# The Cultural Context of Contemporary Graphic Design

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Graphic design in the contemporary era (postmodernity) seems to be in a state of diversity and pluralism as designers produce work without any unifying stylistic or theoretical principles. Although designers frequently draw inspiration from stylistic and attitudinal trends at a street culture level in order to produce designs that have market appeal (to economic ends), seldom do they take the time to analyse contemporary culture at a theoretical level. As a result contemporary graphic designs often emerge as empty consumerist styling that celebrates the "postmodern moment" in contemporary culture, or alternatively as a rational, simplified, objectively planned approach that resists the status quo in favour of earlier modernist approaches. This essay, as a theoretical investigation of contemporary culture, attempts to contextualize graphic design within this culture, by analysing its main features and characteristics as highlighted by leading cultural theorists. This is done in order to encourage graphic designers to become more self-aware and to reflect critically on the work that they produce.

"Everybody's doing it, but nobody is home."
Lorraine Wild interviewed by Louise Sandhaus for *Eye* magazine.

At the outset it is important to note that at the core of the graphic design profession lies the concept of visual communication. A graphic designer organizes signs, symbols, images and/or words on a surface in order to communicate a visual message to an audience. Heller (2001: 9) further qualifies the activity of the graphic designer as the organization and communication of messages in order to "establish the nature of a product or an idea, to set the appropriate stage on which to present its virtues, and to announce and publicize such information in the most effective way". Hollis (1996: 10) draws attention to the fact that "graphic design constitutes a kind of language with an uncertain grammar and a continuously expanding vocabulary; the imprecise nature of its rules means that it can only be studied not learnt". Yet when one takes a step back to view the context in which graphic design operates, it becomes apparent that these superficial generic stylistic characterizations do not reflect an understanding of the link that always binds disciplines and practices to their cultural context. By default, they therefore often point to deeper issues at play when one traces the intricate strands of reciprocal influence between society and a cultural practice like graphic design.

The closing decades of the twentieth century experienced an intense pluralization and fragmentation in graphic design. It seems as if the revolutionary rebirth of the profession through the advent of digital technology, together with Millennium fever, caused its life to flash before its eyes as designers feverishly "flew" through almost an entire history of styles and ideas and even added in a couple of new ones.



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While Paula Scher, for example, revisits the typography of Russian Constructivism, Futurism and Dada in the *Great Beginnings* self-promotional booklet in 1984, April Greiman experiments with a new digital technology in "Does it all make sense?" a fold-out, life-sized self-portrait for *Design Quarterly* magazine, which expressively overlays digitized (often low-resolution), type, image, illustration and icon. Meanwhile Vaughan Oliver designs record covers for the music industry in a surreal moody trademark style that Jeremy Aynsley (2001: 212) describes as "poetic interpretations that aspire to be equivalents of music". The Cranbrook Academy of Art, under direction of Katherine and Michael McCoy, draws influence from the early writings on postmodernism in the fields of design and architecture (amongst others) as well as the writings of linguistic theorists such as Roland Barthes, and produces "deconstructed" work with multi-layered visual and verbal messages that destabilize reductive, clear communication. David Carson further subverts the "clarity" of modern communication in his role as designer and art director for *Ray Gun*, a magazine devoted to nineties alternative music, blurring the distinction between artist and designer as he "paints" rather than designs expressive cinematic pages for the magazine. In contrast the London-based design practice 8vo, formed in 1982 by designers Simon Johnston, Mark Holt and Hamish Muir, launches the magazine *Octavo* as a personal initiative (Thrift, 2000: 66). *Octavo* primarily showcases a modernist typographic approach, which advocates a "rational objectivity" and clarity of communication, through the use of sans-serif fonts and geometric ordering of information using a strict grid system.

