

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

MARIAN DENE SAUTHOFF

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

ORIENTATION

This chapter sketches the background to the study, clarifies its motivation and purposes and explains the choice of methodology. It positions graphic design within the context of the challenges facing organisations in South Africa, and although it acknowledges the significance of design for development in this context, it sites the study firmly inside the parameters of design development with a concomitant focus on the professional and theoretical dimensions of graphic design. The chapter charts how a greater awareness and understanding of design have been established internationally, particularly in its intersection with business and the economic arena and comments on the increasingly complex contemporary design environment. The importance of graphic design speaking *for* and *about* itself in a proactive and a systematic manner is emphasised. Key areas in delimiting the study are illuminated and four considerations are taken into account in this regard: the meaningful interpretation of graphic design; appropriate design application; the design client; and graphic design practice in South Africa. The need for informative initiatives and programmes for graphic design is noted. Specific reference is made to the current status of research and theory in South African design education and their potential to provide a foundation that would enable designers to explain their conceptual methodologies systematically and articulate their role as communicators clearly. In conclusion, a brief outline of the objectives and content of the chapters in the study is presented.

BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM DEFINITION

The necessity for post-apartheid South Africa to establish and develop local markets, compete in the global marketplace and meet the requirements of social reconstruction and development allowed commentators to reassess the role of design in the country. At the start of the post-apartheid period, Kurlansky (1992) and Oosthuizen (1993) envisaged a significant economic and social role for design, as well as new demands for design skills. Kurlansky draws parallels with other countries, like Germany, Japan and Spain, that have faced similar challenges and where design has underpinned an industrial and cultural Renaissance. Oosthuizen stresses the integral position of design in society and its utilitarian and sign functions. He postulates a design imperative in crafting a competitive edge for South Africa in both national and international arenas. Both commentators see design as a powerful national resource.

According to Kurlansky, who proposed a 'New South Africa Design Initiative', the significant role of design can only be actualised through the development of a unique South African design culture that includes:

- a distinctive creative expression;
- acceptable standards of visual literacy at all levels of society;
- the accommodation of inclusive and representational perspectives and staffing within design industry sectors; and
- the support and promotion of high creative standards.

Oosthuizen calls for 'a new design order' based on an holistic and integrated vision of design purposes and the development of a South African design culture that combines global trends with the essential and differentiating qualities of Africa.

The potential of design to contribute specifically to the development of non-industrialised and low-income countries has generally been approached from two perspectives. The first perspective places the focus on the generation of design solutions that answer to the basic and circumstantial needs of non-industrialised countries, sectors and communities, in other words, design that

is accessible, affordable and relevant to specific communities and groups. It points design in the direction of core areas such as agriculture, health, education, literacy, transportation, communication and housing. The second view of design for development focuses on sustaining indigenous sensitivities and upgrading and redirecting traditional skills with the aim of fostering self-reliance, self-employment, job creation and small business development. This approach also seeks to balance issues of universality and diversity, i.e. homogeneity versus local, regional and national cultural characteristics (Du Plessis 1992; Isar 1995; Kalsi 1993, 1995; Naidu 1993; Pido 1993; Southwell 1997).

The complexity and diversity of the challenges confronting design practice in South Africa and comprehensive proposals like those of Kurlansky and Oosthuizen have elicited continuous personal assessments and a multitude of opinions, observations and comments pertaining to design capacity and the state of the industry¹ in South Africa. Numerous suggestions for strategic and operational development of the industry as a whole and of particular fields within the discipline have been offered by both design practitioners and educationists. Design commentators who have adopted a macro view in emphasising the significance of design have called for a national policy and the formulation of a long-term strategy to co-ordinate all aspects of design. A national infrastructure that supports and promotes design, encourages investment in design and offers financial incentives to design organisations is perceived as an issue that deserves due consideration from the state (Carey 1995; Thomas 1995; designers Wessels and Wadman quoted in Sauthoff 1993b).

Design industry sectors have been called on to formulate a strategic vision for themselves, review legislation regarding design and establish formal and functional communication channels between all parties in the design arena – industry, education and clients. The importance of unified representation and co-ordinated industry actions and the cultivation of a willingness to co-operate and compete simultaneously have been stressed. Other factors that have been emphasised are the necessity for the industry to shift its orientation from imported design ideas and design values to local ones, and the impact of digital technology on fundamental aspects of design practice (Bizos 1997; Embelton in *Marketing Mix* (1997); Hunt 1990, 1992; Lange 1996, 1998; Oost-

huizen 1991, 1993; Sauthoff 1992, 1996, 1997; Sutherland 1993a, 1993b; Thomas 1995; Van Eeden 1995; Van Niekerk 1993; Wolfaart 1996).

At organisational level, South African design consultancies and organisations have been criticised for their poor business focus and the manner in which they manage, market and differentiate themselves (Von Bornmann 1993; Oosthuizen 1996). They have also been taken to task for their lack of knowledge and insight into the wider aspects of their clients' corporate and organisational policies, structures, needs and culture (Lange 1996; Van Niekerk 1993). The depth and extent of designers' understanding of corporate and organisational strategy and their ability to integrate design and strategy have received little systematic attention and very little relevant information is currently available. For instance, the perceptions and experiences of South African clients of and with designers in this regard have not been documented.

At operational level, the perceived inability of designers to present design rationales or to articulate their conceptual methodology does not engender confidence in client organisations. A view that designers do not possess adequate non-design skills is increasingly being offered as a factor that inhibits design acceptance and use (Lange 1996; Temple 1997; Oosthuizen 1996). The credibility of design decision-making is questioned because of a poor research basis and a deficit in relevant data. This deficit is held up as being particularly problematic, as it has resulted in the superficial understanding of social and development issues pertinent to South African organisations and local audiences and users (Harber 1993; Kalsi 1993; Lange 1996; Sauthoff and Lange 1992; Southwell 1997; De Jager quoted in Van Eeden 1994b; Van Niekerk 1993).

Design practitioners, in turn, feel that a major deterrent to industry development and the effective utilisation of design lies with the commissioners and managers of design. A number of broad areas have been identified as problematic. Designers contend that commissioning organisations have little understanding of the nature of design, particularly its strategic role and value, leading to its under-utilisation and a low prioritisation for design funding, research and staffing. Inadequate attention is paid to the formulation of policies for strategic integration, co-ordination and management of the design

function. Designers are often perceived as 'decorators', 'dabblers', 'unrealistic' and 'arty' who operate at the fringe of an organisation in an ancillary activity. There is a lack of expertise within organisations to manage design at project level; inexperienced gatekeepers have little understanding of critical aspects in the design process like intent, briefing, timing and production. Finally, low levels of visual and design literacy result in design decision-making and evaluation based largely on emotional response, previous experience, personal preference and other subjective criteria (Erasmus 1993; Hofmeyr 1992; Hunt 1990; Lange 1996; Oosthuizen 1993, 1998; Rozin 1992; Sauthoff 1993b, 1998; Temple 1997; Van Niekerk 1993).

In summary, South African designers and design commentators feel that design cannot be exploited as a resource to its maximum benefit in this country because:

- Support infrastructure at national and industry levels is poor.
- There are too few co-ordinated interventions from design industry sub-sectors.
- Very little reliable data is available, particularly data related to the South African professional design context and design for development.
- The knowledge and skills of designers and design organisations need to be upgraded, specifically with regard to broader economic and management aspects, interpersonal and research capabilities and the changing role of design and designers.
- There is a superficial and fragmented understanding of the nature and function of design among key personnel in client organisations, resulting in its under-utilisation and unacceptable standards of design management.

These views echo international sources that trace and document some of the problems in establishing an awareness of design and its possible role in business and the economy over the last three to four decades (Blaich & Blaich 1993; Gorb 1990; Lorenz 1986; Newell & Sorrell 1995; Olins 1995; Sparke 1983; Walsh *et al.* 1992). In many industrialised countries, design is now accepted as a powerful tool in the hands of organisations that need to devise and market products and services, develop efficient environments and communicate effec-

tively with consumers, employees, shareholders and others. The development and use of design since World War II, accelerated by massification, technology and globalisation, have encouraged its multifaceted examination, as well as a consideration of those factors that inform it, from both theoretical and applied perspectives. Three main streams – design awareness, professional design development and design management – have progressed in tandem with the growing fields of design research and design history.

In design's intersection with business and the economy, concerted efforts have been made to elucidate the attitudes and conceptual frameworks from which designers operate and to highlight fundamental differences between designers and 'others'. Critical design knowledge and skills and their strategic value within an organisational framework have been emphasised, the role of the designer has been clarified and attempts have been made to change the perception of the designer as a 'stylist' or 'decorator' to that of a strategic planner and co-ordinator, integrated team partner and project leader (Baker 1996; Blaich & Blaich 1993; Bruce & Jevnaker 1998; Cross 1995; Lawson 1990; Lorenz 1986; Newell & Sorrell 1995; Walsh *et al.* 1992). Professional associations, design education, support structures and design consultancies have fostered the professional status of designers and encouraged designers to improve their strategic understanding of client organisations, design markets and design business management (Crawford 1998; Gold 1985; Goldfarb 1993; Mott 1989; Sparkman 1995). Initiatives to create an awareness of the extensive presence of design have included the showcasing of broad categories of design, design solutions and designer profiles. Directories of design consultancies, catalogues of sub-sector services and publications that promote the benefits of design, have all raised consciousness of its functions. Overviews and models of the design process, with the emphasis on sequential procedures and the explanation of mechanical, technological, legal and administrative aspects have widely been made available, and remain an ongoing feature of design literature.

The focus on design's contribution to both corporate and national economic development (particularly its role in product innovation and development, marketing and corporate image) resulted in an increasing volume of research that highlighted the importance of integrating design with other key organisa-

tional activities and the proper management of the design process (Walsh *et al.* 1992). The response to research findings has been a drive to define and improve design management practices internationally. Design management courses have been established at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; design management awards have been initiated in numerous countries; publications and international conferences have made research results accessible to wider audiences; and national agencies and professional design associations have promoted an understanding of design management and disseminated an important body of information. Chung (1992) provides an interesting historical overview of developments from the 1960s through to the beginning of the 1990s, showing how initial drives focused on delineating the philosophy, goals, functions and techniques of design management, while later initiatives emphasised design as a routine and integral part of management thinking.

During the 1980s, seminal writing and analysis, specifically related to product/industrial design, provided more precise insight into the dimensions and benefits of design management (Blaich 1989; Freeman 1983; Kotler & Roth 1984; Oakley 1984; Topalian 1980). Long-term collaborative projects, for instance the *Design Management Development Project* of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Design Council in Britain, and the *TRIAD* project undertaken by Harvard Business School (HBS) and the Design Management Institute (DMI) in the United States, continue to make materials and best practices widely available based on the traditional HBS method of case studies. While the initial focus of the DMI was on product design, corporate identity and branding have enjoyed increasing attention and are now an established part of its programme.

Though many of the objectives to educate designers, design managers and clients outlined above have formed the bases of ongoing strategies, the 1990s have seen the fundamental re-examination of the significance and role of design in the light of the challenges and threats posed by an increasingly complex and changing environment. Generally perceived to characterise the move from an industrial to a postindustrial, information society, areas that have had a particular impact are developments in digital technology; social demands and changes; shifts in contemporary corporate philosophies, objectives and

activities; and professional values. These key factors point design in a number of directions: new working configurations, new alliances, collaborative situations and interconnections; new perceptions of the designer; new design purposes and goals; new areas of potential influence; and increasing demands for accountability and explanation. All place additional pressure on *designers* to articulate the unique qualities of design, the unique skills they bring to situations, and to clarify and justify their input.

Recent remarks by international design commentators highlight the possible danger that, unless design speaks clearly *for* and *about* itself, it runs the risk of being buried in corporate and social structures that have no interest or inherent obligation to supply a rationale for it as a discipline or practice. Thackara, design theorist and director of the Netherlands Design Institute, speculates that the design profession could be marginalised, as professional design structures are inappropriate to the tasks at hand and because designers are only capable of delivering low levels of input in dramatically changing environments (Mitchell 1996). Thackara feels that there is a real threat that the responsibility of exploiting designers' skills in a "... dramatically changing world will fall slightly outside the traditional design world onto design managers and business in general" (Mitchell 1996:120). He calls for a clear distinction to be made between design as an activity and designers themselves.

Buchanan, professor of design at Carnegie Mellon University and design editor, agrees that the design profession is not currently responding adequately to a changing environment: "... other disciplines such as management, marketing, and engineering have attained higher levels of sophistication in theory and practice, with correspondingly stronger voices in decision making that enable them to demand and expect clear answers about what the field of design can actually accomplish today" (Buchanan 1994b:81). Buchanan maintains that there will have to be more reflection on where design has been and where it is going; there will have to be new, well-grounded explanations of the nature and practice of design, supplemented with diverse types of research; and there will have to be incisive explanations of the specific ways in which design can address the issues that will be important to industry and society.

Poynor, a design journalist and critic, states that “[t]he received wisdom among design insiders is that new design ‘languages’ are changing the semantics of visual communication. Yet if ... the work ... does portend new forms of mediation and new kinds of media literacy, then outside the professional design magazines a phenomenon of the utmost significance is going largely unnoticed, or being touched on in only the most superficial terms. What is this new work? How does it differ from established forms of communication design? What do its makers think they are up to and say the work is about? What is the work about, since this is by no means necessarily the same thing?” (1998:9).

Dewey (1997:89) echoes the above sentiments with specific reference to graphic design, maintaining that, while its history is central to its identity, the models of the past are no longer adequate. He argues that educational institutions, professional organisations and design practice will have to redefine themselves and that educational institutions for graphic design must become centres for research and new ideas.² Professional organisations must prepare their members for the future by disseminating those ideas and not let themselves be ruled by a small established élite. Designers must engage their clients on a more substantial level and educate them about graphic design’s potential. Dewey sets out a sequence: research, to practitioners, to clients. Designer Doblin (1979), using law, medicine, behavioural sciences and design as examples, has pointed out that the systematic and structured flow of information is a critical factor in the development of a profession and the establishment of professional credibility.

The theme of a systematic and structured flow of information, and more particularly the informative link between practitioners and clients, identified by Thackara, Buchanan, Dewey, Doblin and Poynor, is one that runs through the broad overview and background sketched above. It points to and reinforces the need for a fundamental explanation of graphic design, and for a clear articulation of design roles relevant to contemporary circumstances that also acknowledges the unique dimensions of the South African context.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN DELIMITING THE STUDY

Any systematic study of design must take the multiplicity of meanings commonly associated with the term and concept *design* into account. Walker (1989) lists them as:

- a process (act or practice of designing)
- the result of that process (a design, sketch, plan or model)
- products/artifacts/images manufactured with the aid of design
- the look or overall pattern of an object/image
- a full-time activity undertaken by trained specialists who are employed or commissioned
- a desirable attribute or indication of value – guarantee of uniqueness, authenticity, individuality and creativity.

The process of designing is more comprehensively defined by Walsh *et al.* (1992:18) as "... the activity in which ideas and needs are given physical form, initially as solution concepts and then as specific configurations or arrangements of elements, materials and components." They describe a design outcome as "... the configuration of materials, elements and components that give a product [object/image] its particular attributes of performance, appearance, ease of use, method of manufacture" (1992:16), and note that these may be manifested in evolutionary or revolutionary ways. As a mode of practice, design emerged as distinct from art and craft in the transition from feudal to capitalist systems of production and the growth of industry, engineering, technology, mass production and mass media communication. From trade activities, it has differentiated itself into segmented professions based on the type of outcome and the training received, for instance, product designers, design engineers, and graphic, interior, textile and fashion designers.

The extensive presence of all forms of visual communication in contemporary life underscores graphic design's potential contribution to organisations. This study is premised on the importance of organisations being able to utilise graphic design efficiently and effectively and seeks to explore selected issues

related to this objective. Graphic design, of necessity, changes continually in an organisation. While some design solutions are fairly static (e.g. primary or core visual identity; three-dimensional applications like signage), many are closely linked to an organisation's day-to-day communication activities, shifting organisational objectives and changing audience profiles. The speed of change and implementation is increasingly accelerated by digital technology. Ideally, the effective utilisation of graphic design demands judgement and interpretation; understanding of both procedural and cognitive aspects of the design process; and insight into appropriate application. As Clucas (Sauthoff 1998:14), a prominent South African graphic designer aptly comments, "[c]lients need to realise that each design problem must be solved in a uniquely appropriate manner and that design expectations and judgements should not be based on a studio's portfolio of past solutions which were each devised to meet a very specific set of circumstances and requirements."

Buchanan and Margolin (1995) maintain that the revelation of ideas and methods behind design and the clarification of design's significance are governed by four considerations: awareness and recognition of design's presence; the meaningful interpretation of design; the nature of the activity of designing; and the appreciation of design as a contested domain of conceptions, principles and values of and between designers, clients, audiences and users.

Meaningful interpretation of graphic design

The purposes and values attributed to graphic design are multiple and often conflicting. Designers may see their work in terms of creativity and problem-solving, marketers will view graphic design in terms of competitive advantage, consumers in terms of improved functionality, utility, personal appeal or appropriate style, and theorists as expressions of dominant ideologies. Design outcomes will thus be interpreted and evaluated according to perceived purposes and objectives, taking aspects into account like aesthetics; materials and technical fitness; performance; appearance; personal needs and preferences; context of use; and social and cultural appropriateness.

The product, object or image as a subject of systematic study and analysis

addresses the inner functioning of design and provides clues about the thinking of the designer. Graphic designs are considered by Heller and Pomeroy (1997:ix) to be sources of historical information and contemporary inspiration that provide evidence of the values that have been instilled in them. The information provided by design outcomes can be accessed through a variety of interpretive strategies, or a systematic examination that seeks to clarify design on various levels, such as semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and symbolic. By isolating and exploring the qualities of objects and images, it illuminates design mechanisms and reveals the embedded layers of meaning in a design. Systematic analysis exposes the role and functions of design within cultural, social, economic and political domains and raises questions of value and intent within each of these.

From a pragmatic point of view, the constructive and analytic functions of theory and the strategies used by theorists and designers suggest a number of possible applications. For instance they could:

- provide the terminology and mechanisms to undertake and articulate a critical appraisal of design outcomes (thus encourage clients to move from subjective response to objective evaluation);
- reveal the essence, intrinsic qualities and principal functions of objects and images, thus sensitising clients to factors which influence visual creation and translation (assist clients to provide clues that help designers solve specific design problems);
- expose the range, scope and richness of design's potential contribution (help clients to select appropriate alternatives);
- reveal the diversity of opinion, shifting paradigms and the contested domain integral to design (enable clients to transcend conventional notions); and
- confront contemporary issues and tensions in design practice and design culture (enable clients to identify design trends and developments).

