality is the only real measure of good design." Though it is true that there seems to be some intrinsic quality present in good graphic design and missing from bad graphic design, this is true for all art forms, as well as for graphic design.

Graphic design is special because there are also technical features, which have to be considered when evaluating a work. But ultimately it is the recipient or the majority of recipients who define the value of the design. As Kaufman (1950, p.9), as cited in Rand(1993, p.23) writes that good design is a "thorough merging of form and function and an awareness of human values, expressed in relation to industrial production for a democratic society".

In opposition to this artistically, socially and culturally aware definition, Tom Watson gives priority to graphic design's relation to corporate interest: "Good design is good business" said Tom Watson. But it is equally true that any design, even bad design, can be good business." Rand (1993, p.33) It is hard to argue against this statement, as it is very difficult to prove that the 'intrinsic quality of a work' can make or break a business. There is also no reason why a badly designed piece of work cannot successfully promote and sell a product, especially if this case of 'bad design' stands out from the crowd or even uses familiar stereotypes or clichés. Similarly, 'good design' can fail, especially if it cannot compensate for the peculiarities of the commercial sphere, such as what images or ideas people find motivating, memorable, provocative to the right degree etc.

Interestingly, in his essay *Nature or Nurture*, Bierut (1994) is saying that CEOs like Tom Watson may not be driven by profit to commission well known graphic designer. Instead they might be driven by good design, by good styling or as Bierut (1994) puts it "...they may just be the kind of persons who like good design, the same way they might be interested in music or wine or motorcycles or porcelain figures." He continues by saying that it must have been easier to define what good design was then, in the 50s, when there seem to be an agreement about the contents of good design and when the world of 'good design and good business' featured a small circle of designers. Although the mantra 'good design' seemed to be the dominant feature of successful business then, there is some evidence that good business may have been very selective with good design in spite of this mantra. Examining an example of a commercially successful campaign which consisted of elements of both good and bad design, Bierut (1994) ultimately concludes, "...good design is good business, but good business may not always be good design."

Graphic design is related to corporate or commercial interests through the creation of

appropriate forms of media, such as posters/billboards, letterheads, logos, website designs etc. In general, it is about all the things that contribute to creating a visual representation of a company or a product. These constitute the corporate identity. Corporate identity is the way that a company presents itself to the public. "Corporate identity is an expression –visual, but also attitudinal – of a company`s character." Aldersey-Williams (1994, p.6) The identity must or rather should give the recipient a clear visual representation of the company and as Olins (1994, p.7) puts it, "The identity of the corporation must be so clear that it becomes the yardstick against which its products, behaviour and actions are measured."

When such emphasis is put on the force and clarity of corporate identity, it is no surprise that the discipline responsible for making it should develop to form a part of graphic design. "The truth is that corporate identity is a rapidly evolving discipline. When it is used superficially it is only cosmetic. But when treated with appropriate interest and respect it has serious and important implications." Olins (1994, p.149)

PAUL RAND

When considering which designer could truly represent a sense of real relationship between graphic design and the commercial – corporate world, there seems to be no better choice than Paul Rand.

Although his name is most commonly associated with the tag 'corporate designer', he did not allow his work to be controlled by the corporations he worked for, but retained full creative autonomy, making immense contribution in developing the field of graphic design: “Rand has been called a designer of lyrical beauty, and his work has been identified as possessing 'an explicit straightness'....He was a key figure in the reception of modernism in American design.” Ansley (2001, p.106) From observing his commercial works it becomes clear they feature elements that were up till then mostly seen in art works. “He made the most of the whole battery of Modern Movement techniques, particularly collage, photograms, cut-outs and borrowings from painters, such as Miró and Arp...” Hollis (1994, p.113) It is worth pointing out that he achieved this in his commercial creations. Rand’s works exemplify his approach towards the role of graphic design in a corporate environment: “Visual communications of any kind... should be seen as the embodiment of form and function: the integration of the beautiful and the useful.” Rand (1970, p.9)

ABRAM GAMES

“In the history of graphic design in Britain since 1945, Abram Games holds a reputation for his graphic wit and deceptively simple designs. Many of his compositions reflect his design axiom of “maximum meaning, minimum means.” Ansley (2001, p.118)

Today Abram Games is best known for his series of war-time posters. “His contribution to the development of graphic communication was remarkable for having been made within the circumstances of propaganda communication during WW2. Images such as *Your Talk May Kill Your Comrades* or *Don't Crow About What You Know About* applied modern design sophistication to the primary messages of wartime in a witty and effective way. The war established Games as a master of poster design.” Rennie (n.d)

When observing the posters it is visible that there is a distinct relationship between the images and the text, none dominating the other; rather they work in harmony. Games as cited in Hollis (1994, p.107) said that “Lettering, in particular must work equally with the design and not be merely an added afterthought....Posters should not tell a story...but make a point.” Although Games also worked for big corporate institutions, these posters represent the majority of his work.

THE PURPOSE OF GRAPHIC DESIGN

With a short introduction to Paul Rand and Abram Games it now necessary to try to identify what could differing approaches to the purpose of graphic design in relation to commercial interests be. As I have previously pointed out, good design is not a necessity for commercial success. Good business can manage without good design and the same is true for good design. It is not there only for commercial interests, for example it can also be found in works that address social issues “...as socially useful graphic design work.” Howard (1994)

Great examples of socially useful work are war-time posters of Abram Games. Games, then appointed as an Official War Artist (Design Museum, n.d.), designed them for The War Office. Games’s motives for designing these works, which are described as a “body of work that gave visual expression to both the efforts and experience of the war and to the hopes and ideals it was fought for.” Rennie (n.d), were not controlled nor directed by economic stimuli. They did not come with a price tag and a commercial pressure. Since corporate marketing departments seem to be most detrimental to good design: “...the marketing people. They destroy people’s work: ‘this should be bigger, this should be up there, there should be a sun here with a price.’” Rand cited in Abrams (1993), it is fair to assume that Games would have had a great deal of creative freedom in making them, as well. Through a combination of creative freedom and personal motivation, Games produced excellent examples of good graphic design.