This complexity evident in design practice, although seemingly contradictory at first, points to a transitional period in graphic design, as by the end of the 1970s, it was felt that the modern era was drawing to a close. At this time a younger generation of designers started to expand the possibilities of the International Typographic Style, a movement that epitomized modernist thinking in Switzerland and had dominated much of design worldwide during the 1960s and 70s. A period of rethinking and questioning marked the emergence of this early postmodernist strand, evidenced in the work of Rosemarie Tissi and Siegfried Odermatt, amongst others, as the visual predictability of the modern aesthetic was challenged (Meggs, 1998: 435). By the 1980s postmodernist graphic design had established itself firmly, emerging first in Switzerland, then in the US and finally spreading to other centres worldwide. Graphic designers working in this new postmodernist idiom "sent shock waves through the design establishment" as they rebelled against the functional, rational and objective modernist approach (Meggs, 1998: 432). A personal, subjective and intuitive attitude was embraced and design during the eighties was characterized by an intense interest in play, visual wit, surface texture and colour. Postmodernist styling, as seen in the work of designers such as April Greiman, Dan Friedman and Michael Vanderbyl, to name only a few, is characterized by "a playful kinetic geometry featuring floating forms, sawtooth rules, and randomly placed blips and lines; multiple layered and fragmented images; pleasant pastel harmonies; discordant letter-spaced typography; and frequent references to



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art and design history" (Heller and Chwast, 2001: 221).

This postmodernist graphic design of the eighties evolved into a consumer style in the nineties due to its inherent anti-establishment qualities that appealed to a youth market. And so the nineties became marked as a time of searching for a "new", "individual" style. This unique style was expressed in the "edgy" deconstructed design of the students at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, the work of Neville Brody and the magazine layouts of David Carson amongst others. Ironically these individualistic visions and initiatives that were truly revolutionary were "quickly implanted into the body of commerce" and became part of a to and fro interchange between innovation and assimilated style which is described in the following passage (Heller and Chwast, 2001: 236, 8):

> It was a period when styles were frequently appropriated to meet market demands. It was a time when disorder was considered 'edgy', and then order even edgier. Edginess became the rallying cry for a revolution that really signified adherence to a new conformity.

A further irony was that this new "conformity" brought with it the hybrid of a radically new visual approach, which pushed boundaries and exemplified diversity, pluralism and "chaos" on many levels. At the same time the digital revolution certainly played its part in advancing a new visual aesthetic, by not only revolutionising the ways in which designers worked, but also by making possible "an unprecedented manipulation of colour, form, space and imagery" (Meggs, 1998: 455). Whereas the industrial revolution had fragmented the design process into a series of mechanical steps, which the designer had limited control over and as a result diluted his or her personal vision, the digital revolution put the production process squarely in the hands of the designer. Postmodernist design thrived on computer graphics experimentation and encouraged the pluralism and diversity already evident at the time. In complete contrast to what was happening around them, several designers resisted this postmodern insurgence and continued in the modern tradition, albeit in new guises, even though the modern era had experienced its prime decades earlier. Other designers fostered a counterstyle which, working against the chaotic complexity that accentuated design in the mid-nineties, and returning to a modern origin, featured a minimalist approach while incorporating aspects of postmodernist thinking.

Design historians have resorted to using thematic captions for the numerous groupings of styles and/or theories, in order to make sense of this undeniable, often contradictory state of multiplicity in contemporary graphic design. For example, on the contents page of *Graphic Style from Victorian to Digital* (Heller and Chwast, 2001: 7), the following are some of the subtitles that appear[1]: "American New Wave", "American Punk", "Deconstruction", "Fontism", "Controlled Chaos", "Rave", "Kinetics" and "New Simplicity". Heller and Chwast (2001: 8) further expose this multifaceted, contrasting nature of graphic design when they describe the time from 1985 to 2000 as "a period when designers looked backward and forward, invented and mimicked, cluttered and economized". The juvenile rebellion that exemplified much of the graphic, fashion and product design of the eighties and the grunge aesthetic of the nineties, has mostly been replaced by a more sophisticated, cool and stylish visual in the twenty-first century. Yet, although the graphic design scene has



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certainly "quietened down" significantly since the eighties[2], there still is no sign of a unifying stylistic or theoretical tendency emerging, as Wild (2000: 13) makes apparent in the following piece:

> Now the number of people who practice graphic design (whether or not they call it that) has increased hugely. The field is geographically diverse, pluralistic, democratic... not so ingrown. We are told that the business world now realizes that we are essential and that there is strength in numbers. But that has come at a price: a fracturing of the design community into sub-groups, like narrowly focussed chat rooms, with little general dialogue or agreement on common goals or anything so antiquated as "good design".