Appropriate design application

Gorb (1990) notes that the design needs of organisations are best served by

grouping their use of design into four categories: the products they make and sell; the environments in which they work; the information systems used to communicate their purposes; and corporate identity. According to Gorb, these four areas are usually handled by several people with different sets of criteria, in a way that is relevant to the manner in which the organisation itself is managed. Each category is further subdivided by professional areas of specialisation in terms of which design services are promoted and provided to organisations.

While this type of pragmatic grouping allows for the identification of some key corporate areas where design can make a contribution, some theorists favour a consideration of design practice on a less differentiated basis. Preference is given to a consideration of design as an open concept and an analysis of designing as a discrete activity. Lawson (1990) maintains that professional design disciplines are only differentiated by the type and severity of the constraints placed on them. While Walsh *et al.* (1992:23-24) group the main areas of design activity within an organisation into three-dimensional design (products) and two-dimensional design (graphics), they maintain that the design activity, irrespective of specialist areas, has four essential characteristics: creativity, complexity, compromise and choice (1992:52). Buchanan (1994a) proposes that the field of design should be considered in four broad areas of *thinking* rather than divided into traditional specialisations: symbolic and visual communication; material objects; activities and organised services; complex systems or environments. While he admits that it is tempting "... to limit specific design professions within each area – graphic designers with communication etc ... this would not be adequate, because these areas are not simply categories of objects that reflect the results of design. Properly understood and used, they are also places of invention shared by all designers, places where one discovers the dimensions of design thinking by a reconsideration of problems and solutions" (Buchanan 1994a:8).

A perception of design as a discrete activity seeks to define the unique qualities of design as separate phenomena and reveals distinct 'designerly' ways of knowing, thinking and acting. Consideration of the cognitive dimensions of design highlights a number of critical characteristics. Design thinking can be

described as abductive, rather than inductive or deductive reasoning (Cross 1995; Morello 1995). Design problems may be viewed as indeterminate or 'wicked' and design has no subject matter of its own apart from what the designer conceives it to be (Buchanan 1994a). Implicit in this is that design needs to be managed qualitatively to a large extent, rather than by means of quantitative and administrative procedures. It demands intelligent interpretation and informed application.

However, design ability does not operate freely, but is embedded in a nexus of social, political and economic motives. Theorists postulate that factors within both the external and corporate environments, particularly technological and socio-political requirements, demand the accommodation of a more encompassing view of design and a reconsideration of both design practice and design applications that transcend conventional notions. Sociologist Moles (1989, 1994) proposes that graphic design should be seen as an integrative discipline of which the objectives are to facilitate an individual's interaction with an environment and to make the world 'intelligible'. Margolin (1989:16) feels that all forms of designing must address the need for "social models that accurately represent and can aid in easing wide disparities of awareness, motivation and privilege." Whiteley (1993) calls for a sensitivity to 'green' and feminist issues in designing. Mok (1996) maintains that the strategic business environment of the future will extensively utilise electronic mediation, offering graphic design an optimal role.

An analysis of the process of designing and a review of the dimensions of its operational contexts:

- reveals the scope of capacities and abilities of designing and enables the utilisation and exploitation of intrinsic design skills by an organisation;
- builds an awareness of the range and extent of possible design applications;
- exposes and clarifies new areas for design practice in organisations;
- orientates the organisation towards changes in media, products and techniques;
- enables a more comprehensive structuring of design problems;

- conveys the scope and power of design in the realisation of organisational objectives;
- facilitates collaboration and interpersonal communication; and
- promotes efficient design management.

Design client

Design theorist Bonsiepe (1995b:36), referring to both product and graphic design, declares that “[t]he criterion for success in design can be reduced to a simple, positive *declaration by the client*, in which he says ‘I am content’. Therefore, the condition of satisfaction in design is neither the verification (or rejection) of an assertion, nor the empirical proof of a physical viability, but the successful fulfilment of the expectations (needs) of a client ...”

Anyone employing the services of a professional designer may be considered a client. Thus, a client could be an organisation or people within an organisation who have acquired responsibility for a design project or for using design as an integral part of a task and who deal with consulting or in-house designers. Hancock (1992a) states that organisations should ideally have design managers with the responsibility to maximise the benefits of design in the organisation. In reality, most organisations in South Africa commission graphic design projects on an *ad hoc* basis, with their results rarely quantified.³ This selective, project-based use, rather than a culture or understanding of design as an organisational resource and tool, leads to a fragmented, rather than an integrated, holistic or synergistic use of design. This is easily demonstrated in the daily experiences on various levels of interaction with an organisation – e.g. signage, information ecology, personnel documents, and management communications.

Essentially, the type of organisation and its structure influence the use and management of design. According to Gorb (1990), design tends to be managed as a central resource when it is perceived as strategic (e.g. corporate identity which comprehensively influences and modulates design activities). Otherwise, design management tends to follow the organisational pattern of the business. The closer the organisation is to the consumer, the greater the

focus on design. In addition, Dumas and Whitfield (1990) indicate that many people within an organisation are 'designing' or managing design without recognising that they are doing so. These 'silent designers' are scattered throughout organisations and unknowingly participate in design tasks, taking a wide range of design decisions, without considering that they are engaged in design. They also note that clients have expectations about the extent of the design function that differ significantly from those of designers.⁴

Generally speaking, it could be assumed that in South Africa a variety of personnel in an organisation 'manage' design in isolation without being encouraged to see this as part of a larger corporate picture. 'Design clients' must thus be regarded as a highly differentiated group, comprising individuals with a range of qualifications and with varying degrees of design awareness and knowledge, as well as different perceptions of design in the organisational context. Their access to and engagement with design information, trends and developments will be determined by an organisation's strategic and operational objectives and each individual's personal interaction with designers. Oosthuizen (1996) argues for an interface on senior level between client and communication or design company, but also that every level in the organisation should be informed and aligned behind communication strategies. He intimates that this is not common practice in South Africa.

Obviously, for design information to be effective and valuable to client organisations under these circumstances, it must be:

- moved beyond 'showing' and persuasion to fundamental explanations that clarify the specific contributions and the language and semantics of design;
- translated into accessible and comprehensible formats;
- conveyed in a manner meaningful to a particular client's level of understanding, requirements and specific problems;
- transmitted by means of flexible and appropriate vehicles and methods that are determined by specific needs and situations; and
- perceived as strategies by clients to empower them in their interaction with design and in their design decision-making.

Graphic design practice and clients

The background sketched in the opening pages of this study suggests and points to three pertinent and interrelated areas or aspects that deserve particular attention in any attempts at a meaningful promotion of a structured flow of information between theory, practice and clients in South Africa. These include:

- bridging the superficial and fragmented understanding of the nature and function of design;
- clarifying the changes to design in an increasingly complex environment; and
- identifying and systematically elucidating the potential of design to meet the specific characteristics and circumstances of the South African context.

Internationally, informative initiatives and programmes have been undertaken by a number of agencies, including formal educational institutions, independent and state-funded structures and individuals, professional bodies and design practice itself. A cursory review of South African conditions regarding design (see p 5) indicates that, given current circumstances, it is imperative that design practice plays a proactive role in establishing an informative interface with clients. Although the theme has been continually emphasised by South African designers (Carey 1995; Hunt 1994; Kurlansky 1992; Lange 1996; Rozin 1992; Clucas quoted in Sauthoff 1998; Van Niekerk 1993), there is little documented information to indicate whether, or to what extent, initiatives have been adopted or implemented.

Personal observation suggests that promotional material like corporate profiles, newsletters distributed to clients and direct interpersonal contact between design companies and clients sometimes fulfil an educational function. Individual designers have indicated a commitment to an educational and informative role for themselves in three areas: the acknowledgment of standards of design; design advocacy; direct inputs to formal education and to client education (Lange 1996; Sauthoff 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995;⁵ Van Niekerk 1993). Once more, there is little documentation describing the content, methods

or success of such efforts. Design discussions in the public arena have tended to focus on creative innovation and showcasing design outcomes. Temple (1997) considers the overall approach used by South African graphic designers in the provision of design services and design recommendations. He suggests that designers are unable to explain their conceptual methodologies or articulate their role as communicators. A possible contributory factor to this situation might lie in the nature of design education and its teaching methods.

The traditional mode and methods of design education⁶ in South Africa are largely art and craft based. These have tended to valorise studio activity; visual and design problem-solving on a project basis; and to emphasise the development of creative intuition and the subjective domain. Although there has been an increasing move to incorporate components from other disciplines in design curricula, these have often remained unconnected to the specialist design area. Postgraduate design studies are essentially underdeveloped. Universities⁷ have generally followed a fine arts model and the entrenched conventions and values of this tradition. The granting of degree status to Technikons, academic qualifications as a criteria for professional advancement and the validation of courses and degrees at private design schools by overseas universities have focused attention on design research.

These trends and the growing international acknowledgement of the importance of design research over the last ten to fifteen years, have accentuated the need to both clarify and develop it as an activity and as a discrete field of endeavour. Three trajectories may be discerned in attempts to confront research and theory in design education, both locally and internationally. The first deals with promoting and developing a culture of design research in education in terms of structure, content and standards. The second considers the significance and status of 'the designed object', works of practice or research-by-project as legitimate research outcomes for postgraduate qualifications. The mode of theoretical support or discourse that should accompany research of this nature, and dealing with the resulting incompatibility with entrenched research cultures and conventions are ongoing questions (Fourie 1992, 1999; Seago & Dunne 1999). The third trajectory examines the nature and status of design research in a broader sense: for instance, do design disciplines have a

scientific/academic status of their own, what is the difference between design methodology and research methodology, and how may types of research in design be distinguished and categorised? (Butler-Adam 1992; Cross 1999; Glanville 1999; Roth 1999; Sauthoff & Lange 1992). These developments in design education have served to highlight the extreme lack of insight and expertise (in graphic design and other design disciplines) in relation to both theoretical and methodological dimensions and suggest that attention should be turned to the formalising and systematic articulation of theoretical foundations in graphic design.

STUDY PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINE

The intention of this study is a pluralistic examination of graphic design from a number of theoretical perspectives. It takes the form of a broad-based exploratory investigation that seeks to:

- synthesise, interpret and order the conceptual theory informing the creative production and analysis of contemporary graphic design on a selective basis; and
- review selected theoretical and conceptual viewpoints as a means of identifying dominant ideas and some key issues within the contemporary design environment, thus further scrutinising the operational design arena.

The choice of a broad and exploratory approach has been informed by a number of considerations, which should be viewed in general terms and in terms specific to South African circumstances. These include:

- Graphic design theory and research are perceived to be underdeveloped, fragmented and eclectic. Comprehensive and sustained theoretical perspectives with systematically formulated fundamental assumptions, have not enjoyed the kind of attention comparable to other subject disciplines.
- The nature of research which focuses on the interpretation of design outcomes has been overwhelmingly qualitative rather than quantitative; descriptive, analytical and inferential rather than empirical, interventionist and deductive.

- The relevance of graphic design theory and research to professional practice is considered to be tenuous. Pragmatic intent and applied context that lead to well-defined strategies and normative guidelines for practice, have not been areas of focus.
- There is a growing awareness, both locally and internationally, that graphic design education needs to move beyond the traditional and entrenched 'Bauhaus pedagogic model' with its strong emphasis on practical concerns and studio activity.
- Graphic design in South Africa has developed into a sophisticated practice and an industry which projects itself as capable of delivering international standards of design and servicing large corporate clients, locally and overseas. However, design theory, research and criticism appear not to have kept pace with these developments. Creative innovation and tacit knowledge have tended to be valorised.
- There is a clear need to establish a systematic basis that will aid the integration of relevant aspects of the design discourse into the organisational context. Discussion of design in South Africa is usually sited in a marketing context which seems to suggest a tendency to focus on the pragmatics of its role in economic competition, rather than fostering an understanding of its wider role in an organisation.
- Elucidating the qualitative dimensions of design as an intrinsic part of design management in South Africa is of great importance. Chung (1992) maintains that design management has concentrated too much on administrative and bureaucratic procedures.
- The lack of empirical data on the nature and structure of the industry and local design circumstances, is particularly problematic and would necessitate a number of preliminary investigations before the viable adoption of an in-depth focus on a single area.
- A broad theoretical overview allows the nature of the design discourse to emerge more fully and accommodates the possible adoption of a speculative stance.

The following assumptions have been adopted as the basis of this study:

- Design – in products, communication and environments – is an important

resource and tool which should be exploited to its maximum benefit by an organisation in an informed, comprehensive and directed manner.

- Design practice, in its broadest sense, has a role to play in promoting an understanding of design and educating those responsible for commissioning and managing design, and implementing design policy.
- This role relies on a sound theoretical basis and may be actualised either directly through the proactive implementation of specific interventions, and/or indirectly through the informative and explanatory stance adopted in mediated and interpersonal interactions.

The study is presented in the following manner:

CHAPTER 2 briefly notes the various trajectories that inform graphic design theory and sites the study within the analytical/interpretive stream of graphic design theory and reflection. The chapter confirms the need to consolidate and review theoretical frameworks and considers the specific objectives of the study and the approach adopted in the theoretical review in greater detail.

CHAPTERS 3, 4, 5 AND 6 explore contemporary conceptual theory and its constructive and analytical application in graphic design. Four perspectives or theoretical frameworks – visual language, semiotic approaches, deconstruction and visual rhetoric – are highlighted and illuminated through an explanation of intellectual groundwork, core principles and their application in identified graphic design domains and practical outcomes.

CHAPTERS 7 AND 8 link theoretical implications to the pragmatic consideration of identified key issues, ideas and areas within the contemporary operational design arena, by means of both directive and speculative discussion. Particular attention is briefly and selectively focused on graphic design's potential intersection with corporate organisations as a prelude to the final review of the study and its conclusions.

NOTES

- 1 Industry is referred to here only in a generic sense. Classification, definitions of discipline and descriptions in terms of structure, size and modes of practice are problematic and fluid (see chapter 8).
- 2 Poggenpohl (1991:30) agrees that design education has a major contribution to make: "Teaching should lead. Practice should follow. Let's just say that design teachers are in a better position collectively to develop a knowledge base, to write history and to create a critical discourse. [Furthermore] ... I have no confidence in the profession's critical ability to evaluate or question design solutions in any tough-minded way. Designers are too polite. Designers are too political. There is no discourse concerning design priorities or alternative viewpoints or comparative analysis of design solutions."
- 3 While no data is available on design testing in South Africa, *AdFocus* (1999:78) states that "[d]epending on who you ask, its estimated only 5% – 15% of TV advertisements are tested before or after they appear." Roth (1999:20) quotes a study undertaken in the United States on the prevalence of evaluating the efficacy of design solutions: "... the user is rarely asked to participate in either formative or summative evaluations. When respondents were asked if their design organization typically solicits user evaluation of communication prototypes, almost 68 percent stated they did not. The same question when applied to user evaluation of the final communication indicated that 71 percent of the organizations did not seek user feedback."
- 4 This observation has been reinforced in a number of ways. In a survey by the Australian Graphic Design Association, designers cited the four most important determinants of design success as creativity, profitability, stimulating clients and solid relationships. Characteristics valued by clients were understanding the client's needs, attention to detail and strategic vision (Lam-Po-Tang 1996). Designer Kernan (1997) likens his own experiences with clients as being analogous to actors playing from two different scripts. Management theorist Kao (1996:9) speaks of "puzzling discontinuities" between design and business, stating that he encountered what almost appeared to be "... two distinct tribes, with two distinct sets of concepts and two distinct languages for describing reality – leading to a *Rashomon* kind of phenomenon in terms of looking at the same thing but describing it in profoundly different ways."
- 5 Prominent South African designers profiled and interviewed for these articles include Alistair Wessels and Alexey Wadman (1993); Jaan Bekker (1994a); Dairin Ashley (1994b); Garth Walker (1995).
- 6 The Design Institute, of the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), in the publication *Design Education in South Africa* (1998) lists 27 courses that offer degree and/or diploma qualifications in graphic design ranging in duration from one to four years. It indicates that this information is by no means complete. The point being made here is that with few external control or mandatory accountability mechanisms in place from either industry, practice or the state, there must be significant variation in the breadth and depth of theoretical knowledge and insight which graphic designers bring to the professional arena.
- 7 Only Pretoria and Stellenbosch Universities offer degree courses in graphic design. Potchefstroom and Cape Town offer graphic design as a major subject within a communications and fine arts degree, respectively.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

ORIENTATION

The previous chapter suggested that the effective utilisation of graphic design by an organisation depends on design judgement and interpretive ability, understanding of the procedural and cognitive aspects of design, and insight into appropriate application. It further proposed that design practice needs to articulate and clarify its role and potential systematically by explaining the unique qualities of design, elucidating the specific skills it brings to situations and justifying its input into an organisation, particularly in the light of increasing and significant changes over the last few decades. This is especially relevant in South African organisations that have few design managers in place and where, generally speaking, design is seldom submitted to rigorous testing procedures. Design decision-making thus relies on the knowledge, understanding and experience of clients and/or designers and often on their idiosyncratic preferences. The chapter furthermore intimated that the theoretical basis of graphic design, which would allow for a better systematic and structured flow of design information, has to be reviewed. There is a need to consolidate ideas about the intrinsic nature and underlying mechanisms of design and to consider how this information should be meaningfully disseminated to buyers and users of graphic design.

Graphic design has an extensive presence in contemporary society, shaping the meaning and impact of much that is seen and read in all forms of visual communication. From the printed surface to outdoor, broadcast and digital transmission, innumerable typographic configurations, images and graphic devices

disseminate information and ideas. In this expansive sense, graphic design may be viewed as a complex matrix of visual systems and media circumscribed by three factors: industrial production, accessibility to wide audiences, and a means of conveying ideas through the juxtaposition and integration of word and image into an holistic unity (Meggs 1992; Jobling & Crowley 1996). Historically, its articulation has been shown to operate in aesthetic, social, political, cultural and economic arenas and within professionally defined sub-disciplines, areas of specialisation and through diverse mediated products.

The broad scope and range of graphic design activity is reinforced by the definition of its role by the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) as “an intellectual, technical and creative activity concerned not simply with the production of images but with the analysis, organisation and methods of presentation of visual solutions to communication problems”, which contribute to information and communication and forms “the basis of worldwide interdependent living, whether in trade, cultural or social spheres.” The graphic designer’s task is thus “to provide the right answer to communication problems of every kind in every sector of society” (ICOGRADA 1998).

As mediated communication, graphic design may be illustrated by and located in both transmission and socio-cultural models of communication. Watson (1998:34) differentiates between the two models in terms of emphasis, direction and orientation. The former emphasises “the process of communicating information from A to B, from sender to receiver”, and is generally instrumental, linear in direction and technologically oriented. The latter “stresses the process of *exchange* ... is circular or spiral in nature and is couched in the interactive practices of people in cultural situations.”