On the other hand, graphic designers find it hard to survive without some commercial work. But when graphic design pays service to commercial interests, it is in danger of gradually turning into a mere tool in the hands of the marketing department. As Rand

(1993, p.34) wrote “Most see the designer as a set of hands – a supplier –not as a strategic part of business.” When that happens, good design is replaced by a vision created and controlled by the company rather than the designer. In his essay *Design and Business: The war is over*, Glaser (1995) criticises this approach: “After forty years, business now believes that good design is good business. In fact, it believes in it so strongly that design has been completely removed from the hands of designers and put into hands of the marketing department. In addition, the meaning of ‘good’ has suffered and extraordinary redefinition. Among an ever-increasing clients, it now only means ‘what yields profits.’” What this means is that graphic design is in danger of being split into two parts: those who wish to retain creative freedom and control over their work, and those who uncritically succumb to the ‘more profit, less design’ formula, which diminishes their creative input.

This, however, is not true of all graphic designers. Some excellent designers do manage to retain all the desired control over their design as well as satisfying their corporate clients. There is no better example for this than Paul Rand. As we have seen above, Rand is generally labelled as a corporate identity designer and he has collaborated with many companies. Rand firmly believes that good design requires designer’s full control over the work. “Rand has a simple template for what makes a good client: they don’t interfere, don’t tell you what to do, and appreciate whatever the designer proposes without questioning it.” Abrams (1993) But he also firmly believes that it is possible to retain this level of control when working for corporations. Such critical involvement of the designer with the corporate world is, according to Jeeves (2009), best for both sides: “The most successful unions between commerce and design come from critical involvement...”

Some might argue that graphic designers who choose to be involved in commercial interests should also have full control over their projects and a chance to explore their

creative freedom without any interference from commercial world. Jeeves (2009) says “Ideally, a commercial operation recruits a designer based on what they can bring to a project, therefore providing greater scope for the designer to apply his or her unique skills to bear.” Often, though, this is not the case and “On occasion, a client will simply insist on directing the project from A to Z.” Jeeves (2009). When this happens, the designer has to choose whether to still be involved in the project as an uncritical servant, or walk away as he “may not feel the money on offer is worth the perceived indignity of absolute direction.” Jeeves (2009). Sometimes, despite the pressure designers still choose to be involved because they may feel that the money generated will give them the freedom to pursue more creatively rewarding avenues later on.” Jeeves (2009). And that might be the reason why some designers achieve their best work in a non-commercial world. Not that they would not do well in a commercial environment, but it seems that sometimes designer`s critical approach to their work and commercial interests are not fully compatible.

So, is it the purpose of graphic design to be an uncritical servant of commercial interests? As I have discussed above, there is certainly a risk that the ‘marketing people’ might interfere with the designer’s autonomy and control the creation process to the degree where the designer becomes nothing more than a tool in their hands – an uncritical servant of those who had hired them. So, the answer no, it is not the purpose of graphic design to be an uncritical servant of commercial interests, because this approach compromises good design. But, as we have also seen from the example of Rand’s works and his general approach to corporate design, this should not and need not happen. Rather, the designer and their client should be equally critically involved in the process of design. Designer should consider commercial interests, their client’s goals and expectations in their work and include this commercial element into the creative process of good graphic design.

CONCLUSION

Graphic design as a profession has not been in existence for very long when compared to the history of visual communication. Despite that, it has seen many changes in the role it played in various areas of society, most notably in commercial or corporate interest. To try to fully understand the essay question, it was necessary to break it down to individual terms, such as good design, good business, uncritical servant, commercial interests and then find their suitable explanations in the context of graphic design.

In order to then provide a sound subject matter I looked at the works of two eminent graphic designers: Paul Rand and Abram Games. These two designers provided at a glance two different approaches in relation to the purpose of graphic design. On one hand, Paula Rand known for his corporate identity work, where as Abram Games in mostly known for his war-time posters, regarded as socially useful work. This apparently stark contrast was the basis for an in-depth look at the way graphic design is involved in commercial interest.

It soon became clear that good design does not necessarily mean good business, and that good business is not about good design. It became evident that once graphic design is used as a tool for commercial success, the process of design is taken from the designer and put into the hands of marketing, thus leaving the designer with not much control. A good designer must then be able to assert their ideas and defend their design, which is what Paul Rand was able to do and so good design was by no means taken from him. Abram Games on the other hand was by circumstances put in the time where there was no commercial interest, at the time of the war. As the official war artist it was his responsibility almost to use graphic design to keep the fight alive. Through his posters he inspired people. And people were inspired by his good design, which was not pressured by commercial interest but it still was able to do 'good business' for the army.

By exploring both graphic designers, I was able to identify that there are simply three ways a graphic designer might follow. The first one is to be involved in commercial interests with the possibility of having little control over the design. The second way is to completely avoid the commercial world and in this way find creative freedom and autonomy. The third way is the middle way, where a designer succeeds in working hand in hand with the 'marketing people' while retaining their autonomy and creating good design.

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