Today graphic designs often emerge as empty (and even cynical) responses to the consumerism and information overload prevalent in society with very little indication of ethical[3] reflection, and seemingly with no real understanding of what it is responding to. Jessica Helfand (2000: 6) describes how designers seem to be "caught between the spirit of acceleration that typifies contemporary culture (make it fast) and the economy of means that has come to characterize all things modern (keep it simple)". Similarly Monika Parrinder (2000: 9) explains that designers usually respond to the information overload prevalent in culture today by either attempting "to make sense" of it (hence the emergence of graphic designers labelling themselves information architects), or by creating designs that "attempt to block it out, by delivering "experiences" not information". Andrew Blauvelt (2000: 38), on the other hand, advocates a "complex simplicity" as a mediation point between the two opposing stylistic and theoretical streams evident in contemporary graphic design, namely expressionistic pluralism and retrograde simplicity. Later on in the document it will become clear that these opposing stylistic streams correspond with the modern moment, on the one hand, and the postmodern moment on the other, and that Blauvelt's "complex simplicity" as mediation point between these opposing streams can be interpreted as a "poststructuralist" moment that refuses assimilation to either side.

The value of insights and contributions to debates that graphic designers contribute in journals such as *Eye*, *Design Week*, *Graphis* and *Emigre* is invaluable (Parrinder, 2000: 8). These contributions initiate the development of a clearer understanding of how graphic design functions within the larger structure of contemporary culture. In addition they serve to monitor the design profession with the aim of providing a forum to address problems that may arise in a fairly open environment where a varied mix of skills and knowledge can connect. Practising graphic designers are not necessarily "uncritical", but even those who think "critically" about their own work are not necessarily theoretically critical and informed. A distinction also needs to be made between the designer who is culturally aware, to an economic end – who uses his or her knowledge of contemporary culture in order to speak to the consumer in a language that will encourage consumer behaviour – and the designer who is critically aware, to theoretical and ethical ends. There certainly are graphic designers who are theoretically skilled and whose work indicates a sophisticated ethical understanding of the culture in which they practice. Yet, with reference to the graphic design profession at large, there still seems to be a need for further analysis of contemporary culture, for taking a step back in order to view the larger context in which graphic design operates, and to clarify how this relationship between encompassing culture and cultural practice functions



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reciprocally. As Andrew Howard (2000: 10) indicates: "the graphic design profession is not equipped with the right theoretical tools – common analysis of politics, economics and culture – that would make it easier to understand how visual communication influences the way we think socially and what we think about".

The following extract by Philip Meggs (1998: xiii), although written to accentuate the importance for graphic designers to know and understand their past, is equally relevant to the argument that intelligent, effective and appropriate graphic design necessitates a knowledge and understanding of contemporary culture and of the relation between culture and cultural practice.

> If we ignore this legacy, we can run the risk of becoming buried in the mindless mass of commercialism whose molelike vision ignores human values and needs as it burrows forward into darkness.

There are many complex, interwoven strands of influence from contemporary culture that work, some directly and some reciprocally, in shaping graphic design. These can loosely be classified as historical, political, technological, economic (capitalist), and cultural. The latter includes cultural sensibility, cultural theory and cultural practice (used here in the narrower sense of the word to include creative cultural activities such as art, architecture, fashion, cinema and graphic design). Aynsley (2001: 202) points out that not only digital technology played a part in constituting graphic design at the end of the twentieth century, but "broader ideas from culture, philosophy, fashion and "style" were just as important for graphic design".