As a goal-directed process of communication, the primary purposes and aims of graphic design have been synoptically and variously defined as to visually identify/distinguish/differentiate; to inform/direct/explain/educate; to persuade/inspire/motivate; and to create an experience – aesthetic/entertaining/intriguing (Brown 1979; Lupton 1996; Tyler 1994; Quon 1995). Visual purposes are actualised with degrees of emphasis and levels of integration in

accordance with the functional specificities required by a given situation and problem.

Although widely present, it is the opinion and experience of numerous designers and design commentators that graphic design still seems to be a marginal subject and an invisible occupation to many people (Holland 1997; Lupton 1996). Theory, criticism and research as fundamental professional and academic pursuits are considered to be relatively underdeveloped in comparison to other subject areas. Reasons offered for this are many: its ephemeral nature which has hindered the conservation of graphic design products;¹ ambivalent professional attitudes to theory; and a design tradition, culture, and education which have not fostered detached reflection, conceptualised the role of design or systematically communicated ideas and methods (Ashwin 1989; Buchanan & Margolin 1995; Cross 1999; Dilnot 1989; Margolin 1989; Poggenpohl 1979; 1991; Roth 1999; Strickler 1999; Van Wyk 1996).²

As Frascara (1994:44) aptly comments, "... unlike architecture, literature, or the fine arts, [graphic design] has developed without much theoretical reflection. It has evolved into a sophisticated practice in a piecemeal fashion, with scattered efforts aimed at the development of subareas, such as posters or books, but without either the critical apparatus of literature or the discussion present in architecture." Graphic design in South Africa may certainly be described in these terms. As a mode of practice it enjoys little critical attention³ and few areas within the discipline have received focused exploration and documentation.⁴

Theoretical viewpoints that proclaim alternative paths for the exploration and evaluation of graphic design are slowly beginning to emerge internationally. Design publications and popular journals (e.g. *Eye*, *Communication Arts*, *Emigré*, *HOW*, *Print*), have introduced a measure of critical reflection and regularly debate a number of theoretical and practical issues, resulting in a slowly developing, albeit uneven, professional design discourse. The recent appearance of anthologies collating critical writings on graphic design (e.g. Bierut *et al.* 1994 & 1997) into defined categories of review, has added a measure of depth and direction to a growing discourse. However, the standard of contributions is

uneven, as is the explication of assumptions, preoccupations and theoretical positions underlying the writing.⁵ Theory and research as academic pursuits and the systematic communication of theoretical ideas, research methods and research outcomes are also gradually beginning to emerge, supported over the last ten to fifteen years by research-based journals (e.g. *Design Issues*), academic publications, conference papers and the development of postgraduate studies.

DEVELOPMENT OF GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY

The corpus of theoretical and research work in graphic design may be described as a fragmented, eclectic and pluralistic collection of approaches and writings. This multiplicity is fuelled by a number of impulses and streams, with theoretical variants inspired by a range of scholarship paradigms, intellectual and practical sources. Each attempts to draw out different aspects of design or emphasise different possibilities in accordance with theoretical or philosophic assumptions.

An integrative discipline

The idea of an integrative and discrete discipline of design (design studies/science of design)⁶ that encompasses and amalgamates all the traditional design disciplines, exists in a formative stage with no significant institutional form as yet (Margolin 1989). The vision of design studies as a new liberal art of technological culture articulated by Buchanan (1989, 1994b) would consider the practical, theoretical and philosophic issues of design as a unitary concept, express the assumptions that guide design (irrespective of professional or disciplinary area of practice), and enable an examination of the outcomes and consequences of design. Envisioned as essentially humanistic, design studies would advocate no single philosophy of design, but promote radical systematic pluralism.

The science of design, initially inspired by design theorist Simon (Chan 1990; Margolin 1989), also treats the idea of design as an encompassing concept but emphasises it as a body of knowledge that can be intellectually and scientifi-

cally studied and formalised into a teachable doctrine.⁷ This view, with its focus on the cognitive and epistemological dimensions of design, has been particularly influential in the examination of the design process and design methods, more specifically by researchers in architecture and industrial design, and has informed thinking in artificial intelligence and the development of intelligent software for designers.

An interdisciplinary direction

A growing interdisciplinary direction (albeit underdeveloped), in graphic design seeks to establish close and reciprocal alliances with the social sciences (psychology, anthropology and sociology) with regard to the conceptualisation, planning and use of design. Common ideas of concern and interest as well as the design of contexts (processes, services, structures and systems), generated by a postindustrial society, are considered to increasingly necessitate new methods and modes of collaboration.⁸ An acknowledgement of the potential role of design to contribute to human development and behavioural change has led to an increasing emphasis on the thinking and methodologies of the social sciences as a basis for user-centred design.⁹ Similar motivations have governed a growing affiliation with the methodologies and guiding principles of marketing research, particularly its links to motivational psychology and to aspects like audience and market analysis.

Physical and computer sciences

To a lesser extent, and still tentatively, theoretical work (with specific relevance to graphic design) based on the physical sciences (mathematics) is starting to appear in literature, for instance, shape grammar, considerations of spatial/structural dimensionality and fractal geometry. The intersection of computer science with the cognitive sciences – the development of interactive computer-based media and the emerging research field of human-computer interaction, which has started to explore issues related to multimedia development and to visual interface design – will increasingly contribute to graphic design theory and incorporate graphic design researchers.

Other disciplines

Other disciplines that have considered dimensions and outcomes of graphic design as a subject of study, for instance, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, linguistics and marketing, have had a marked influence on graphic design theory and research. Commentators (e.g. Findeli 1999) have remarked that the largest corpus of design research currently available, is generated by this category. This development has heightened an awareness that design must be prepared to participate in a cross-disciplinary discourse. For instance, disciplines like cultural studies regard design, elements of design or the products of design as components of ideology and hegemony, while marketing researchers regard them as marketing constructs. This has led to an emphasis that, according to design commentators, should be both countered and critiqued, on the one hand, and supported or expanded, on the other, by presenting the viewpoint of design and by explicating the precepts, principles, visual dynamics and characteristics of design clearly and systematically.¹⁰

Traditional concerns

The traditional concerns of graphic design combined with imperatives from a number of influences provide an ongoing theoretical basis for graphic design development. These are chiefly its own disciplinary practice and its shared heritage with the fine arts, which includes practical aspects and ideas from the fine arts intersection with art history and theory. This theoretical orientation in graphic design has looked to the subjective domain of creative production; the diverse inspirations and influences which have governed creative production; and sought to reflect upon creative outcomes. This stream of graphic design theory is increasingly being supported by a scholarly field of design history that has undergone significant development since the Second World War¹¹, particularly related to certain geographic locations and topics.¹² Scholarly research and writing have also been given an impetus by the establishment (particularly in the United States) of design museums which need to be curated, and exhibitions and private collections that have to be contextualised historically, functionally and technologically.¹³

The perceived dominance of formalism and modernism in the conceptualisation and evaluation of graphic design, instigated at the beginning of the century, has encouraged and made way for a range of theoretical orientations. For instance, thinking that has informed structuralist and poststructuralist theories has become a particularly influential source for graphic design writers and researchers and contributed to the theoretical frameworks with which a consideration of graphic design may be undertaken.

OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

Given the eclecticism of current graphic design thinking (often unsystematised), the volume of designed objects and images in circulation and the diversity of their appearance, four perspectives that inform the constructive consideration and analytical reflection of graphic design, have been selected for review in the following chapters. This selection and review support the idea that design information to clients should go beyond advocacy and the promotion of areas in which design may operate (e.g. corporate identity or packaging) and the explanation of design procedures. Both design practice and client organisations need to engage with design at a base level. In other words, the ways in which ideas and information are visually articulated and the impulses that inform the articulation, interpretation and analysis of design, as well as its application and use should be appreciated. With this in mind, the next chapters present a selective consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of graphic design with three primary aims in mind:

- The fundamental thinking and guiding principles which enable the production and analysis (examination) of design outcomes and solutions will be elucidated and ways will be suggested in which design may be 'looked at' in terms of broad theoretical frameworks. Preconceptions, inner workings, underlying mechanisms and strategies are thus rendered transparent.
- Some dominant ideas and influences will be identified which have informed and animated the creative production and analysis of contemporary design and which, by extension, point design research and practice in specific directions.
- Possible approaches, concepts and dialogical and analytical instruments will

be established which suggest criteria that may be used to frame a consideration of the operational design arena.

The four perspectives selected for review are design as visual language, design and semiotic approaches, design and deconstruction, and design as visual rhetoric. These perspectives are presented as theoretical frameworks as each represents a compilation and/or consolidation of relevant ideas rather than definitive models. Their selection was determined by the following points:

- They are generally significant and prominent in the literature, suggesting a legitimacy, perceived usefulness and acceptance within the graphic design discourse.
- Each offer conceptual schema and guiding principles for designing and for the systematic analysis of design outcome characteristics, as well as the broader significance of design.
- Pragmatic consideration of their potential ability and viability to elucidate a better general understanding of graphic design in an organisational context.
- The possibility that, although they are commonly dealt with by theorists in an exclusive (and sometimes oppositional) manner, they can interact, overlap and mutually support one another in their practical application.
- They collectively provide a useful overview which illustrates and encapsulates some of the dominant impulses that have informed design thinking, activity and outcomes during the last three decades (e.g. postmodernism, poststructuralism, digital technology, linguistic and critical theory), rendering their ideas and issues topical and contemporary.

No attempt is made in the chapters to engage critically with any of the selected theoretical frameworks or to give a full account of their complexity. Each chapter seeks to signal an orientation only and to describe core ideas in an accessible and relevant manner, and then to review how essential ideas are actualised in practical outcomes and applications. Specific objectives are, firstly, to provide the intellectual groundwork used in theoretical development and generally applied as a means to explain, test and further hypothesise about graphic design and graphic design solutions and outcomes. This is followed by focused and systematic illustrations and explanations aimed to expose, in each

case, the functioning of fundamental concepts and principles in graphic design domains and media. A reductive, rationalised and selectively edited version of each theory is thus presented, followed by the examination of examples drawn from the literature and a review of practical applications in demarcation topic areas.

Topic areas have been assigned purposefully to demonstrate the scope and range of graphic design activity and to emphasise perceptions, aspects, and issues potentially pertinent to contemporary operational contexts. Discussion has been largely restricted to print as the traditional medium of graphic design, although references are occasionally made to broadcast media (television advertisements and television graphics) and the new electronic media. Many of the South African examples have been drawn from the design journal *Image & Text* that, as the only academic journal dealing with graphic design in South Africa, should be indicative of the nature of the design discourse developing in this country.

NOTES

- 1 See Van Eeden's (1996) description of some of the problems and techniques associated with the conservation and restoration of 62 Russian propaganda posters dating from the 1930s and the Second World War, by the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.
- 2 An emphasis on intuition, the mystique of design and designer and a rejection of precise methodology have been articulated by theorists and commentators. Dilnot (1989) maintains that design remains almost invisible because it has not consistently pursued the historical, cultural or philosophical-analytical study of itself. Ashwin (1989:199) suggests that "[w]e continue to suffer from the cultural legacy of the Romantic Movement which often represented the plastic arts ... as a matter of intuition and inspiration somehow above and beyond the access of rational inquiry and understanding." Buchanan (1994b:80) maintains that "... design lacks that tradition of ongoing reflection and debate which transforms a recognisable practical activity into a defensible field with ideas and methods that can be systematically communicated to outsiders and its own students." Poggenpohl (1991:31) states that design education has "... romanticised the studio aspect of learning to the exclusion of the intellectual aspects of design. This anti-intellectual attitude must end if we are to move forward with a new vision of education and practice that integrates formal/technical ideas with a knowledge-based approach to the design process."
- 3 Even a popular graphic design critique in South Africa, which would foster exposure and promote general understanding, is almost non-existent. For instance, while national and regional newspapers (e.g. *Sunday Independent* and *Pretoria News*) often review examples of advertising, architecture, interior and fashion design, they seldom focus on graphic design *per se*. Similarly, while a degree of analytical attention is routinely given to art or films, graphic design is seldom submitted to critical scrutiny.
- 4 The literature on South African architecture which reflects, and reflects upon, the rich diversity of style, influences and imperatives that have emerged in three centuries of interaction between indigenous factors and peoples and broader international impulses, cannot be remotely matched by considerations of graphic design in South Africa. Recent architectural publications (for instance, Strauss 1994; Fisher *et al.* 1998; Freschi 1998) bear testimony to this and, by comparison, underline the current status and lack of development in the theoretical dimensions of graphic design.
- 5 Bush (1997) provides an example of this problem by showing the manner in which 'modernism' has been simplistically understood and polarised in graphic design writings. She contends that explications and critique have been too narrowly focused on 'designer and work' with inadequate attention being paid to relating such critique to the broader concerns of modernity and modernisation and their accompanying social and conceptual shifts.
- 6 See Baynes (1976) for a taxonomy of design developed at the Royal College of Art in the 1970s, which incorporates concepts of both 'design studies' and 'design science' not as distinct disciplines, but as categories or working definitions within design education.
- 7 Herbert Simon is renowned for his pioneering work in the fields of computer science, organisational development and artificial intelligence. His seminal essay, "The science of design: Creating the artificial" in *The Sciences of the Artificial* published in 1969 (Chan 1990; Margolin

- 1989) offered a definition of design that distinguished it as a professional and cognitive activity, differentiated essentially by an intellectual orientation and a practical consideration of 'the artificial' rather than 'the natural'.
- 8 The problems accompanying the developing contexts in a country like South Africa are equally complex and deserve serious consideration within multi and/or interdisciplinary frameworks.
- 9 Frascara (1994) and Strickler (1999) present informative clarifications of the attitude, thinking and methodologies germane to this field of design research.
- 10 See Hardy's (1999:81-82) review and critique of the publication, *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image*, which elucidates this point. See also Seago and Dunne's (1999:13) description of research that seeks to illuminate the visual dynamics and inspirational sources of black British popular culture and black popular music. Here the focus has been on creative production and entrepreneurship, as a stated counter to standard cultural studies' approaches that emphasise black popular culture essentially as a resistance to bourgeois hegemony.
- 11 Not only has the growing volume of historical works contributed to a measure of continuity and coherence in the way graphic design is viewed (Craig & Barton 1987; Doordan 1995; Dormer 1993; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Meggs 1983; Müller-Brockman 1971; Sparks 1987; Walker 1989), but the controversies and problems surrounding the nascent field as it has sought to define subject matter, purposes, methodologies and alternative views, have fostered a fundamental and inherent consideration of design. A special section in *Design Issues* 11(1), published in 1995, reviews and consolidates some of the differences and perspectives of this debate.
- 12 Standard texts, research and discourse on the general histories of design and the specific history of graphic design, tend to concentrate on the discipline and its development in Western countries. Sub-Saharan Africa is almost completely ignored. Sutherland (1993b; 1998) stresses the need for South African design research and education to focus on 'an appropriate design history'.
- 13 A good example of writings flowing directly from design collections that have broadened an understanding of design in social and political contexts is *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion 1885 - 1945* by Kaplan (1995), based on the Wolfsonian collection in Miami. Similarly, *Letters from the Avant Garde: Modern Graphic Design* by Lupton and Cohen (1996), coincides with an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in Washington.

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN AS A VISUAL LANGUAGE

ORIENTATION

The consideration of visual form is traditionally the primary mode of visual discourse, whether used as a rationale for creative decisions or by critics and theorists to reflect on creative outcomes and the significance of visual disciplines within broader social, economic and cultural domains. It is accepted to be a manner of address that is as structured as any linguistic form, with the ability to communicate through unique visual expression, inflections, syntax and conventions. The systemisation and articulation of its theoretical basis emerged in the early twentieth century out of avant-garde movements and organisations such as Constructivism, De Stijl and the Bauhaus and have been unified and institutionalised into a core of basic visual principles that are taught as the foundation of visual disciplines throughout the Western world.

Simply stated and at a most elementary level, visual expression and understanding are accommodated through a formal language comprising an accepted vocabulary of elements (point, line, shape, direction, tone, colour, texture, scale, dimension and motion); compositional techniques (innumerable, e.g. contrast, unity, balance, rhythm and focus); creative medium; and style. Each component may be described and analysed in terms of specific qualities, attributes, characteristics and behaviour. For instance, colour may be examined through its dimensions (hue, saturation, brightness) and effects in contexts of application (e.g. simultaneous contrast, visual depth, temperature). Style can be classified into broad categories (e.g. primitive, expressionistic, classical, embellished, functional) which provide the basis for further subdivision. Each

broad category or subdivision can be defined and typified in terms of consistent visual attributes (e.g. harmony, simplicity, accuracy and symmetry) and implicit values (e.g. idealism, rationality, humanism), and is thus able to conjure up a series of recognisable visual cues.

The skilful selection, application and manipulation of elements, techniques and medium and their compositional relationships allow the artist and designer to construct and preplan any visual material in terms of meaning and message purpose, produce unlimited visual effects which govern response and to achieve a coherent stylistic synthesis. The organising principles of visual composition (e.g. visual referencing systems, visual preferences, figure/ground, grouping and closure) are drawn from studies in perceptual organisation, particularly Gestalt psychology. Gestalt psychology provided an incisive influence on formalist theory, not only in directing an understanding of the interaction and effect of human perception on visual meaning, but as an approach to knowledge that recognises both the unique elemental characteristics of a system or object and the interdependency of elements within the totality of a system or object. Systematic and comprehensive overviews of the concepts, principles and applications of visual theory in relation to Gestalt theory were set out in seminal texts by post-war theorists like Gyorgy Kepes who further developed Bauhaus pedagogic thinking and methods, and Rudolph Arnheim who emphasised the importance of 'purely' visual perceptions in human thinking and experience (Lupton & Miller 1996).¹ Basic tenets have since been elucidated, reviewed and expanded in numerous publications, often within the context of standard pedagogic sources. Here, particular attention is paid to integrative systems (i.e. grids, modules, fields and patterns) and revealing the compositional dynamics within creative applications in all visual disciplines, under the aegis of a subdiscipline entitled basic design (Behrens 1984; Bevlin 1984; Dondis 1973; Lauer 1979; Maier 1977; Richardson *et al.* 1984).

Dondis (1973) provides a useful exposition of key concepts within which a theory, based primarily on visual perception, the integrality of form to content and formal syntactic strategies, is sited. The autonomy of the visual mode, which has its own nature, characteristics and integrity, is central, although visual literacy may be compared with verbal literacy in relation to levels of skills and

complexity in interpretation and production and in the sense that both can be taught and learned. Perception is viewed as a physiological experience, governed by universality rather than cultural and historical circumstances. Universality of meaning founded on human commonality is thus stressed, and pure elemental visual forces as the basic substructure of visual communication which add aesthetic and sensuous dimensions, are deemed critically important.

Visual intelligence and the anatomy of visual messages are considered to operate on three interconnected and overlapping levels: the representational, symbolic and abstract. Representation comprises replication, imitation, realistic and recognisable presentation. Representational images and messages may be submitted to a degree of simplification through distillation or reduction, but always maintain essential (still recognisable) or typical features. On the level of symbolism, meaning is experientially or arbitrarily attached. Abstraction is a level of the most basic meaning with no resemblance to any representational information. Dondis stresses the abstract level as the most potent: "The abstract conveys the essential meaning, cutting through the conscious to the unconscious, from the experience of the substance in the sensory field, directly to the nervous system, from the event to perception" (1973:81). Visual meaning may thus be described in terms of a dispositional message (pictorial/immediate/manifest) and a compositional message (fundamental/oblique/intuitive).

The production and interpretation of meaning rely primarily on the cumulative and dynamic effect of compositional relationships and are governed by psycho-physiological mechanisms shared universally by all human organisms either through innate faculties and intuition, shared life and environmental experiences (e.g. spatial orientation) or learnt associations. The construction of meaning is firstly a response to a specific need or purpose (i.e. expressive, utilitarian – here again universality of need is emphasised) which is modified by particular functional requirements, subjective and individual factors, situation or context, and cultural and historical constraints. Interpretation, in turn, may also be modified by subjective variations resulting from psychological moods, cultural conditioning and environmental expectations. Visual materials may be

probed directly in relation to their immediate purpose and creative execution, in other words, how they are produced and the specific reasons for their efficacy. They may also be probed indirectly and in a more general sense as to establish why they were produced, allowing subjective, contemporary and historical issues to emerge and in so doing, revealing another level of meaning (i.e personal statement, shared visual philosophy, character of group, culture or period) (Dondis 1973).

Within the broader dimensions of early formalist theory, significant value is placed on the aesthetic sensibility of the creator and his/her abilities to eloquently formulate, structure, articulate and modulate personal ideas and concepts, vision and feelings into a harmonious unity. Communication is viewed as essentially linear with shared and/or unitary meaning of vital importance and emphasis placed on the integrality of meaning to the internal dynamics of compositional relationships. Although cultural variables are acknowledged, these are secondary considerations with reduced significance, and often trivialised. A privileged position is accorded to style as a manifestation of formal consistencies enabling recognition, identity and strong associative values.

Since the inception and institutionalisation of the formal premises of a visual language, the importance of aesthetics and sensuous dimensions, coupled to the manipulation of medium and style, have become discipline and time specific. Cardinal ideas and principles have been integrated into graphic design and elucidated in primary texts (Blanchard 1984; Hurlburt 1977; Swann 1987, 1991) as an introductory basis to the discipline and its practice, and continue to be a basis from which to review and explore graphic design. Four tributaries within the parameters of design as visual language are considered here:

- the evolution of the initial conceptual schema of visual theory in accordance with preconceptions of design form and perceptions of design purpose;
- the impetus to maintain the traditional integrity, associative values and continuity of visual language in contemporary graphic design;
- the response of contemporary visual language to various theoretical imperatives and an increasingly complex design environment, which are essentially defined as the emergence of a postmodern society, changing pro-

- fessional values and demands, and the ascent of digital technology; and
- the exploration of how design is linked to ideas of transition; a theme which particularly considers the reflective and transformative dimensions of graphic design and how design is able to promote, prefigure and mirror social and cultural change.

DESIGN FORM AND VISUAL CONTINUITY

In graphic design, a theory of form is predicated on type and image as fundamental components and their interaction and integration (symbiosis, synthesis, interplay, intertextuality) as the basic substructure of graphic communication. Great consideration is given to defining and revealing the dynamics of this relationship and its predetermination. A theory of design as a language founded in abstraction and which embraced the idea of universality of meaning as expounded by initial visual theorists, fitted well with early modernist thinking which embodied a design ideal modelled on the perceived characteristics of scientific rationality and the definition of design objectives as clarity of communication, systematic organisation and purity of form.

This is most evident in the articulated theoretical basis and defined graphic principles for formal application in an incipient modernist search for a common language of graphic design in Central Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. Clear directions were allocated to research which must lead to universal, international letterforms, standard guidelines for visual presentation and the development of information systems. These principles were to be used for all graphic needs and were intended to transcend local conventions. The underlying ideas of a universal, rational language are perhaps best exemplified by designer Herbert Bayer's Universal typeface (Mills 1991) and social scientist Otto Neurath's isotype pictorial signage systems (Lupton 1989). Research directives were coupled to a common mission with the aim to discover not only rational principles of design which could guide all design applications, but which would also serve as criteria for the objective evaluation of design. Early European Modernism was not simply a matter of aesthetic inclination, but grounded in a belief that the primary goal of design was clear, precise message transmission which was best achieved by means of a reductive approach

and simplicity. Function was viewed both as a matter of utilitarianism, but also as the rational utilisation of formal elements available to the designer.

In practical applications, these essential values were embodied in a stable graphic language, fixed associative dimensions, and clearly defined formal conventions of structure and legibility. Efficient and functional communication ('good design') was facilitated by asymmetry in layout and composition; strict use of sans serif type, preferably in a monochrome version differing only in weight and sizes; rules and graphic devices to give emphasis and lead the viewer's eye in an effective manner; photographs and photomontage for accuracy and the fusion of image and text; use of an underlying grid as a means of constructing a page; and the banishment of all complexity and embellishments. Design was to reflect symbolic associations with the unadorned aesthetic of the machine, technical progress, systematic engineering values and a connection to the formalist aesthetic of the abstract painters (Jobling & Crowley 1996).

The most apparent lineage to these ideas is the design approach (philosophy, method, visual manifestations) adopted by the influential Swiss School which "has become a synonym for methodical, responsible design" (Jobling & Crowley 1996:161). Initiated in the immediate post-World War II years in Switzerland, its epistemological grounding and practical examples of application were promoted through journals and monographs, ensuring that principles were taken up internationally in academic and professional arenas. It came to be seen by many designers and theorists as an entrenched canon and an orthodox design method which provided normative criteria for production and evaluation.² Essential characteristics identified in the 1950s, and which have had enduring value in design, were a systematic, research-oriented methodology and spare economic designs which sought to deliver optimum information to the viewer. Strict conventions for layout were prescribed. For instance, internationally acclaimed designer, writer and design tutor, Emil Ruder defined these in 1959 as: legibility not visual impact; white space as an active design element; grid structures for consistency; typeforms for universality, clarity and impersonality; photographs to provide variety and contrast within an orderly and geometric layout; functional hierarchy of typography (Jobling & Crowley 1996:162). A critical attitude in both theory and application

that aimed to ameliorate the worst affects of consumerism was advocated during the 1960s and 1970s. A concerted drive to align the social role of design to the public sphere (i.e. public direction, factual information, visual identity of civic organisations) was nurtured. This legacy has ensured a distinct and easily recognisable graphic language, widely visible in contemporary built environments throughout the world.

The adoption and infiltration of the theoretical aspects and formalist principles of modernism and their manifestation as 'the international style' are not only apparent in the approach of the Swiss School, but may also be traced in the fundamental ideas and objectives, design methods and directives for visual articulation in a number of contemporary professional design domains and media (e.g. mainstream publishing, corporate modernism, information design, instructional graphics), as well as in the stylistic applications of individual designers. These applications, which place great value on efficiency, explanation and easy access to information, an aesthetic and humanist sensibility coupled to the guiding principles of precision, objectivity, organisation, functionality and clarity of communication, continue to direct design towards established formal conventions and strategies for logical integration and clear structuring of information. The underlying objective is to guide the viewer systematically and sequentially through the communication or information using a hierarchy of formal cues based on the assumption of one desirable response and/or interpretation. Perceptual, cognitive, and developmental factors are accepted as critical variables that could contribute to prescriptive guidelines and normative standards. Design is projected as a problem-solving activity bound by technical and pragmatic parameters and chiefly utilising aesthetic and rational resources. The stability of graphic language is reinforced.

The changing economic and cultural climate of the last three to four decades has activated alternative streams of thinking in design which question whether natural models could primarily provide normative standards for human actions, as well as the possibility of precise message transmission and the ideal that design could be objective and unequivocal. The singularity of meaning and a prescriptive set of values have been widely challenged, particularly in the light of impulses generated by consumer capitalism, poststructuralist

thinking and technological development. The active construction of individual meaning by audiences, as well as cultural, social and contextual factors have received increasing emphasis from media, cultural, linguistic and design theorists.

In graphic design, the response to increasingly diverse and complex theoretical and practising environments has been twofold. Firstly, designers, critics and commentators have sought to reject or de-emphasise formalism and to look for alternative theoretical models and conceptual strategies within which graphic design production and reflection may be framed. For instance, more encompassing views of perception and cognition, semiotic and linguistic models, the values of other artistic modes (e.g. conceptual and performance art, film), and poststructuralist deconstruction are some of the directions that have provided conceptual principles, guidelines and methodologies for graphic design. The second response has been to recognise and accommodate additional variables, factors and perspectives within formal theory. Although formal language as a basis for graphic design remains intact, increasing recognition of aspects like subjective interpretation, cultural relativity, intertextuality and social dimensions have prepared the way for broader and more open models of design practice. Aesthetic, ergonomic, semiotic and rhetorical qualities of form are accommodated with varying degrees of emphasis in formulating theoretical perspectives (Lupton 1996; Margolin 1989; Margolin & Buchanan 1994; Mitchell 1996; Poynor 1998; Thackara 1988).

Meggs (1992) presents what may be viewed as an expanded but logical extension of the basic tenets and fundamentals which encompass perceptual organisation, intuitive response and form as content.³ He maintains that the universal dimensions of formal theory should not be over-emphasised and postulates that graphic forms (type, images, graphic support elements) have a dual nature, as optical phenomena with visual properties and as communicative signals (symbol, sign) which function with other signals to form a message. Graphic design is thus a hybrid discipline that must not only recognise visual theory, but also information theory, communications theory (modes of graphic signals, semiotic properties of signs and their denotative and connotative meanings) and linguistic models (rhetorical figures of speech).

According to Meggs, the conceptual nature of graphic design is threefold. The designer unifies and merges graphic forms (type, image) using visual strategies and techniques (e.g. connotative interrelationships, juxtaposition, fusion, spatial illusions, synergy) to direct the viewer towards a specific meaning and enhance the message. Secondly, the designer organises forms in graphic space to construct a visual communications gestalt or configuration based on perceptual principles (e.g. form relationships, equilibrium, modular systems and mathematical measurement, fields of tension, repetition and rhythm, visual continuity, planes in space, scale and visual hierarchy, implied motion) and a viewer's intuitive need to impose order. Composition is integral to communication and should be viewed as an organic part of an inseparable whole. It has both organisational and associative values and is thus able to generate perceptual, affective and connotative responses.

Most importantly, the designer imbues visual communication with 'graphic resonance' through the selection, manipulation and interconnection of the associative and connotative qualities of type, image and style; the expressive power of visual vocabulary; and the interrelationships of forms in space (Meggs 1992:117). Graphic resonance clarifies, supports, reinforces and amplifies a message; creates visual impact, vibrancy and tactile qualities for a message; and heightens the emotional intensity of content through expressionism (e.g. sombre realism, absurdity, lyricism, aggression, spirituality). It enables multiple levels of meaning and understanding which start with the explicit, but move to suggested deeper levels of meaning through the use of, for instance, visual metaphors, analogies, allusions and ambience. Expressive and symbolic qualities in graphic designs allow the viewer to identify additional communication themes, (e.g. affective tone and range, individual and social attitudes) and provide sensory and aesthetic experiences. A viewer's ability to access increasingly complex levels of meaning and experiences in a design is determined by subjective levels of visual literacy (skill in comprehending the use of visual forms, cultural exposure).

This model acknowledges and promotes a continuity in design language that banks on the revision and familiarity of historical forms and structures to modulate the meaning of the work. The symbolic integrity of graphic form is main-

tained, while allowance is made for a range of creative impulses and visual formulations from the expressive to rational systems-based solutions. Lupton (1996:54) suggests that an “important track of innovation in contemporary design openly engages an existing culture of signs, symbols and styles. Such work builds upon a taut yet permeable web of visual literacy, a common language in which elements move in and out of currency ... The best work transforms the meaning of the old and the ordinary while drawing energy from its tremendous power to communicate.”

Important aspects in this track are the skill of the designer and creator in enabling the expressive and aesthetic dimensions of graphic design and style:⁴ “Mass communication is given an aesthetic dimension that transcends the dry conveyance of information, intensifies the message, and enriches the experience of the audience” (Meggs 1992:117). Style is significant, not only as an organising mechanism, but for associative values conveying established temporal, cultural and technological conditions. “A visual style is not an attractive surface decoration: it is often an expression of a philosophy, an ideology, and the spirit of its times” (Meggs 1997a:3). He is critical of the “mania for historical revivals during the last decade [which] has often detached the visual appearance of an earlier style from its symbolic meaning and social context, rendering it neuter [sic]. This process can debase the original, robbing it of its historical potency” (Meggs 1997a:3).

The significance attached to the individual designer or design organisation and its impact on design applications in general and graphic language specifically, should be appreciated within the traditional view of art theory and criticism and the art historical context which sought to elevate the individual artist, personal style, and the idea that the work expresses something essential about the artist. Definitive approaches and/or styles (e.g. modernists Paul Rand, Saul Bass, and postmodernists Neville Brody, Wolfgang Weingart), and individual design philosophies continue to be sources of influence in current design practice. More importantly, the circulation of images and ideas through global networks of design publications, conferences, competitions and lately the electronic media which all showcase design, have reinforced the continuance of this convention. Visual manifestations carry import by virtue of the authority

and currency conferred on them in their selection for awards or publication. The inclusion or exclusion of certain work and individual working methods for exposure and review is usually based on perceived (albeit shifting) innovation, distinction or consensus of sustained excellence.

In the view of some design commentators (Burdick 1994; Dilnot 1989; Kalman *et al.* 1994), both the 'selective lens' and methods of presentation have a negative impact on graphic design production and thinking. Rather than illuminating the ideas informing design, the convention presents design as a parade of artifacts with minimum explanatory commentary, decontextualised and focused on aesthetic qualities. The result has been design production "in which style is a detachable attribute, a veneer rather than an expression of content. This is nowhere clearer than in the so-called historicist and eclectic work which has strip-mined the history of design for ready-made style" (Kalman *et al.* 1994:28). The tendency to imitate or copy (plagiarise?) historical and current examples of design has also garnered criticism from designers and jeopardised the notion of originality. Acclaimed American designer, Milton Glaser maintains that contemporary design has ceased to be a matter of creativity, and has become a matter of assembly (Heller & Finamore 1997). The notion that South African designers slavishly copy and imitate international design solutions, has been a critical impetus for the consideration and visualisation of a South African design identity relevant to its African context (De Jong 1992; Oosthuizen 1993; Sauthoff 1995).

The counter-argument is that imitation and historicism in graphic design may be seen as characteristics of all modes of contemporary cultural production, all of which are subject to the influences of a postmodern society, an idea that has come to dominate discussion in many spheres since the 1970s. It postulates a fundamental shift in "sensibility, practices and discourse formations" governed by a distinct set of assumptions, experiences and propositions which differ from those of a preceding period (Jobling & Crowley 1996:271). This notion suggests an alternate track in design and points visual language in new directions. Essential influences in this movement may be grouped into three inter-linked clusters: design's connection to prevailing cultural concepts and discourses, professional imperatives and the prominence of digital technology.

RESHAPING VISUAL LANGUAGE

Postmodernism as a “periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order” (Jameson 1984:113), has been broadly described in terms of a breakdown of existing beliefs during the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of a global culture and a conflict about the nature of reality, social truth and epistemology. It has been characterised among others, as: incredulity towards metanarratives and an acceptance of smaller narratives which seek no universalising stabilisation or legitimisation; the effacement of boundaries and hierarchies in culture and traditionally demarcated disciplines; the explosion of information and communications technology; a mass media economy of images; the social construction of reality which acknowledges the importance of language in this construction; the availability of alternatives and choice leading to multiple lifestyles and worldviews; and an age of ‘simulation’ as postulated by the French scholar and theorist, Jean Baudrillard, where reality is experienced as a series of images which are ultimately more important than that which they purport to represent (Anderson 1996; Jameson 1984; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Wheale 1996).

Jameson frames the postmodern condition in terms of an aesthetic dilemma by describing its position as one in which the theoretical and psychological basis of individualism is no longer tenable. By extension, “... the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over ... [and nobody has] ... a unique private world and style to express any longer” (1984:115). Furthermore, it is no longer possible to invent new styles, because “they’ve already been invented, only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already.” Hence, one of the most significant features of contemporary cultural practices is pastiche, “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask” (Jameson 1984:114). Another significant feature, according to Jameson, is temporal discontinuity. Additional accepted signposts of postmodern cultural expression generally delineated by theorists are a rejection of the precepts of modernism; the introduction of themes, images and materials from mass, popular, and consumer culture into prestige

forms of high culture; recognition of minority cultures and their modes of expression; the revival of pre-modernist mannerisms such as eclecticism, the collaging of diverse styles within one piece, and ornamentation; pluralism and mixing of styles into improvisations and variations; playfulness with history and the conventions of style and taste (Anderson 1996; Jameson 1984; Wheale 1996).

The acceptance of the idea that an epistemological shift has occurred within graphic design is problematic for a number of reasons. Design can be acknowledged as instrumental in accelerating the advent of the postmodern condition in that it is deeply implicated in the economic and media practices that constitute its definitive nature. Many of the central concepts identified as characteristic of postmodernism, for example, the effacement of boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture, are precisely those that have fuelled graphic design since industrialisation. The fluid movement between vernacular and mainstream design⁵ expressions has long characterised graphic design, as has the hybrid mix of content and imagery, for instance, in the magazine genre. Many printers, historically and currently, provide informal design services characterised by trade, rather than conventionally accepted design idioms (Jobling & Crowley 1996; Lupton 1996; Lupton & Miller 1996). Furthermore, many of the themes emphasised by postmodernism can be replayed in various guises throughout the history of graphic design. As Jobling and Crowley point out, the hegemony of the image and its heightened significance through mediated formats, can be found in contemporary 1850s opinion that "the captioned image, found on the pages of illustrated magazines ... usurped the autonomous word as the significant conveyor of meaning" (1996:273). Many modernist graphic techniques, for instance, the fractured style of 1920s Dadaists, are echoed in the postmodern fascination with typographic disjunctures and ruptures.