Cultural theorists and commentators, such as David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard amongst others, provide in-depth critical reconstructions (and sometimes deconstructions) of the contemporary cultural landscape, in order to facilitate understanding of its various components and characteristics. It is important to note, though not surprising, that a consonant relation seems to exist between contemporary graphic design and contemporary culture, as this article attempts to show. Terms from cultural theory that are central to understanding postmodernity (contemporary culture) and which will be discussed in the following sections are *premodernity*, *modernity* and its counterpart *modernism*, *postmodernity* and its counterpart *postmodernism* and also *poststructuralism,* which will only be mentioned briefly.

*Postmodern*. By simple analysis of the word one is able to gain some insight into what it represents. It can be assumed that in terms of history the word refers to an occurrence after the modern era. On a timeline the zenith of the modern era, which first emerged in recognizable form in the eighteenth century, could be placed around the first half of the twentieth century, while postmodernity emerged from the late sixties but especially during the last three decades of the century (Harvey 1990: 38). Furthermore the word *postmodern*[4] does not draw attention to what it is, but rather to what it is not, an indication that it does not really know itself. And perhaps most importantly the term postmodern does not seem to reference the modern in an affirming manner, such as a term like late-modernism does, but rather in a more opposing manner which indicates a breaking away.

These precursory observations are confirmed as one explores what has been written on this complex subject. Walter Anderson (1996: 3, 6) refers to Stephen Toulmin's observation that we are living



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in a new world, "a world that does not know how to define itself by what it is, but only by what it has just-now ceased to be". Anderson goes on to explain that the term "postmodern" is a makeshift word - one that we are using until we can decide "what to name the baby". Our attention is therefore drawn to the fact that the culture we are living in is in a transitional stage, which is characterized by varying degrees of uncertainty. Fredric Jameson (1985: 112) points out that postmodernism emerges as specific reactions against the established, dominant forms of modernism. As a result there will be as many postmodernisms as there have been modernisms to react against. Jameson reinforces Anderson's view when he highlights that it is quite a complex task to describe postmodernism as a coherent movement, as its character is not constructed from within but from the modernisms that it is seeking to displace. With reference to graphic design history, Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast (2001: 221) confirm Jameson's position in the following extract:

> Despite the Post-Modern label, design style in the eighties must be defined as a sum of its various parts. Evidence definitely exists of a common period vocabulary, or at least a kindred aesthetic sensibility and artistic cross-pollination, visible in all media and applied to diverse products. Yet the aesthetic continues to evolve primarily from the styles of specific designers... propagated through the media as popular fashion. Only time will reveal its true nature and significance.

It is important to indicate that a distinction should be made between postmodern*ism* and postmodern*ity*, and likewise between modern*ism* and modern*ity*. "Postmodernity" and "modernity" can be explained as concepts that refer to cultural conditions, whereas "modernism" and "post-modernism" refer to artistic or critical responses to these cultural conditions[5]. For example art and design such as the Bauhaus, De Stijl, or the Swiss International Style (International Typographic Style) represent a modernist response to modernity. From this example it should be clear that modernism and postmodernism refer to critical, creative responses to a cultural condition and are therefore critical concepts, whereas modernity and postmodernity refer to different cultural conditions and have definite "periodising" connotations. It follows logically that postmodernity historically is preceded by modernity and that premodernity precedes modernity.[6] It is interesting, though complex, to note that contemporary culture, or postmodernity, can feature moments of premodern, modern and postmodern cultural practice, existing side by side. In the following extract Anderson (1996: 6) explains in a striking manner the differences between postmodernity, modernity and premodernity in terms of a culture's experience of universality (sameness, generality) or lack thereof in various stages of history:

> People in premodern, traditional societies have an experience of universality but no concept of it. They could get through their days and lives without encountering other people with entirely different worldviews – and, consequently, they didn't have to worry a lot about how to deal with pluralism. People in modern civilization have had a concept of universality – based on the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant would figure out how to get everybody on the same page – but no experience of it. Instead, every war, every trade mission, every migration brought more culture shocks. Now, in the postmodern era, the very concept of universality is, as the deconstructionists say, 'put into question'... Postmodernity, then, is the age of over-exposure to otherness – because, in travelling, you put yourself into a different reality; because, as a result of immigration, a different reality comes to you; because, with no physical movement at all, only the relentless and ever-increasing flow of information, cultures interpenetrate. It becomes harder and



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> harder to live out a life within the premodern condition of an undisturbed traditional society or even within the modern condition of a strong and well-organized belief system... We are living in a new world, a world that does not know how to define itself by what it is, but only by what it has just-now ceased to be.

Historically the premodern world can be described in terms of life in tribal cultures, or small isolated villages, and as Anderson (1996: 5) elaborates, "premodern societies weren't necessarily simple or primitive, but people in them were relatively free from the "culture shock" experience of coming into contact with other people with entirely different values and beliefs". The modern world arrived with the advent of modern science and the industrial revolution and through colonial conquests, travel, war and other means of contact, not only became exposed to the diversity of cultures, but also reacted "against" it. The modern world is characterized by a modernist search for a "universal" (sameness) to re-establish unity among humankind, in the face of this newfound plurality of cultures. The postmodern world on the other hand embraces the diversity and is "aware" that a search for a "universal" is pointless. Post-structuralists apparently realize that to choose between the "universal" and diversity would be a loss of one or the other, and propose therefore a both/and logic or approach where the "universal" and diversity (the particular, plurality) can coexist[7]. The dominance of the one or the other in modern and postmodern logic is replaced in poststructuralist reason by a tensioning in thinking the universal and the particular together. As pointed out earlier, it is fascinating, yet complex, to recognize that within the contemporary era, referred to primarily as postmodernity, there are pockets of postmodernist, poststructuralist, modernist and even premodernist thought patterns (cultures, worlds) that coexist.

In contrast to Anderson's explanation of these concepts, the poststructuralist Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984: 79), author of the influential book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, observes that "the postmodern is the modern in its nascent state and that state is constant", and that "every work of art is first postmodern before it is modern". This may seem paradoxical at first, but what it means is that in order to create a modernist artwork or design, one that embodies the universal (stability), there first would need to be an experience of diversity of possibilities (flux). In other words stability (the modernist "gesture" of stabilization) cannot be understood or experienced unless it is viewed against the background of flux or instability that precedes it. Here is a wonderful example of Lyotard's poststructuralist logic at work, which refuses to submit to either extreme, be it modern or postmodern. Lyotard's use of the terms "modern" and "postmodern", unlike those of Anderson, is primarily as critical concepts, and can be used to describe postmodern (and sometimes also poststructuralist) tendencies that appeared at various stages in history, before the advent of the postmodern era as we know it today. It is important to emphasize that both Lyotard and Anderson's use of the terms, together with varied descriptions from other postmodern theorists, are valid in that they complement each other in creating a greater understanding of the complexity of the postmodern condition.

In his early work Lyotard is still quite positive about the diversity, or "difference", as he describes it, which characterizes the postmodern condition. He concludes the essay included in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on*



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*Knowledge* with a call for people to "activate the differences" (1984a: 82). Later in his career, as is evident in his writings in *The Inhuman*, Lyotard (1991: 6) becomes less optimistic about postmodernity. He points out very pessimistically that "the ideology of development" is positioning itself towards global domination. By implication this ideology subverts genuine difference[8].

Other mainstream character-izations of contemporary culture make use of descriptors such as "heterogeneous", "fragmented" and "multi-layered", to emphasize the pluralism and complexity of the present-day world. Graphic design as part of the contemporary cultural landscape and in a position of reciprocity with it, finds itself not untouched by this state of flux and pluralism. David Harvey (1990: 44) states that what appears to be the most patent characteristic of postmodernity (contemporary culture) is "its total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic". A similar point is illustrated in the following piece, but with reference to contemporary graphic design (Steven Heller, 2000: 9):

> Our relatively recent past is notable for a myriad of styles that occupy comparatively brief, concurrent periods and come and go with such speed that a kind of cultural detonation results when one collides with another.

Anderson (1996: 2) refers to postmodernity as " a burst of cultural chaos and creativity... a rampant pluralism" and graphic design historian Phillip Meggs (1998: 432) refers to "an era of pluralism" and "a growing climate of cultural diversity". A warning is necessary here, however. It is easy to be misled by the modernist search for the universal into thinking that modernism itself exemplifies *only* rationality, stability, order and structure - this is not so, as David Harvey (1990: 22) points out, "Modernism internalized its own maelstrom of ambiguities, contradictions, and pulsating changes at the same time as it sought to affect the aesthetics of everyday life". It is important to emphasize that diversity and flux have been experienced in both modern and postmodern culture, the difference between modernism and postmodernism being in the way that artists and cultural practitioners respond to this condition. Whereas postmodernists, or at least those described by Hal Foster (1985: xii) as "reactionary" postmodernists, are quite content to experience, or even to celebrate flux and diversity, modernists were intent on "resisting" the condition they found themselves in.

Modernists such as Baudelaire were already aware of the "postmodern condition" (at least as an awareness of flux or "becoming") as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, although he did not use the term itself (Harvey, 1990: 20). Baudelaire understood the role of a successful modern artist as a twofold process, firstly to record the fleeting, the ephemeral, diversity and flux of everyday modern life and secondly, to find and extract from it, that which is universal and eternal. In other words the modern artist's task was to find an answer to the question: "how to represent the eternal and the immutable in the midst of all the chaos" (Harvey, 1990: 20). Modernists used various strategies such as stabilization, "domestication", and formal reduction in order to make accessible and "universal" the multiplicity of the world in which they lived. For instance the graphic design of the Swiss International Style was intent on presenting information in



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an objective, structured and clear manner of "universal" appeal, through the use of photography, sans-serif typography, the exclusion of ornament, ranged left type settings, narrow text columns and composition based strictly on the grid system (Heller and Chwast, 2000: 196). Kenneth Hiebert explains that the methodology of the Basel School, one of two major schools that promulgated the Swiss design philosophy, is derived from the idea that "abstract structure is the vehicle for communication" and that furthermore (Heller and Chwast, 2000: 199):

> It relies on an analysis that rigorously questions and accounts for all parts of the message. The act of searching for an appropriate structure forces the designer to make the most basic enquiry about a message, to isolate its primary essence from considerations of surface style.

The modern ethos, especially as expressed by Baudelaire, is clearly detectable in this piece as one recognizes "the diverse" in "an analysis that rigorously questions and accounts for all parts of the message" and "the universal" as "the primary essence" of the message.

Harvey (1990) provides another framework through which the qualities of modernity and postmodernity are revealed in terms of the "Enlightenment Project". The Enlightenment Project, which is synonymous with Modernity, is characterized by a utopian belief in progress. Theorists critical of the postmodern, such as Jürgen Habermas for example, believe that modernity, or alternatively the Enlightenment Project, has not been given the opportunity to run its full course and prove its worth. Referring to Habermas, Harvey (1990: 12) expounds the task of the Enlightenment Project as (supposedly) the positive upliftment of humankind:

> That project amounted to an extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers 'to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic'. The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life.

The Enlightenment Project, which lasted historically from the late eighteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, is described as a way of bringing all the diverse people in the world to see things in the same way - in a rational, lucid, coherent way, a way based on "reason" (Anderson, 1996: 4). In brief, the Enlightenment Project was based on the belief in linear progress, freedom and the creation of a better world through the power of science over nature, the uncovering of absolute truths and the development of "rational" forms of social structures. Enlightenment thinking was anchored in the belief that there existed a single correct way of interpreting the world. In light of this, Harvey (1990: 28) describes postmodernity as the cultural condition after the breakdown of the Enlightenment Project. This means that "the idea that there was only one possible mode of presentation began to break down" and was replaced by "an emphasis upon divergent systems of representation". Shifting to a different register, we see this in practice as a radical transformation within late modernity, starting in the early twentieth century in the art of Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, Duchamp, Klee, de Chirico, in the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg and Bartok amongst others, and in avant-garde art and design movements such as Vorticism, Constructivism, Dada and Futurism (Harvey 1990: 28). In graphic design it is important to note that movements from the first half of the