Notwithstanding these points, Jobling and Crowley propose (as do Berman 1988; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984; Kinross 1992; Thackara 1988) that postmodern culture does not necessarily mark an absolute break from modernism. A change in sensibility can occur when latent and dominated ideas in one period become explicit and dominant in another. Hence, certain points of the post-

modern intellectual discourse can be identified as significant for graphic design theory, while graphic design practice and graphic design outcomes will exhibit features which may be considered characteristically postmodern.

An example of design that may be categorised as “the epitome of postmodern pastiche and kaleidoscope of style” (Jobling & Crowley 1996:278) is the British magazine *The Face* which first appeared in 1980 and remains influential in design (and successful in the 1990s market). Editorial design of the magazine incorporates referencing of historical graphic styles and matches the hybrid mix of content with pluralistic graphic treatments. Standard conventions for the presentation of subject matter are replaced by diverse and often subversive visual approaches and techniques. For instance, social issues are conveyed in a range of ways from black-white documentary style or the pastiche of fashion spreads, to images which nostalgically allude to Hollywood films or Soviet propaganda. This constitutes a significant move away from the earnest approach traditionally adopted to social issues in editorial media. Here subject matter is offered in a highly visual form for the pleasure of ‘spectators’ who might or might not be encouraged to contemplate the implications of what is shown. The collapse of hierarchies of representation allows the wilful combination and recombination of styles, genres and conventions leading to a high level of graphic intertextuality and to the creation of a ‘perpetual present’ into which past and future dissolve – “The only history that exists is the history of the signifier and that is no history at all” (Jobling & Crowley 1996:276-279).⁶

If the salient characteristics of contemporary design language are considered to be ‘the aesthetics of mixing’ or ‘visual blending’, referential appropriations, parody, quotation and pastiche, and greater subjectivity and individuality in the interpretations of accepted conventions, then these are most apparent in the symbols and styles that have become associated with certain groups or sub-cultures in consumer societies, particularly those which would like to identify themselves as anti-establishment in style and/or attitude. The phenomena of cults or sects within a society that visually signal their affiliation is a theme that has commanded the attention of contemporary design theorists and historians, as well as cultural theorists. Specific attention is given to descriptions and explanations of how accepted associations and conventions of style and repre-

sentation have made way for the relativity of meaning determined by group dynamics and internal codes, and how in turn, the meaning of such styles and symbols have been reappropriated and legitimised by mainstream design and reappear within conventional and established commercial arenas (Dormer 1990; Hebdige 1985; Heller 1997; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Polhemus 1994; Sparke 1987).

The interrelationship between graphic design, counter-cultures and activist groups that need to express their dissatisfaction with current or dominant ideologies, on the one hand, and graphic design and youth cultures that need to both signal group affiliation and assert their creative autonomy as consumers, on the other, has fuelled the process of continuous reinvention. For instance, current youth cultures like rave, hip-hop and skateboarding freely mix styles and symbols from the commercial aesthetics of mass media and brand images, corporate communications and the urban underground in the display of identity and visual expression (Kabal 1997; Lupton 1996). In typical postmodern mode, graphic forms assume ambiguous and fluid associations which enable them to be repetitively revalorised by their reassembly and insertion into new contexts. "Not only is history up for grabs, but also each and every new look as it originates, surfaces, and is instantly sucked up, at which point it is deemed 'history'. Its very existence guarantees its death" (Burdick 1994:140).

The above examples position design firmly within the broader confluence of ideas, variables and trends informing the postmodern cultural experience and discourse. Values of self-expression, formal experimentation, relativity of meaning, ambiguity and recycling of graphic forms, and open-ended design are viewed as reflections of postmodern cultural and theoretical imperatives. The discourse with postmodern theory in graphic design finds its most radical connection in poststructuralist deconstruction which is dealt with in later pages of this study. While acknowledging its cultural nature, graphic design must also be viewed as a primarily professional activity bound by certain parameters and values. These are increasingly being questioned from within the profession itself, leading to an infusion of design language with other impulses.

Poynor (1998) suggests that the entrenched boundaries of design practice are being replotted and that rigid, categorical distinctions and concepts of professional identity are starting to fall away. Some designs and designers seem to be taking on the characteristics of art and artists in terms of both expression and attitude.⁷ These he indicates as emphases on: subjectivity, personal authorship and personal agendas which include pure visual research and formal experimentation; radical and transgressive digital styles; and unresolved meaning. The comment that contemporary design often “does not solve a communication problem so much as present the viewer with a communication problem to solve” (Poynor 1998:15), encapsulates some of these ideas, as does the view of influential American designer, April Greiman that design must primarily “seduce, shape ... and evoke emotional response”, that “form itself is the content” and that “if you [the viewer] give it a sense, it makes sense” (Poynor 1998:16, 43, 42). A similar viewpoint is expressed by acclaimed British designer, Neville Brody’s comment that: “I enjoy creating modes of communication, but I don’t enjoy communicating” (Poynor 1997a:248).

The alliance of professional designers with the formal and expressive dimensions explored by artists, initially was, and continues to be fuelled by a shared preoccupation with mass media (photography, film, video, television, advertising and print) and an interest in the manner in which the convergence of media and technology, subject matter and techniques of representation gained currency in the arts during the 1980s. In a parallel way, referential appropriations of imagery and style and media conventions, their reinvention, visual layering, and an enigmatic amalgam of disparate visual elements have also become the hallmarks of open-ended forms of design, which ask viewers actively to extract or construct a meaning (Poynor 1998).

Within the more conventional and pragmatic confines of its operational arena, design is deeply implicated in the production, organisation and presentation of information, the creation of perceptions and the representation of identities accepted as integral to the pursuit of economic objectives. The design of corporate identities and corporate identity consultants have been largely instrumental in establishing a credible professional profile for graphic design. Although the use of symbols and logos to represent individuals, groups and

commercial enterprises is an ancient practice, design was increasingly applied in a systematic fashion to unite large conglomerates and to promote a coherent and vigorous public image for organisations and to position them in the expanding and increasingly prosperous economic development of the postwar period in America and Europe. By the mid-1960s, corporate design had matured as an industry and the characteristics, dynamics and problems of corporate identity and its management were cogently enunciated in explanatory texts, mostly by consultants themselves (for instance, Henrion & Parker 1967 and Olins 1978). Its visual articulation supported a modernist aesthetic which gradually evolved into the visual language of large institutions and corporations. Simple identification marks, a unified style of application, consistency and objectivity became the accepted signifiers of corporate values, best exemplified by definitive models like modernist designer Paul Rand's monolithic identity for IBM with its geometric icon, clean typography and coherent visual codes and systems.

In the 1980s, both the design approach and "the aura of visual authority" (Lupton 1996:105) around which corporate identity was promoted, defined and defended by design consultants, were questioned. Lupton (1996) suggests that fluidity and change were introduced to the industry from a number of sources. These include conscious decisions and strategies largely internal to design itself, tied to the plurality and diversity of markets and audiences to which design must cater, the necessity for global outreach and multicultural communities. Within design, an active and sceptical experimentation with formal modernism was fuelled by influential designers like Wolfgang Weingart⁶ who rejected objective standards and, in his own work, disintegrated rational modernist structures and typographic conventions, substituting them with complex arrangements to engage intellect and emotions. References to other impulses (i.e. regional, vernacular, subcultures), as well as tactile and decorative qualities appear in mainstream corporate design as part of the reactive phase of modernism (Heller & Finamore 1997; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Lupton 1996; Poynor 1998).

In corporate identity design specifically, this attitude is reflected in more open grammars, legible icons (realistic, narrative, figurative) and flexible systems in

the place of standard and rigid conventions of vocabulary and style. Lupton (1996:85) illustrates how even traditionally conservative institutions like banks integrate established identity strategies (i.e. minimal mark, visual consistency) with more playful and varied applications and extensions that incorporate subtle and complex forms, yet maintain visual continuity. The orthodox categorisation of corporate identity types into monolithic, branded and endorsed (Olins 1978; 1989) has also been challenged and replaced by the premise that an identity need “not have a uniform brand presence” but could be build by providing a variety of different experiences. The identity is thus capable of changing expression through the flexible mixing of various visual elements giving rise to infinitely variable manifestations (Hancock 1992b:8).

The corporate identity programme for the South African company *Cross Colours* embraces the idea of a mutating identity, as well as a more complex, eclectic approach to corporate identity in which personal directions are allowed (Sauthoff 1996). Improvisations on the corporate name and the cross-functionality of typography and images in the design of this identity, semantically suggest a multiple interplay between elements, while a wide selection of diverse images demand the forging of lateral connections. Additive visual layers, achieved through the exploitation of tactics like dramatic colour variation and unconventional die-cutting, encourage multidimensional interaction and interpretation. The visual personification of company directors underline humorous, figurative and illustrative impulses which have also eclipsed many of the conventional and traditional ideals previously entrenched in devising multinational and/or international identities.

In an interesting exercise, Lupton (1996:86-88) demonstrates how easy it is for multinational and international symbols and logos to degenerate into “weary archetypes” thus weakening unique recognition and communicative values. For instance, ‘the globe’ is used as a design motif and concept to variously signal international stature and reach, mobility and the ascendance of digital communications by multinational conglomerates. The ‘planet earth rendered in green and blue’ signals ecological ideas (and ideals) and dominates the iconography of environmentalism, while fashion and sportswear companies (i.e. Reebok) often put ‘the world’ at the centre of a highly individualised universe.

As a consequence, designers have attempted to reinvest multinational corporate identities with specificity by means of a range of essentially humanistic techniques (i.e. painterly execution, spatial dimensions, realistic depictions, pictorial images) and more informal approaches in an effort to ensure differentiation in a globally competitive environment. They have also had to look to “ever more exotic locales and to other cultures to find signifying forms that are not already in commercial use” (Coombe 1997:146).

While competitive visibility is an important design parameter, issues of cultural legibility have framed the necessity for global business to develop cross-cultural identities which simultaneously maintain and transcend cultural traditions to “weave and transmute the strands of two contrasting traditions into a statement that is neither and both” (Steiner & Haas 1995:vii). In this process, culturally specific elements of iconography, typography, symbolism and style are melded, synthesised and transformed by means of quotation, mimicry and assimilation or appropriation allowing the designer to articulate ideas and transmit a visual message to an international audience without losing the meaning or attitude of the original elements and concepts utilised.⁹ This cross-pollination of ideas (form, content and values) reflected in design has been accelerated by the international commissioning of design consultants and by the movement of designers between countries resulting in a multinational employee base in design companies (Steiner & Haas 1995).

The idea of ‘creative synthesis’ or the visual reconciliation of cultures is particularly prevalent and a typical feature of design in countries, regions or enterprises that are attempting to come to terms with self-unification (e.g. India, South Africa, corporate mergers and divestitures), both as a means to political solidarity and as economic strategies. In South Africa, attempts to integrate indigenous impulses with a contemporary aesthetic are visible in national symbols (e.g. Olympic logo/s), redesigned corporate identities for state and private enterprises (e.g. Department of Arts, Science, Culture and Technology and Anglogold) and in the search for a national design identity.

The notion of a national design identity as economic strategy and as the search for an appropriate stylistic vocabulary, is not novel and is well-documented in

the history of design (Doordan 1995; Dormer 1993; Kaplan 1995; Sparke 1983; Sparke 1987; Stein 1998). It was given additional impetus in South Africa by the economic changes offered by the post-apartheid era and perceptions of the need for the strategic positioning of South African design in the global arena. The initial acknowledgement in graphic design of the natural environment, wildlife, ethnic motifs and naive techniques and marks considered to be characteristic of Africa, have gradually made way for a more aggressive visual experimentation which blends and mixes indigenous and regional inspirations, vernacular iconographies and verbal messages (e.g. street and township) with Western formats (Coyne 1995; Kaplan 1998; Richardson 1997; Sauthoff 1998; Van Eeden 1995). The aesthetics of 'cultural mixing' are perhaps best exemplified by the local design magazine *i-juse*, an open and experimental platform which allows designers an opportunity to contribute to 'an African stew'¹⁰ by mixing and appropriating existing visual elements and expressions from different sources within the South African cultural matrix (Richardson 1997; Sauthoff 1998).

The refinement of the experimental approaches adopted in *i-jusi* and the crafting of a South African graphic language to meet specific communication and business objectives, mark the attitude and design strategies of a growing number of South African designers. The portfolios of design groups TinTemple and Orange Juice Design (Sauthoff 1995, 1998) serve as good examples of a Euro-African design amalgam. The portfolios show that even annual reports, usually regarded as one of the most conventional of corporate documents, demonstrate South African graphic design's direct engagement with, and visual reconciliation of, history, localities, indigenous cultures and urban vernacular expressions. For instance, the 1993 Moolla annual report incorporates (juxtaposes and melds) contemporary and historical images, ethnic patterning, ghosted background images of African artifacts and an overvarnish which subtly presents African icons. A natural African environment is conveyed by muted colours, soft photographic treatment and paper textures (Sauthoff 1995:9). The 1997 Khula Enterprise annual report contextualises a standard approach to typography and layout by means of vernacular images and naive street communication, while the cover of the 1998 Khula report seamlessly integrates bold colours, pattern, kudu horns, Africana etching and contempo-

rary images, all of which are formally and symbolically deployed as motifs throughout the report (Sauthoff 1998:10).

Two conspicuous attributes may be observed in the above design portfolios. The first is the movement from the blatant appropriation of vernacular images characteristic of earlier work, to the close observation, blending and underplayed references to indigenous colour combinations and Africa's heritage of shape and pattern; the use of local visual metaphors; and oblique rather than direct allusions.¹¹ All suggest the emergence and evolution of sophisticated and complex visual nuances which demand the forging of lateral connections and a high level of visual literacy from audiences. The second noteworthy attribute is the advanced level with which digital technology is applied and its dramatic impact on the formal language of graphic design.¹²

Digital technology has provided designers with increasing independent control of creative execution and production processes. The computer as a design tool allows and enables a fluidity of physical outline, an ease and speed of manipulation and technical control in the emulation or free interpretation of visual elements. Its role in facilitating a seamless mixing, blending and layering of visual imagery and disparate elements is a critical contributor to contemporary design practices. The designer's augmented power to experiment, explore and improvise has had a marked influence on typography and type design¹³ which were, of necessity, closely tied to the conservative conventions of industrial and reproduction processes. The expressive and autographic dimensions of typography have been extended, images and text are increasingly cross-functional and often fused in startling ways. Simultaneous horizontal, vertical and diagonal movements which override an orderly hierarchy, overlapping planes, fields of spatial tension, textured and fragmented backgrounds and a dynamic interplay between foreground and background have become common features of contemporary layout. These have added denotative and connotative complexity and increased ambiguity to design, and have allowed the proliferation of 'visual effects'. Designer Richard Feuerer states that the goal of his work is "... neither a question of bringing across a significant message, nor of being 'understood'. ... My task is to generate an effect" (Byrne & Witte 1994:120).

Print media materials, in particular, reveal how designers exploit the intrinsic characteristics of digital technology and often seek to transgress its limits, echoing similar responses to technologies and media like photography, letterpress, colour lithography and photomechanical reproduction earlier this century. The significance of technology in shaping visual language and its impact on the exploratory dimensions of individual designers' works, remain important areas of consideration in the analysis and history of graphic design (Jobling & Crowley 1996; Rothschild *et al.* 1998; Walker & Chaplin 1997). Printed materials currently offer a highly evolved informative and richly expressive graphic language, that, according to some theorists, has not yet been matched by online and interactive digital media (Baker 1993; Helfand 1997a, 1997b; Mok 1996).

Helfand (1997a) characterises the initial language of screen-based media (particularly online media) as one of reductive pictorial syntax, primitive typography, a stilted navigational iconography of miniature hieroglyphs, banal orientation metaphors, and a graphic vocabulary of recycled clipart comprising flat, pixillised cartoon-like images. She suggests that the development of a digital language has been governed by the technical limitations of the medium (i.e. bandwidth, downloading and delivery options, coding possibilities) and an international lexicon dictated by the metaphors, icons and typographic conventions of software programmes, as well as the user conventions and codes generated by e-mail, electronic bulletin boards and chatrooms. Furthermore, the theoretical and functional role of graphic design in the digital context is not yet clear. Designers have thus tended to adopt the language of print and to mimic the form and structure of paper-based design and traditional media.

Mok (1996) contends that designers have been pre-occupied with the density of solution required by the new media. Here he includes the orchestration and synthesis demanded by the convergence and overlapping of disciplines and media, product functions and types of content; complex structuring (i.e. zero-directional, sequential and multidirectional); and mutability, malleability, interruption and repurposing of information by users. He agrees that precedents from print are not sufficient and that new conceptual models are needed to define the vocabulary, syntax and grammar of technological language. A

number of new conceptual models are emerging. Most visible are the dramatic and dynamic model of film narrative with its filmic codes and methods for visualising stories in multiple layers with multiple entry points; the idea of a richly textured and comprehensive informational and experiential landscape, a network rather than a highway; the strategic business environment of the future (Baker 1993; Hefland 1997a; Mok 1996).

Mok (1996) postulates that the optimum role for graphic design in the electronic business environment over the next decade will be actualised in three main areas. These are visual identity (corporate, brand and product); information design (contextualising and structuring of information, visualisation and concretisation of abstract concepts); and interactivity and interface design which must focus on usability and the clear mediation between content and users typified by applications like online banking. The full potential of the digital medium as a richly textured visual experience and the exploitation of interactivity as individual discovery, rather than as prescribed direction and response, are starting to be appreciated by designers. The interactive CD *Chakalaka* designed for the Technikon Witwatersrand by design consultants TinTemple attests to the ways these ideas are being embraced by South African design (Sauthoff 1998).

Predictions are that ongoing development in the synthesis of traditional media and their integration into generalised image technology with its expanding applications (e.g. virtual reality, process data visualisation, artificial intelligence) will continue to present design with new tools, new media and of course a concomitant reconsideration of graphic form and language. For instance, a current consideration of structure is concerned not only with compositional values, but with implicit structure, both topological and geometric structure built up in the computer's memory as a result of drawing operations. Computing power has allowed an in-depth scrutiny of fractal forms and dimensionality. The development of 'intelligent' software programmes and an examination of ways in which the computer may enhance and mimic the designer's role, identify and delineate style within a range of geometric variables and distortions (Baker 1993; Chan 1990; Wolf 1991a, 1991b).

The semantics of digital form bring into sharp focus not only how design is being transformed (tools, media, discipline, fundamental definitions of creative originality), but also the manner in which design simultaneously contributes to transformation and is indicative of significant changes in society. Baker (1993) suggests that design's intersection with digital technology demonstrates anew its ability to both 'read' and 'write into' material culture. The consideration of formal dimensions (type, structure, iconography, style) as a means of reflecting upon design within the broader parameters of its economic, social and cultural milieu enable issues related to its role in transformation to emerge as broad themes in critical explorations and the design discourse. Analysts agree that the graphic language of modernism indicates a strong force in the promotion and prefiguration of social change. They also agree that postmodern graphic language confirms epistemological and cultural shifts, but they ponder the social significance of the ambiguity it embodies.

TRANSFORMATION AND REFLECTION

The stated objective of avant-garde and early modernist designers to develop a graphic language that embodied and promoted the ethos of modernity has animated contemporary design discussions both in terms of its historical articulation and as a counter to postmodern design thinking (Bierut *et al.* 1994; Kaplan 1995; Lupton & Cohen 1996; Rothschild *et al.* 1998). This, and the focus on the distinctive visual languages employed by powerful political movements in the first half of this century (i.e. Fascism, National Socialism, Revolutionary Communism)¹⁴ to engender, promote and sustain political values and goals, have tended to obscure less dramatic manifestations that illustrate how visual language has supported the introduction of far-reaching social changes. Loar (1995) suggests that new creative idioms and modes of visual expression in publicity and promotional materials during the interwar years in Europe and the United States were instrumental in countering popular resistance to ideas of modernity.

A comprehensive review by Meikle (1995) of publicity material disseminated in Europe and the United States during this period, elucidates how visual vocabulary and style were harnessed to domesticate the disruptive experience

of modernity and to convince ordinary people of continuing stability in their own lives. Meikle contends that imagery, iconography and expressive techniques in particular, demonstrate the adoption and visual articulation of three strategies. The first situated modernity in a historical continuum represented by the evolutionary linking of images and symbols of the past, present and implicit future. For instance, past and present modes of transport were presented in a single frame of reference; panoramic vistas which mingled images of past, present and implicit future in a surrealist medley promoted progress as natural and celebratory. The second strategy limited modernity to the discrete zone of the city and presented the possibility of escape to pristine realms untouched by disjunctive modern experiences. For instance, travel posters conveyed images of primitive and exotic geographic locations of serene harmony unspoilt by the din of modern life. The third strategy abstracted icons of the modern world from their usual environments and incorporated them into personal and familiar surroundings and situations, thereby neutralising their threatening potential.

Adopting a broader historical perspective, Butler (1994) discusses how the evolving layout structure of the page and its functional purposes reflect institutional thinking and profound changes in Western culture from the Industrial Revolution to contemporary time. This chronological evolution spans the introduction of multiple vertical columns and the horizontal location of information, the three dimensional grid, the open grid, the dismantled grid and the subminiaturised grid (pixel) of digital technology. In Butler's view, these approaches to layout, respectively, indicate the mercantilism accompanying the Industrial Revolution, revolutionary scientific thinking, democratic values and equality of access to information, new preferences in comprehension habits, and finally, the collapse of a system of authority and perhaps an entirely new way of conceptualisation in contemporary society.

Williamson (1989) echoes the observation that the contemporary (particularly the postmodern) grid indicates dramatic change and contends that it has come to signify a disorientation in the graphic embodiment of values and the displacement of rationality in Western society. As a symbolic device in medieval times, the grid represented the interrelationship between spiritual forces and

earthly life. Renaissance thinkers rejected this symbolism and began to use the grid as a means of visualising abstract relationships between points and lines, thus representing the process of rational thinking itself, as did modernist designers for whom the grid became a means of ordering and structuring. According to Williamson, the changing meaning of the grid from the medieval period to the present clearly illustrates a transition from a world that was formerly rich in shared symbolism to one that has few shared values and no common symbolic system. The symbolic meaning of the grid has been reduced to a marginal argument, confined essentially to designers who have turned it into an issue of stylism, a matter of seductive surfaces.

While Jobling and Crowley (1996) agree that postmodern style in design signals a change in values, they suggest a divide in interpretations of the nature of society that the graphic language of postmodern pastiche and the continual contextual revalorisation of graphic forms is presumed to represent. For some commentators and designers it mirrors a new attitude that encourages a 'knowing' and exploring spectatorship, a celebration of diversity and a progressive recognition of pluralism. In essence, it is an acceptance of different and individual racial, social and gender identities and non-conformities, and the presence of proactive viewers who are willing and able to extract and construct their own meanings for their own purposes. Alternatively, it is perceived to represent a wholehearted capitulation to the forces of consumerism that destroy differences by converting them into commodities (Jobling & Crowley 1996:278). This propensity, the reliance on intertextuality and the recycling of ideas, images and symbolism have led to definitions of "a kind of promiscuous and apolitical culture", one in which there is no position "from which to speak that is in advance, or even outside the general position" (Jobling & Crowley 1996:279).

In graphic design, the indiscriminate appropriation of cultural imagery may be seen to exemplify the position of 'the outsider' whose cultural forms and visual traditions become commodified and invested with alien meanings. This process is aided by Eurocentric legal systems and copyright laws with their insistence on criteria of individual expression and permanent fixed form that tend to devalue creative expressions produced collectively, in symbolic contexts,

inter-generationally, or in unfamiliar media. This leaves many products and elements of cultural artistry (e.g. imagery, pattern, colour) unprotected and available for incorporation into the work of professional designers (Coombe 1997). Cultural groups, particularly underdeveloped communities and those with little economic or political leverage, generally have no legal authority or control over the trivialisation of iconic forms or the re-aestheticisation of historically charged symbols for mainstream consumption. Here, postmodern design stands accused of indulging in a blatant exploitation and invasive violation of cultural values and ownership (Coombe 1997; Heller 1997; Ruffins 1997). The ethics and politics of cultural appropriation have received perfunctory mention in South Africa. For instance, art historian Buntman (1994) notes the insensitive (or perhaps ignorant) manner in which San artifacts were used in corporate advertisements for Spoornet and South African Airways.

Sadar (1993) adopts a radical stance that equates postmodern tendencies not only with exploitation, but with the continuation of colonial suppression. He refutes the claimed progressiveness of postmodernism, attacks its basic premises and argues convincingly that it is not pluralistic, neither is it global, nor does it recognise cultural diversity. Choices about lifestyles, belief systems and 'realities' are only available to a privileged group in Western society, while "the non-Western world – four-fifths of the planet's population – does not even have the choice not to be victims of postmodernism" (Sadar 1993:879). The social and artificial construction of reality, with its relativistic morality, is untenable in terms of the living conditions and circumstances widely prevalent throughout the world (e.g. poverty, displacement) and in terms of the fact that the traditional belief systems are still intact in many societies. The flow of cultural ideas and products is not reciprocal, but proceeds from the West to others only. For Sadar, postmodernism represents a Western paradigm, a monolithic, Eurocentric continuation of colonial suppression.

The evolution of a distinctive South African graphic language incorporates many of the salient characteristics of postmodern design and postcolonial imperatives. Both creative production and commentary, to a large extent, appear to be driven by the global context and the international design discourse, in conjunction with a celebratory attitude indicative of a progressive

recognition of unification and integration. Currently, very little explanatory and/or critical analysis has accompanied the formal experimentation that feeds into this development (for example, in *i-jusi*). Popular reception of its appearance in mainstream applications has not been monitored, neither has the extent to which social change is actually supported and/or reflected solicited widespread comment. More internal aspects of South African graphic language and its relation to change have commanded even less attention. For instance, the democratisation of language policy and how this should be visually articulated, holds stylistic and typographic implications with regard to the presentation of indigenous language design applications. These appear not to have garnered much acknowledgement from the design community.¹⁵ The recuperation of African writing systems and symbolic graphics of African origin and how they may contribute to design, have not received the kind of consideration that they have attracted in, for instance, Zimbabwe (Gunn 1998). The graphic languages of the liberation movements, their connotations of social transition and their integration into current political and national symbolism as signals indicative of fundamental change, have yet to be granted serious recognition and review. For the most part, very little consideration has been given to the location of graphic design within the broader parameters and problematics of visual integration, transformation and indigenous expression posed by the Western/African and first/third world dichotomies.

Rather, the cultural theorists and art historians, in particular, have considered South African material culture in terms of postcolonial studies and identified the duality and dilemmas of continuity and change implicit within the broad domain of design. Although graphic design has remained an incidental consideration rather than a focus of attention, its implication in a number of themes has come under review. These include romantic and mythologising representations and iconographies of Africa that are interpreted as continuations of specific historical and colonial visions of a legendary and lost Utopia with concomitant ideologies of power and control. The philosophy and aesthetics of entertainment linked to consumer culture, a tendency increasing prevalent in the South African cultural landscape and mediated environment (particularly the dominance of Americanised ideals with ideas like themeing and spectacles), are variously posited in critical reviews as extensions of cul-

tural imperialism, sites of capitalist hegemony or as opportunities for the creation of better multicultural communication and tolerance and for the integration of once separated cultural identities (Buntman 1994; Van Eeden 1995, 1998; Wolfaart 1997).

Although these interpretations have considered aspects of graphic design as visual language, they have relied, to a larger degree, on semiotic readings of contemporary culture and mediated communications. Semiotics, as an area of theoretical consideration, presents design with an alternative perspective for analysis and interpretation. It denies the autonomous or parallel realm of the visual and proposes an understanding of communication in which the visual and the non-visual alike are components of an inclusive system of signs.

NOTES

- 1 Kepes and Arnheim are accepted as having had a formative influence on graphic design education in the West and particularly on the thinking of post-war modernist graphic designers. Seminal texts, *The Language of Vision* by Gyorgy Kepes was published in 1944 and *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* by Rudolph Arnheim was published in 1954. See De Harak (Heller & Finamore 1997:139-151), who provides an insight into Kepes' personal view of his impact on visual culture and his opinion of contemporary developments in graphic design, based on an interview conducted in 1988.
- 2 Ideas of modernist orthodoxy were never the blanket acceptance of monolithic style, thinking and attitude often implied in contemporary writings, for instance by many of the articles in the section entitled "Modernism and its malcontents" in Bierut *et al.* (1994). Jobling and Crowley (1996), Schaefer (1970) and Heskett (1995) present broader considerations which reject the simplistic understanding of modernism as uniform and illustrate the diversity prevalent in conceptual ideas and stylistic manifestations.
- 3 Epstein (1992) demonstrates the viability of an approach that accentuates formal, perceptual and intuitive dimensions, within the ambit of a professional design journal and as a means to review a body of commercial work.
- 4 A study of factors that have shaped style and its visual articulation has been central to historical and theoretical considerations in the arts. Chan (1990) provides a useful and concise summation of some the definitions, concepts and conventions of style in both historical and contemporary contexts. In this overview, particular emphasis is placed on concepts of style in the creative process and the impact of the work of seminal theorists like Ernst Gombrich (fine arts) and Herbert Simon (design).
- 5 Ideas of 'vernacular' and 'mainstream' design and design characteristics have taken on a multitude of interpretations in graphic design. In contemporary design usage, vernacular could include forms and messages that reflect local customs, commonplace styles and the naive and unknowing expressions generated by individuals from outside the profession. Lupton (1996:111) maintains that the vernacular should be regarded as a broad territory with a range of visual dialects and a potentially infinite series of visual languages. These could include corporate idioms, the insider codes of subcultures and "the mass-market hieroglyphics of national brand names."
- 6 Heller (1996) provides an alternative reading that demonstrates the salient characteristics of postmodern graphic design, in his description of parody, pastiche and vernacular references in the work of the Charles Spenser Anderson graphic design studio.
- 7 While Poynor's observation is certainly valid within the contemporary professional context with its demarcated boundaries for practice, the ties between graphic design and fine arts have an historical tradition. Atzmon (1996) presents a comprehensive and fascinating description of typographic collaborations and mutual influences between De Stijl artist/designer Theo van Doesbury and Dadaist typographer Kurt Schwitters.
- 8 Weingart is not only renowned for questioning the tenets of the 'international style' and for the innovation manifested in his own work, but for his impact as a design tutor and educa-

tionist. His postgraduate course in typography at the famous Basle School of Design, attended by an international profile of students, is reputed to have had a powerful influence on a number of prominent contemporary graphic designers.

- 9 Steiner and Haas (1995) define cross-cultural design within the parameters of a sophisticated audience. As Poggenpohl (1998) rightly points out, this audience comprises the best educated, wealthiest and most travelled individuals, who globally constitute a relatively small group. She suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to a broader and more complex understanding of cross-cultural design which acknowledges people with varying levels of education, wealth, language sophistication and ability to appreciate cultural variation.
- 10 The origin of the term and design concept 'African stew' is credited to Kenyan academic and designer Odoch Pido, and its popular use and promotion in South Africa to designer Garth Walker (Sauthoff 1995).
- 11 Designer Clucas (Sauthoff 1998:7) maintains that a cursory review of South African graphic design will reveal that the essence of Africa has not been adequately confronted. He suggests that many designs in this country are still characterised by superficial packaging and stylistic appropriation and that a move towards a conscious absorption of African influences needs to be encouraged.
- 12 Although not within the scope of this study, interesting parallels are to be found in the burgeoning field of South African motion graphics and television titling that successfully combine digital and animated typography with indigenous motifs, colours and textures. Particular reference can be made, for instance, to channel identity and continuity graphics for TV2 by the Delapse studio.
- 13 For instance, South African designer Jan Erasmus' type design Thornface combines digital technology with subjective imperatives based on African and ecological inspirations.
- 14 The enduring power of graphic forms is apparent in the debate and reaction accompanying the revalorisation and use of such political symbols by subcultures and in the commercial arena (See Heller 1997a, 1997b).
- 15 Designer Zhukov (Steiner & Haas 1995:204-211) provides some relevant insights in this regard in his discussion of designing for the United Nations. Here, the conceptual foundation of the organisation as equality of peoples and nations is of paramount influence and demands the fair and equal visual and stylistic treatment of mediated communications irrespective of alphabet, language, cultural or regional audience.

CHAPTER FOUR

DESIGN AND SEMIOTIC APPROACHES

ORIENTATION

Semiotic theories regard the primary function of communication as the conveyance and attribution of meaning through the utilisation of signs and sign systems. In essence and simplistically stated, “a sign may be construed as composed of two ingredients, a *signifier* and a *signified*. The function of the sign is to communicate a *message*, and in purposive communication, the process requires two participants, an *emitter* and a *receiver*. The message is embedded in a *medium* and subsists in a set of conventions or *code*. The sign is *encoded* by the emitter and *decoded* by the receiver” (Ashwin 1989:200). The ultimate aim of the science of semiotics is the theoretical enquiry into the processes involved in the production and interpretation of signs. Its initial and principal protagonists were the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1875-1913), and the American pragmatic philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).

De Saussure aimed to reconfigure the diachronic study of language, the dominant approach to linguistics at the turn of the century. Instead of emphasising the historical evolution of languages and the relationships between languages, De Saussure advocated the development of a synchronic approach. This approach entails viewing the elements of language as parts of the larger system of language in use and their definition not in terms of some absolute standard, but based on their relationships to other components within the overall system. The key component to De Saussure’s model of the sign was the notion of the interdependent link between the signifier (e.g. the word ‘tree’) and the signified (e.g. the mental concept of tree) to create the actual sign, whose recog-

notation and legibility lie in its difference from other signs. De Saussure proposed that language functioned as a symbolic system because the link was always arbitrary, thereby leaving the system free and flexible to account for and create new patterns of representation. Building on the dynamics demonstrated by De Saussure's basic model of single reference, other theorists demonstrated that signifier-signified relationships can serve as signifiers themselves for more complex signs. For instance, French scholar and theorist Roland Barthes consigns the term 'denotation' to a simple reference and 'connotation' to instances where the signifier is a prior sign or a network of signs (Skaggs & Shank 1997:55-58).

Peircean semiotics integrates three core ideas: signs, reality and logic. Peirce expanded the Aristotelian notion of 'potency' and 'act' into a triadic model: potency, act and relation. Aspects of reality which relate to pure potency are called 'Firstness'. Aspects of reality which relate to pure action are called 'Secondness'. Secondness may be viewed as an action-reaction relationship in that it deals with the awareness of something happening without knowing or understanding what it is that is happening. Any system of Seconds embeds and contains the qualitative potential of Firstness. Aspects of reality dealing with mediation Peirce called 'Thirdness'. Anything symbolic, including language and sign systems in general, are considered to be Thirds, because these involve, of necessity, mediated relations. Any system of Thirds embeds and contains the action-reaction of Secondness, as well as the qualitative potential of Firstness (Skaggs & Shank 1997:58-60).

According to Peirce, a sign is a mediator between the thing that it stands for (object) and the consequence of its representation (interpretant). A word, either written or spoken, is a sign "only inasmuch as it stands for something to someone (or something!). It is the mediational role that is unique to signification" (Skaggs & Shank 1997:60). Peirce linked meaning to three distinct types of reasoning: deductive, inductive and abductive, or logical conclusions, highly probable conclusions and plausible conclusions. The move from abduction to deduction, represents a move from the simple reconciliation of meaning towards the production of certain meaning (Skaggs & Shank 1997).

Following Peirce's lead, visual signs are generally classified into three groups, each with numerous possible subdivisions. An *index* is a sign that arises as a result of, or in contiguity with the thing that it signifies (e.g. footprint in the sand). An *icon* is a sign that bears a similarity to the thing it signifies (e.g. schematic image of animal on road sign), and for this reason is termed a motivated sign. A *symbol* is a sign that bears no apparent resemblance to its related signified, but operates within an agreed set of conventions. Symbols are therefore termed arbitrary or conventional signs (Ashwin 1989:200). Signs have the capacity to pass from one category to another based on time and circumstance and to manifest mixed symbolic, index and iconic features (Bignall 1997:15; Morgan & Welton 1986; Watson 1998:43).

Signs may be characterised by three levels of specificity: monosemic signs offer only one correct interpretation; polysemic signs offer more than one legitimate interpretation; and pansemic signs offer unlimited possibilities of interpretation (Ashwin 1989:203). American theorist Charles Morris' triadic model divides semiotics into three basic branches on the basis of sign relationships: syntactics, or signs and their formal relation to other signs; semantics, or signs and their relation to the objects for which they stand; and pragmatics, or signs and their relation to production and interpretation contexts (Ockerse & Van Dijk 1979:59; Walker 1989:145).

Like sign, code is a central concept in semiotics. Codes are sets of rules that govern the use of signs. De Saussure saw codes as an interrelated set of signs that allow for distinction between different sign systems (e.g. verbal language, non-verbal language). Codes range between those that are fixed (e.g. Morse code, heraldry) and those of a more flexible nature. Messages are assembled by means of a paradigmatic-syntagmatic process of selection and combination. Paradigms are sets of possibilities from which choices are made (e.g. visual paradigms, aural paradigms in film) while syntagms are their meaningful ordering (i.e. film narrative). The user of codes taps into a variety of signifying acts to create both connotative and denotative messages. Generally, the more a given code is universally accepted in a culture, the more denotative its use, and the more ambiguous a code, the more connotative its use. An act of functional communication, according to linguist Roman Jakobson, requires not only a

sharing of codes between parties to the transaction, but also the linking of the participants in terms of context and physical or psychological contact. There are therefore six essential elements to the communication situation: addresser, addressee, context, message, code, channel or contact. The predominance of any one of these in any message leads to the identification of six principal communicative functions: emotive or expressive; connotative or imperative; referential; metalinguistic; poetic or aesthetic; and phatic (Morgan & Welton 1986; Walker 1989).