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twentieth Century, namely Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Dada, De Stijl, Bauhaus, and Swiss International Style, form the zenith of the modern era. Accordingly, even though most of these movements may fall under the late-modern label, this does not indicate a dissipation of modernist theory. It is possible to see in the existence of these different movements a preparation for the multiplicity so typical of postmodernism, with the difference that each of the modernist movements was committed to the belief that it had somehow grasped the "essence" of art or design.

Parallel to Harvey's (1990: 28) perception of postmodernity as the condition of the world after the collapse of the Enlightenment Project, Lyotard (1984: xxiv) describes the postmodern era as a time of "incredulity towards metanarratives". Modernism places strong emphasis on the search for universal truth in various spheres, especially in the areas of science, which Lyotard gives special attention to, and politics. Lyotard indicates that the status of knowledge in Western societies is in crisis and that this is an important factor in the emergence of postmodernity. Following Lyotard, John Storey describes the postmodern condition as:

> ...the supposed contemporary rejection of all totalising thoughts: Marxism, liberalism, Christianity, for example, that tell universalist stories (metanarratives), which organize and justify the everyday practices of a plurality of different stories (narratives).

Hardt and Negri (2001: 69) in the book *Empire* provide an enlightening, paradigmatic historical sequence regarding the birth of modernity. The birth of modernity historically took place during the fifteenth century, at the time of the Renaissance. Hardt and Negri identify three moments in this constitution of European Modernity (2001: 70):

> ...first, the revolutionary plane of immanence; second the reaction against these immanent forces and the crisis in the form of authority; and third the partial and temporary resolution of this crisis in the formation of the modern state as a locus of sovereignty that transcends and mediates the plane of immanent forces.

The "revolutionary plane of immanence", that Hardt and Negri refer to as the first stage in the development of modernity, became apparent in the Renaissance and stands in opposition to the medieval reliance on a transcendent authority. Simplifying somewhat, the "revolutionary plane of immanence" can be explained as the "creative forces" that work within people to bring about a realization and acknowledgement of human power to "generate" and in this way destine life, independent of a higher transcendent force such as God, or the church. To summarize, "In those origins of modernity, then, knowledge shifted from the transcendent plane to the immanent" (inherent, intrinsic) (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 72). Consequently it is this birth and celebration of individual human power, which destroys any ties to the unifying and mediating influence of an external power, that brought about a diverse creativity in the form of a revolution. The second phase of modernity emerges in the form of crisis, as a counterrevolution (against the revolutionary plane of immanence), which seeks to "dominate and expropriate the force of the emerging movements and dynamics". Hardt and Negri (2001: 74) elucidate:

> This new emergence, however, created a war. ... This is the second mode of modernity, constructed to wage war against the new forces and establish an overarching power to dominate them. It arose within the Renaissance revolution to divert its direction, transplant the new image of humanity to a



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> transcendent plane, relativize the capacities of science to transform the world, and above all oppose the reappropriation of power on the part of the multitude. The second mode of modernity poses a transcendent constituted power against an immanent constituent power, order against desire. The Renaissance thus ended in war - religious, social, and civil war.

It is this second mode of modernity - in other words, "the modern" - that emerges as "victor" in the struggle and which directs the development of modernity throughout history, a development characterized by crisis on the one hand, and on the other, its counterpart - the attempt to resolve the crisis. In a political framework Hardt and Negri identify the formation of the modern state as a temporary solution to the crisis of modernity. More importantly however, is that it is the first mode in the development of modernity, the revolutionary plane of immanence, with its emphasis on the power of the individual (within a community) and its spawn of diversification, which corresponds with the moment of the postmodern. In addition, this historical framework for the origin of modernity provided by Hardt and Negri, accurately confirms Lyotard's (1984: 79) poststructuralist observations that the postmodern is always present in the modern and that the modern is constantly "pregnant with its own postmodernity" (1991: 25). This serves as a reminder, as we take a step back, away from the detail, of the cyclical nature of history - the inherent action-reaction mode that is so patent in the development of the modern out of the postmodern and of the postmodern in turn, again, out of the modern.