Signs and codes are assembled into texts that contribute to discourses in the wider arenas of communication. The meaning and interpretation of signs, codes and texts are essentially determined and reviewed in terms of situational factors; cultural conventions; the contextual and intertextual relationships of signs to each other; their interaction and their interconnectivity which serve to modify, alter or reinforce meaning; and the personal attributes of both the sender and receiver. Textual analysis has formed a significant constituent of an international area of systematic study that has broadened the pioneering work of De Saussure and Peirce and that currently impinges on disciplines like linguistics, social theory, film theory, cultural studies and communications (Ashwin 1989:200).

As an area of theoretical study, semiotics has attracted leading contemporary intellectuals, such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, who have been instrumental in and major proponents of the development of various movements. These include formalist semiotics that focuses on the literal meaning of a sign and on the description of the visible relationship between the signifier and the signified; connotative semiotics where the emphasis is on the social and ideological relationship of and between signs and codes; and expansive semiotics that emphasises the production of meaning, semantic practices and ideology, and that relies largely on Marxist and psychoanalytical theory (Fourie 1996:33).

A knowledge of sign theory and of form perception could be regarded as integral to graphic design as it may be understood as a process wherein the designer “purposefully marks, signs, and names, thoughts, events or facts, and con-

veys information with a definite meaning and significance ... [and understands] ... the way man assigns meaning and responds to a sign" (Ockerse & Van Dijk 1979:58). Skaggs (1997:4) agrees that every graphic designer is a semi-otician, and notes that graphic design is about putting a sequence of sign exchanges into play. But, as he rightly points out, while semiotics seems to hold great promise for design practice, it has remained an underutilised resource.¹ In his view, this may be attributed to its origins in philosophy and linguistics which do not traditionally intersect with graphic design, and the development of two schools of semiotic thought. This dual development has resulted in two independent contemporary conceptualisations of the sign, leading to variant terminologies, as well as diverse and often obtuse conceptions of the sign.

The introduction and integration of semiotic thinking into graphic design practice and theoretical discourse has thus not been cohesive and has comprised the fragmented and patchwork adoption of diverse ideas from a wide range of approaches and critical perspectives. Three of these routes are considered here:

- the establishment of a semiotic groundwork for graphic design that seeks to match semiotic concepts to established and traditional design terms and to chart the relevance and value of semiotics to the specificity of graphic design;
- the use of semiotic constructs to describe, examine, categorise and explain the functions and efficacy of graphic sign systems within applied contexts or specialised design domains; and
- the clarification of the ideological dimensions embedded in graphic sign systems and the questioning of the pragmatic relevance of such considerations.

SEMIOTIC GROUNDWORK AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

The establishment and elucidation of a semiotic foundation for graphic design have entailed a number of strategies. These have been primarily the alignment, translation and transformation (differentiation) of the terminology and essential concepts of non-visual semiotics into the domain of graphic design, as well as an exploration of the denotative and connotative dimensions of graphic signs and their meanings in a manner relevant to the disciplinary practice of

design. In addition to this, some approaches have sought to support, extend or flesh out semiotic theory itself as it relates to visual communication through systematic and theoretical considerations of graphic design *per se*.

Lupton (1991) reviews how concepts and techniques, generally considered by designers to be essentially visual, can be reformulated in semiotic terms, thus revealing the interconnectedness of visual and verbal domains and rejecting their separation. Lupton proposes that the concept of an object as both visual (spatial, sensual, pictorial) and linguistic (conventional, determined by social agreement) should be consciously addressed by design. Typical visual strategies for organising textual and pictorial material like graph and grid can be paralleled and described semiotically in terms of index or the idea of language functioning as a structure that unifies and gives cohesion to the amorphous realms of sound and thought. Translation and figure may be considered as the linking of form and meaning with an emphasis on transience and cultural framing rather than on inherent perceptual and formal qualities.

While the aspects considered above offer useful, but isolated observations, Skaggs (1997) attempts to construct a usable, functional and practical semiotic foundation that outlines and consolidates the semiotic dimensions of graphic design. The goal of such a framework or 'semiotic template' would be to tailor "understand[ing] of the behaviour of physical forms as meaning-generative devices ... [to graphic design and] ... to explore the relation between form and meaning in its essential nature within the visual sign ... in a way compatible with a designer's role as shaper of the sign vehicle" (Skaggs 1997:134).

Although Skaggs acknowledges that the template is still tentative and incomplete, he suggests that it should comprise six territories or domains, each clarifying a number of variables which, in combination, are manipulated in any graphic design problem. Visual analysis emphasises domains and variables in terms of their interrelationships and their individual roles. The six domains are categories of sign behaviour (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic planes); semantic chunks or three levels of semantic activity (features, units, complexes); functional classification of signs (ideograms, phonograms, scriptograms, pictograms, diagrams); modes of semiotic action (denotative or connotative

expression and interpretation); sign value (qualitative dimensions of meaning); means of representation (relation of representation to object, e.g. iconic, index, symbolic and their multifunctional nature and combination).

On a more empirical level, experimental studies have attempted to determine the semantics of form. Krampen (1997) summarises some conclusions from work undertaken during the last three decades to explore the relationship between typographic form and conceptual meaning. Studies appear to indicate that a degree of consistent interpretation may be evoked by the formal dimensions of typefaces. For instance, marked typefaces (i.e. serif typefaces with clear inner differentiations like Garamond and Times) are more denotative in that they permit fewer and less diverse verbal associations than unmarked typefaces (i.e. sans serifs like Futura and Helvetica). Irrespective of culture (e.g. Western or Semitic – Latin or Arabic typefaces), marked typefaces are perceived as more aesthetically attractive, but less functional than unmarked ones. The addition of shadow to marked faces, overturns this effect by repelling viewers, while unmarked typefaces gain interest through shading. Both typographically untrained and typographically trained audiences are sensitive to the semantic fit between typeface and kind of text. Marked serif and slightly marked sans serif type are felt to be more suited to marked literary texts (e.g. fairy tale, poem, drama, novel) while unmarked typefaces seem more appropriate for texts meant for daily use.

Appropriateness of form may assist functional communication and enhance audience appeal, but certain areas of design application demand precise meaning and easy recognition. Kazmierczak (1997) suggests that the miscoding of graphic signs can be reduced through a better understanding of the graphic conventionalisation of signs and the denotative meanings of images. She argues that, while iconic signs like pictograms are able to condense meaning and are easy to recognise and remember, compared to verbal language, they carry a low degree of semantic precision and are charged with cultural connotations. She views the evaluation, in terms of logic and merit, of semiograms (graphic signs that are regarded as standardised representations of a concept), to be crucial for information design and graphic symbolic systems like road signs and refers to semiography, a branch of semiotics, and the potential that it

offers to designers in terms of principles and guidelines.²

Rather than accentuating differences and cultural determinancy, semiography seeks to identify visual similarities and universal manifestations that rely on 'a superior code' and a structural hierarchy of visual form, as well as semantic invariants of form. For instance, a superior visual code may be found in geometry in that it allows the possibility of reducing every visual configuration to primary geometric elements and provides for the analysis of other more synthetic codes. The structure of the geometric code may be described by units of primary and secondary segmentation of space called figures (closed geometric units like a circle, square, ellipse) and principles that form syntagmatic relationships represented by scales, proportions, perspectives and intervals. The semantics of the structural elements of the code are determined by identifying the focal meaning associated with a given form regardless of temporality and differences among cultures and semiotic systems. Semiographic studies are based on an interdisciplinary incorporation of the psycho-physiology of perception, semiotic rules and graphic conventions, and the historical sources and evolution of the forms and meanings of graphic signs and symbols. While the ultimate aim of semiographic analysis is the provision of standard references (glossaries, lexicons, grammars) and the elaboration of rational design methods, the concepts and principles that are elucidated, provide useful criteria for the coherent production and analysis of a variety of signage systems.

The opposite position is often assumed by theorists and educationists who choose not to emphasise the necessity of consistent interpretation, but focus instead on the variability of meaning (Hoener & Meador 1997; Lee & Mazzucca 1997; Lewis 1997; Lupton & Miller 1996; Mills 1991). Visual strategies in design demonstrate the generation, exploitation and reflection of cultural conventions and the close relationship between form, meaning and context. Mills (1991) traces the historical trajectory of modernist forms and typeface designs from avant-garde Bauhaus origins through to their incorporation into commercial organisations and contemporary mass culture. Conceived as part of the modernist drive to rationalise and standardise, Mills shows how modernist forms and the principle of universality itself are products of economic, social and cultural factors. Once envisioned as a potentially liberating social force, modernist

graphic forms became redolent of bureaucratic, marketing and corporate concerns.

Skaggs and Shank (1997) attempt to clarify the specificity of a graphic sign not in terms of culture or context, but in terms of a theoretical construct. They postulate that interpretation is determined by a sign's position along a continuum of signification, from a point of certainty to a point of complete ambiguity, after which incoherence and incomprehension follow. This notion draws on Peirce's observation that every conception is apprehended with a degree of certainty (belief) or uncertainty (doubt). The drive to resolve doubt governs the handling of messages from the most elemental functions of perception to the ultimate construction and maintenance of a worldview.

The two limiting points of the semiotic axis, termed the absolute interpretant and the threshold of semiosis, have a number of characteristics. Interpretation at the point of the absolute interpretant is manifest, that is, decided, whole, fixed and specific with a single, definite content and may be equated with denotation and deduction. At the threshold of semiosis, interpretation is manifold, essentially uncertain, flexible, loose, unspecific and open, evoking a number of potential interpretants. This may be equated with connotation, induction and abduction. A denotative expression and/or sign exerts influent pressure as it directs the viewer towards a specific rendering and logical inference thus relieving him/her from having to contribute time and energy to arrive at a conclusion. Connotative signs place effluent pressure on the viewer by demanding abductive inferences and an active engagement in the search for possible conclusions. The variable position of an expression along the continuum between denotative clarity and connotative ambiguity, enkindles the viewer's desire to achieve understanding by resolving doubt. The degree to which the expression is effluent and which specific or individual connotations are finally evoked, is strongly determined by an individual's worldview and experiences. The designer's task is thus the proper and appropriate positioning of signs along the semiotic axis. In some cases, this may involve the purposeful excitation of doubt, where non-specificity becomes an inherent part of the communication – a common tactic in postmodern design (Skaggs & Shank 1997).

The model attempts to bridge two competing semiotic viewpoints that maintain that meaning arises either from codification or from a process of logical inference, and to provide common ground for two semiotic traditions without translating one into terms of the other. It is indicative of theoretical work that seeks to explore visual communication through an expansion of basic semiotic theory. Two further examples of attempts to bridge dichotomies serve as amplification. Gaede (1997) postulates that any attempt to measure or develop visual literacy skills in a meaningful way requires further clarification of the visual/verbal dichotomy. Difficulties arising from earlier theory that visual texts comprise iconic (motivated) signs whereas verbal texts consist of arbitrary signs has shifted consideration away from the nature of the sign/referent relationship. A better understanding seems to be apparent in two alternative perspectives that focus on the type of meaning attached by the viewer (i.e. an alignment of 'verbal' to clear, predictable meaning and 'visual' to new and unique meaning), and that differentiate between a language of space (visual) in contrast to a language of abstraction (written).

The problematics of the visual/verbal dichotomy are also explored by Mandoki (1997). Rather than deal with visual semiotics as an examination of specific types of signs, Mandoki proposes that aesthetic communication should be looked at in terms of two distinct semiotic processes or orders that she describes as "the semiotic – which functions by oppositions and differentiations in verbal and non-verbal syntagms, and the symbolic – which functions by indexical associations of these syntagms to a material, temporal, or energetical aspect of reality" (1997:88). Any review of visual material should include both orders which must entail the consideration of dynamic syntagms, rather than signs as units of analysis, and an acceptance of the category of the iconic as a register of semiosis rather than a type of sign.

The three approaches outlined above offer tentative propositions that point to future directions for semiotic theory in design, but need further resolution. Basic semiotic theory continues to provide a useful and enduring framework for the consideration of graphic design solutions as visual sign systems. Its value lies in the provision of a tool for naming and examining various kinds of signs and exploring their complexity, and a methodology that enables system-

atic analysis of visual manifestations and communications processes. This systematic examination has increased understanding of the mechanisms and instrumental purposes of drawn and photographic signs and images in particular, and has elucidated the implicit and explicit ways in which the control of meaning may be extended or limited in design solutions.

IMAGES AND DIRECTED MEANING

Graphic design integrates two sign systems, the typographic and the pictorial. These two systems, studied independently and in combination, have provided the foundation for the semiotic examination of a diverse range of graphic design applications and their meaning, for instance, corporate identity, advertising and signage systems (Kirkham 1996; Lupton 1989; Walker & Chaplin 1997). Burger's (1997) analysis of cartooning demonstrates the orthodox method generally employed in such considerations. Cartoons may be viewed as visual sign systems which deploy principles and techniques specifically to amuse, but also to comment directly or indirectly on social and political matters. To be successful, they must ensure instant and appropriate decoding which will be experienced as entertaining and funny. Burger suggests that cartooning relies on three fundamental semiotic principles. Cartoonists select from four paradigms or categories of humour (linguistic, logical, identity, physical action); create constellations (e.g. overstatement) by grouping and/or emphasising the visual codes and conventions of style and caricature; and forge connecting relationships between or among characters in the cartoon, and society and culture, in general.

Connecting relationships may be actualised through captions, the use of metonym and metaphor to create surprising associations and make unusual visual analogies, and the play on differential definitions of signs. For instance, incongruity or the perception of inconsistency, is achieved by pairing opposites or looking for similarities between seemingly different things. The conventions of cartoon styling entail the consistent use of character types, situations and the manner of drawing (individual use of line), while caricature is founded on the exaggeration or distortion of particular characteristics, for example, facial features, social type, body shape, body language, dress, objects and settings asso-

ciated with specific cartoon characters. Decoding depends on viewers' ability to supply the narrative that leads up to the cartoon, recognise the allusion(s) and make sense of the symbology, all of which are based on learned cultural codes and personal levels of knowledge (Burger 1997).

Semiotic concepts and principles have also provided a useful and convenient intellectual framework for the detailed study of subdisciplines like typography (Lupton & Miller 1996; Miller & Lupton 1994; Swann 1991) and design drawing. Ashwin (1989:199-209) contends that semiotics offer an appropriate means to forge a theory of design drawing, an area which, he points out, has remained at a rudimentary level. Ways in which images direct the viewer towards an interpretation and the manner in which these establish particular meanings may be systematically explored in terms of the threefold division (trichotomy) of index, icon and symbol, denotative and connotative functions as well as the codes and conventions specific to areas of functional application.

Much drawing in design is dedicated to the recording and transmission of resemblances either as representation or presentation, so that iconicity is immediately obvious. Design drawing is also involved, to a large extent, with the creation and interpretation of signs as symbols. For example, logograms for corporate identity are often symbolic in two senses: "they employ alphabetic motifs such as company initials; and they attempt to symbolise the company's supposed character by means of appropriately devised forms" (Ashwin 1989:201). Engineering, architectural and interior design drawings have generated similar hybrid sign systems which make extensive use of iconic systems based on representation. They employ techniques like representational scale, perspective, tone and texture, and conventional symbolic systems such as codes for the representation of cross sections, interruptions of form, or the depiction of materials, colours, and textures in black and white.

Design drawing always has an instrumental purpose: it needs to communicate some important piece of information or value that will influence attitudes and future action. According to Ashwin (1989:203), the inevitable striving for a degree of specificity, ranging "from the mechanical precision of engineering drawing to the more allusive use of drawing for book illustration and the pro-

motion of consumer goods” implies that the designer-draughtsman “operates predominantly within the range of monosemic and polysemic systems.” He proposes that the interplay between the six principal communicative functions, levels of sign specificity and aspects of denotation and connotation within different types of drawing allow for a clear differentiation and elucidation of drawing based on intent and graphic techniques and conventions.

For instance, production drawings, city plans and architectural drawings, which require precise and unequivocal interpretation, eradicate alternative readings and ambiguities by using highly conventional symbolism and prescriptive visual techniques. They sometimes include emotive and connotative elements in the form of incidentals like trees and figures as idealised images appealing to the viewer’s sense of order. Metalinguistic signs play a prominent role in areas of drawing that need to achieve a high level of specificity through the use of conventionalised codes. Often, a separate key or an external source of reference is provided to guide interpretation. Strict referentiality does not necessarily exclude other communicative functions. Ashwin notes that even the most objective and dispassionate engineering design drawing, intended to be totally referential in function, can generate a sense of delight in the viewer and serve as a quasipoetic communication.

Phatic communications play an important role in many areas of drawing for design. Framing devices (e.g. lines and rules) and the deployment of graphic motifs such as arrows are often used to capture and direct the attention of viewers. Comic strips and books have generated a complicated semiotic code rich in phatic devices and signs.³ Emotional bias is an essential feature of both fashion and advertising drawing. Drawing for fashion is characterised by an emotional bias that conforms to any current notion of preferred physical type or body language and employs techniques like escapements, that is, breaks in the profile of form that generate a sense of fluidity and movement. Advertising illustrations show commodities in a recognisable form, but also seek to present them in a value-favourable light to induce a certain mode of behaviour. Emotive techniques are thus employed in advertising images to emphasise, suppress or exclude certain visual characteristics and to heighten the qualitative and connotative dimensions of communication.

It is this persuasive function and its articulation in technologically produced images (photographic, in particular), that have enjoyed extensive and intensive semiotic scrutiny in the literature on graphic design, communication and cultural studies. How can information and ideas be given meaning and how can they be made meaningful to audiences, are at the core of such considerations. Massaris (1997) presents a comprehensive and extremely useful analysis of the fundamental characteristics of visual images and their distinctive contribution to communication in commercial advertising, political propaganda and social issue campaigns. He maintains that the three essential semiotic properties of iconicity, indexicality and syntactic indeterminacy and their implications, allow for an examination of the unique attributes of visual persuasion and, more specifically, the functions of photographic images. In essence, the semantic and syntactic characteristics of photographic images enable the direct or subtle simulation of reality, the establishment of credibility and the formulation of implicit propositions in persuasive communication.