Metanarratives, the Enlightenment Project and other modernist expressions all have unifying, integrating, stabilising endeavours in common. A conveyor belt process can be visualized where the inclusion or exclusion into ordered rational realms of modernity is weighed against universal appeal, a process that does not make room for difference, particularity, distinctiveness, or the individual. Postmodernism, as a critical practice or activity, is seen as a backlash against the dominance and perceived monotony and sterility of modernism. Graphic designers emerging in postmodernity perceive styling based on the modernist philosophy as limited and predictable, and believe that modernism has declined into a superficiality of style, with an inability to respond to consumer needs (Alan and Isabella Livingston, 1992: 136).

In conclusion, if one compares the formal features of contemporary culture, which incorporates the modern *and* the postmodern "moments", with the stylistic diversity evident in contemporary graphic design, similarities are apparent. These "moments" in contemporary culture find their counterparts in this creative cultural practice, as designers seem to move between extremes of exclusive minimalist approaches (the modern) and more inclusive eclectic and elaborate approaches (the postmodern) and at times find the means to "balance" them. Furthermore Hardt and Negri's analysis of the generative nature of the historical relation between modernism and postmodernism, along with Lyotard's critical explanation that positions this relation at the origin of creative practice, points to a future in graphic design practice where the dynamism of the modern/postmodern relationship will continue producing new design styles and approaches. So, instead of a resolution in the direction of a new, "ordered" modernist design, or a postmodernist design dominating, we can expect to see more of the dynamic that is already occurring in the movement between these poles. The



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"new simplicity", as discussed earlier in the document, that emerged relatively recently in graphic design, is an approach which favours modernism, yet ironically this approach adds to the multitude of diverse approaches and styles which can be described as the "postmodern condition" of graphic design (following Harvey and Lyotard). And this condition is undoubtedly one of plurality and difference[9].

**Notes**

[1] These captions refer to the closing decades of the twentieth century.
[2] Although there certainly are formal differences between the graphic designs from the eighties, the nineties and that of today, there still is evidence of the same diversity and pluralism that marked the emergence of 'postmodernist' graphic design, albeit in a different guise. Design from the eighties is perhaps more expressive of a designer's newfound personal vision (in contrast to working under the overarching modern tenets of earlier), whereas design from the nineties and later is marked by a more consumer-driven approach, which in itself (ironically) requires 'the look' of diversification and individuality.
[3] The term 'ethical' is used here in a broad sense, in order to convey the idea that the position held by a designer as mediator between society (the audience to a message as embodied in the design) and the client (provider of the brief for the message), brings with it a certain amount of responsibility. This role should not only be considered as a source of economic enrichment, but also take into account the interests of society at large, including their economic, moral, aesthetic, and social interests.
[4] The word *postmodern* is used here to suggest postmodernism *and* postmodernity, even though these two words have slightly different meanings, which will be pointed out later in the document.
[5] Some theorists such as Lyotard for example tend to use the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' as 'nouns'.
[6] The concept 'premodernity' is here used to refer to a cultural period preceding the historical appearance of modernity. More attention will be given to its characteristics later in this article.
[7] I elaborate on this in the next paragraph, as it is noticeable that Lyotard (who is a poststructuralist) does not apply the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' in a historical sense, but critically.
[8] Unfortunately this line of thinking cannot be developed further here, as it would move too far away from the current topic. For a thorough discussion of this see Hardt and Negri, 2001: 138-143.
[9] Some of the insights arrived at in this article flowed out of discussions with Bert Olivier.

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