The iconicity of persuasive imagery is used extensively to capture viewers' attention and evoke emotional responses. Iconic or pictorial devices are able to "... to attract our attention, engage our emotions, and shape our attitudes towards products, political figures, or social causes" through personal identification, association and analogy (Messaris 1997:51). Persuasive imagery exploits iconic relationships to real-world visual and psychological experiences by replicating meaningful features of human appearance, interpersonal behaviour and physical environments; employing photographic techniques/codes⁴ of viewer placement and camera angles; and using visual form and style to suggest specific connotations.

Attention attraction devices are extremely important in advertising, which is typically an unsolicited form of communication that must catch the viewer's eye through intrinsic qualities. Advertising images attract and engage viewers by providing real-world visual cues that model interpersonal interaction and conjure up optical experiences by positioning the viewer through the use of techniques such as direct eye gaze, rear views, viewing distance and subjective camera. These techniques are effective because they closely imitate experiences of interpersonal space, spatial orientation and personal observation points. An

audience's attention may also be gained by the inverse, that is, the photographic distortion of reality through violation, surrealism, visual metaphor and visual parodies (Messaris 1997:5-29).

Advertising images evoke attitudes and emotions by tapping into preprogrammed individual, cultural and biological associations through manifest content and camera angles that accentuate postures of status, power and submission, appeal to innate predispositions (e.g. nurturance), and encourage personal identification. The iconicity of visual form is often used to suggest more subtle or indirect meanings and is particularly applied in advertising to build gender or sexual connotations (e.g. soft versus hard-edged angular shapes based on loose visual analogy to the female/male body, abstract analogical link between shapes and traditional views of masculine and feminine); signal social status (e.g. spare, reductive, tightly ordered, classical style for luxury products); and convey conceptions of identity (e.g. characterise youth by violating traditional visual conventions).

In addition to being iconic signs, all images produced by photography are also indexical. The indexicality of photographed images serves as documentary evidence or proof often used as an implicit or explicit component in commercial advertising (e.g. demonstrations of effectiveness, reassurance of qualities); political campaigns (e.g. displays of public approval or disapproval, appearance and demeanour of candidate); and the promotion of social issues by arousing moral indignation (e.g. advocacy of causes, reinforcing need for social change). Although visual manipulation (staging, alteration, editing, selectivity and mislabelling) has resulted in diminishing credibility for photographic images, evidence suggests that the context of their application and the perceived trustworthiness of producers, determine audience acceptance or rejection of a message (Messaris 1997).

While relatively precise conventions have been developed to indicate spatio-temporal relationships between different images and objects and/or events portrayed in single frames, visual communication is characterised by a lack of explicit means for identifying other ways in which images might be related to one another. Compared to verbal communication, it particularly lacks proposi-

tional syntax, or the means to connect two entities explicitly (e.g. product A is better than product B, politician X was instrumental in lowering taxes, abortion equals murder). The inability to make explicit proposals gives visual arguments an open-ended quality and persuasive images a corresponding fluidity and adaptability in meaning. This makes them, in principle, more amenable to personal interpretational predispositions and, by extension, more demanding of viewer participation and involvement.

In response to this syntactic characteristic, commercial advertising has developed a number of conventions that are specifically aimed at establishing conceptual connections. These conventions variously seek to elicit relatively uniform and consistent responses from viewers or to leave meaning wholly or partly implicit and open to levels of meaning and interpretation. The juxtaposition of visual images and techniques which stimulate the viewer's mind towards the creation of new meaning through a process of linking or synthesis, is widely exploited. Messaris places the kinds of conceptual linkages encountered in the composition and editing of advertisements into four categories: causal connections (promise of benefits); contrasts (comparisons); analogies (metaphorical connections); generalisations (repetition leading to specific point). He points out that the four categories can be derived from two fundamental syntactic operations: causal connections and underlying comparisons. Categories and operations generate nuances of meaning, that, when activated separately or in combination, imbue products with tacit associations (Messaris 1997:182-206).

The implicit quality of pictorial syntax and argumentation endows visual persuasion with a type of ambiguity (and deniability) that verbal persuasion cannot claim and makes it possible for advertisers to express ideas that they might be less willing to spell out verbally. In practice, while the intended meaning of images can be made explicit through verbal support (slogan, text) and serve as visual counterparts to the advertisement's explicit verbal message, they often also contain an implicit message of a different kind that is expressed less obtrusively. While widely apparent in persuasive communication, in general, there are two major areas of commercial advertising in which such uses of visual syntax have become standard practice: those that link products to images and

precepts of social status (e.g. affluent, high, cultivated, and/or discerning status conferred by analogistic juxtaposition between product and some form of art); and those which link products to images, ideas and feelings of sex (e.g. metaphorical association of product with sexual pleasure, identity, and/or practices).

While Messaris acknowledges that syntactic indeterminacy allows advertisers a certain latitude in moral, ethical, or legal accountability for the assumptions made by viewers, he chooses to stress what he considers to be positive functions and aspects of images as a means to contribute to both social agendas and individual self-actualisation. These include the following: advertisers and audiences are enabled to confront issues of a controversial nature indirectly; the presentation of desirable values (e.g. an idealised form of society which is class, ethnic and gender inclusive); a source of images that people can use to previsualise their place in the world; the provision of social precedents; and the portrayal of situations that facilitate individual indulgence in acceptable forms of social display. This attitude typifies the stance taken in a number of denotative and connotative analyses and reviews of post-apartheid South African advertising, where the potential of advertising to variously hold up healing and inclusive views of society and ease social conflict, relieve tension and promote order, is highlighted by analysts and commentators like Andrew (1998)⁵, Van Niekerk (1998)⁶ and Wolfaart (1997).⁷

The above approaches and positions are in exact opposition to those adopted by seminal works on advertising that prefer to accentuate an ideological perspective (e.g. Williamson 1978) and that use semiotic analysis to substantiate a critical view of advertising as a highly manipulative graphic system employed as a tactic to mobilise deep-seated psychic mechanisms in the audience and disarm their rational faculties. Proponents of this approach voice a dissatisfaction with consumer culture and the market economy and offer a critique of advertising as a social institution. Initially a component of a tributary in semiotics that sought to reveal how texts contain and reinforce dominant institutional discourses and notions of hegemony and ideology within social, political and economic sites of production, the methodology underpinning the approach has become incorporated into the academy as a fairly orthodox mode

of analysis and is used in a host of subject areas. Here it has been extended and challenged by other approaches in the ultimate interest of exploring the general laws governing sign systems and as a standard means that aims to 'read' contemporary culture and the mediated environment.

MYTHS, IDEOLOGY AND SUBJECTIVITY

The semiotic analysis of industrial objects and mediated products as part of a continuum of cultural phenomena was pioneered by French scholar and critic Roland Barthes. Barthes (1973) proposed that complex types of signification involve staggered systems – in essence, systems in which one sign serves as the signifier for another sign which, in turn, forms the signifier for a third sign, and so on. Every sign is not only potentially polysemous and open to multiple readings, but may also form the basis of a second sign system or a second order semiological system, which Barthes called 'myth' or metalanguage. In mythic speech, the context and history of signs are narrowed down and contained so that only a few original signifying features remain, while the simultaneous additional investment of signification serves to direct meaning in predetermined directions.

The purpose of myth is not to make the original meaning disappear, but to distort it so that its original and mythical meaning coexist in a text or image. This is achieved through a slippage between meaning and form (Barthes related meaning to the original sign and form to the signifier of the mythical system). Myth is invested with a strong persuasive force, because it works with incomplete significations and functions on three different levels of complexity: the empty signifier, the full signifier and ambiguous signification. With the empty signifier, the original sign is used and accepted as a literal way to legitimise the new signified (mythical concept). In a similar way, with the full signifier, the intended meaning is also unambiguous, but recognised by the reader as a distortion. With ambiguous signification, meaning and myth appear to be linked into a unitary sign presenting the reader with a persistent textual dilemma of doubt and belief, that is ultimately resolved by the acceptance of the myth and its 'naturalisation'. Naturalisation allows mythical images and representations to seem unproblematic, unquestionable and commonplace, an untroubled con-

firmation of current norms and status. Particular ideas become neutral facts and particular social meanings are accepted as common sense truths about the world (Barthes 1973; Bignell 1997; Jobling & Crowley 1996).

Within a naturalising framework, myth also functions as a political tool as it is able to embody ideologies in ways that make them appear everyday and that consequently make them difficult to contest. For Barthes, myth serves the ideological interests of dominant groups in society: those who own or control the industrial, commercial and political institutions and who need to retain power by eliminating alternative ways of thinking. Initially carried out from a left-wing perspective and often closely tied to Marxist ideas, the analysis of myth with its selectiveness and distortion has formed the basis of one of the dominant means of reviewing aspects of popular culture and signs in the mass media. While the emphasis and focus of media semiotics might differ, analysts in general attempt to explore all or some of the following: the pattern and structures of signs; sign relationships and connotations; media characteristics and contexts; viewer-positioning; negotiations of meaning between media and audiences; and the cultural and social impact of meaning.

This route has been adopted by design critics and design historians as a way of revealing the entrenchment of themes, ideas and attitudes that are and/or were made to assume the aspect of self-evident truth in a wide range of contemporary and historical visual material and graphic imagery. The ideologies embedded in graphic systems, from representations of gender in early twentieth century posters and mid-century ideals of patriotism in political propaganda materials, to the perpetuation of cultural, ethnic and gender stereotypes in contemporary advertising, have come under scrutiny. Many of the 'myths' surrounding design itself in its broadest sense, propagated in practical applications as well as in writing and theory, have been questioned. For instance, some of the themes which have been reviewed in attempts to remove impressions of naturalness and to accentuate the entrenched practice and promotion of unitary ways of thinking are: the ideology of modernism; the significance and positioning of female practitioners in graphic design; the status and omnipotence of design and designers (designers' perceptions of design); and conventional histories of design (Buckley 1989; Dilnot 1989; Forty 1986; Jobling

& Crowley 1996; Lupton 1989; Makela & Lupton 1997).

In keeping with other subject areas, prominence has been assigned in graphic design to the review and analyses of advertising, promotional materials and popular magazines. Particular attention has been invested in elucidating how they have been implicated in the construction of social identities (e.g. presentations and representations of gender); the codification and entrenchment of values like hygiene and cleanliness (e.g. promotion of domestic products and materials); as well as the objectification of pleasure (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, toiletries, perfume advertisements) (Buckley 1989; Forty 1986; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Kirkham & Weller 1996; Sellers 1997). South African studies have focused on some of these areas as well. For instance, gender stereotyping, which is seen to condition and determine patterns of behaviour and promote the maintenance of conventional ideals of gender identity, has garnered the attention of a number of local commentators. While Van Eeden (1994) notes the general prevalence of female stereotyping in sexist ways, Erasmus (1997) adopts a more complex view of cigarette and beer advertising that incorporates male identity, conditioned by Western norms and specific South African circumstances, as well as the objectification of pleasure and escape and the knowing acceptance by the male market of potentially physically harmful substances.⁶

Snyman (1995) refers to postfeminist opinion and studies to suggest that the seeming replacement of traditional feminine roles of passivity with dominant (domineering) male behaviour in certain South African advertisements,⁹ serves to reinforce rather than neutralise entrenched social and cultural perceptions. The more covert strengthening of male domination through insidious coding is also pursued by Du Preez (1998) who evokes the icon, concept and presence of the *femme fatale* in mythological, social and religious history and her late twentieth century mediated manifestation, circumscribed by French scholar Baudrillard's ideology of the simulacrum, in an analysis of print advertisements for female clothing.¹⁰ Du Preez suggests that the thrust of the advertising messages, which in a witty manner appear to support and promote a view that women are liberated, empowered and makers of their own meaning, remains firmly within the bounds of patriarchy and capitalistic hegemony.

While earlier semiotic analyses of advertising stress its manipulative nature based on assumptions of naive audiences, current analysts question the hegemony of a commodity culture with reference to a more pluralist market and knowledgeable audiences who are adept at decoding as a result of media exposure and familiarity with the codes, genres and stereotypes which designers reformulate, transform and transgress. Jobling and Crowley (1996:259-264) maintain that advertisers have had to introduce more entropic and complex coding in response to sophisticated audiences and in the face of other extraneous factors, for instance, legislation and consumer insight into the potentially harmful effects of tobacco products on personal health. Their analysis of the Benson & Hedges *Pure Gold* cigarette advertising campaign since 1976, amalgamates mythology, Freudian concepts of sexual pleasure, and references to surrealist symbolism with its representations of 'convulsive beauty', to demonstrate how connotations of smoking pleasure and its equation with sexual bliss have been objectified and naturalised. The three separate ways of representing convulsive beauty exploited by surrealist artists – the *érotique voilée* (veiled erotic), the *explosante-fixe* (fixed explosion), and *magique circonstantielle* (circumstantial magic) – are highlighted as devices to “transcend any suggestion of displeasure or the harm that smoking can cause; rather the pleasure of spectatorship is underscored through the symbolic deliverance of the spectator’s undoubted object of desire – gold in the form of cigarettes” (p 262).¹¹

This approach typifies the complex models currently constructed and used by semioticians to reveal the mythic structures of meaning that advertisements attempt to communicate. Bignell (1997) suggests that the potential ambiguity of much contemporary advertising makes an ideological analysis of advertising in itself problematic as many of its basic assumptions are undermined. Contemporary advertisements exhibit an increasing trend to provide multiple subjective positions, play with the ambiguity of signs and construct alternative significations that often disarm an ideological critique of meaning. Multi-accental decoding practices on the part of audiences are exploited and advertisements often invite audiences to share in the active and playful decoding of signification. New digital media and new ways of interacting with media allow audiences to assume multiple and changing subjective identities. Bignell (1997) further contends that it has become increasingly difficult to regard an

advertisement as 'a self-contained' entity, as advertising practices encourage multifocused marketing and media strategies.

These developments suggest that greater attention should be paid to decoding within contexts of reception and use, rather than stressing the intentions of encoders. Watson (1998:243) quotes media analyst John Fiske who celebrates "'semiotic democracy' in which people from a multiplex and shifting range of sub-cultures and self-formed groups construct their own meanings within an autonomous cultural economy." Audiences appropriate texts and images for their own purposes despite the hegemony and manipulative intentions devised in sites of ownership and production. The lack of attention to 'real audiences' is one aspect in the resistance to semiotic interpretations articulated from within design by both practitioners and theorists (Rheinfrank & Welker 1994). Other objections relate to perceptions that it privileges the critic or analyst who relies solely on personal perspectives and associations with no recourse to additional verification. This has led to suggestions of indulgence in erudite exercises of subjective and imaginative interpretation that are of questionable systematic or practical value to design (Keefer 1997; Scher 1997; Walker 1989).

Keefer (1997) contends that semiotic design interpretations are often undertaken on the basis of predetermined and poorly founded ideas and that they exhibit a predilection for loose associations that invariably crumble upon closer inspection.¹² "[S]peculative, jargon-ridden, obscure and high-minded verbiage" (1997:80) has come to dominate the literature. He is particularly concerned about the uncritical manner in which design historians and critics have tended to adopt the methodologies and objectives of cultural semiotics without adequate and due considerations of fundamental assumptions or of how the insights gained through such analyses could be made relevant to design practice and translated into strategies for production. Semiotic approaches to design should be less hermeneutic and "more experienced-based and pragmatic, rather than aprioristic and idealistic" (Keefer 1997:81).

The privileging of critics, analysts, their subjective interpretations and the ultimate focus of semiotic interpretation on the system, have served to de-empha-

side both the role of the creative individual and the individual work of production (Selden 1989).¹³ This position has been ameliorated in unexpected ways by deconstructionist design perspectives that have allowed designers and theorists to play up the role of the designer. The legitimisation of self-expression and formal experimentation, and a role for the designer as joint author and/or editor and mediator of meaning are some of the ideas that have been accentuated by design's intersection with poststructuralist deconstruction.

NOTES

- 1 Pretorius (1999) notes that Nöth's *Handbook of Semiotics* contains only one entry under 'design'. Dilnot (1989) maintains that Anglo-American design has historically not paid much attention to the use of semiotics in comparison to Europe, where industrial design and product semantics have particularly received extensive review by German and Italian scholars. Wild (1994) comments on the reluctance of graphic designers to move beyond the analysis of visual form to semiotic considerations.
- 2 Semiography is of some importance in South Africa with its ethnic diversity and the prevalence of low levels of literacy and education that often result in literal and/or personal interpretations of iconic signs leading to problems in the comprehension and accessibility of vital information in both working and public environments.
- 3 Rheeder (1995) and Kannemeyer (1998) provide useful elucidations and analyses of the semiotic codes, formal devices and conventions utilised in the comic book genre.
- 4 Photographic codes are generally divided in codes of form (position of camera, area of orientation, lens and focus angles, basic camera shots) and codes of content (thematic, *mise-en-scène*, lighting codes, colour, field forces, balance, depth and volume).
- 5 Andrew (1998) extracts 'notions of community' from the following advertisements: Vodacom's *Windmills*, SABC's *Your voice your vision* and Castle Lager's *Visitor*. Interviews with creative and agency personnel responsible for the production of the advertisements revealed that they "... held it as self-evident that they needed to make some contribution to community-building through their advertising" (Andrew 1998:127). All believed that they had in some measure succeeded in doing this and that their commercials could be catalysts working positively towards normalising society.
- 6 Van Niekerk (1998) deconstructs the Castrol Oil *Horingboom Oasis* commercial to show how the humorous doubling of character identities in the advertisement reflects the changes in South African values and, at the same time, allows viewers to reconsider entrenched prejudices and confront inherent conflicts in the social and political order.
- 7 Wolfaart (1997) refers to Vodacom's *Yebo gogo* campaign, Sasol's *Ama-glug-glug* commercial and the Spur and Standard Bank advertising series that include several sportsmen of note, as a means to achieve cultural cohesion, construct new cultural myths and evolve an acceptable popular iconography.
- 8 Erasmus (1996) considers advertisements for Castle Lager and Camel cigarettes within a broad framework that refers to a number of prominent brand names and popular icons (e.g. the Marlboro Man) in the promotion of tobacco and alcohol products.
- 9 Snyman (1995) reviews a number of consumer commercials, but specifically compares the approaches adopted in BMW vehicle and Weigh-less diet drink advertisements, to those for Steers hamburgers, Telkom home telephone systems and Defy home appliances that are presented as attempts to reverse stereotypical gender roles.

- 10 Du Preez (1998) focuses on a series of award-winning print advertisements for Sissy Boy Jeanswear.
- 11 Jobling and Crowley (1996:264-265) comment that the producing agency and client prefer to describe the advertisements as “weird ... rather than surreal” and that the crux of the strategy’s reliance on surrealism may be regarded as no more than gratuitous postmodern style-raiding, which juxtaposes the product with suggestions of ‘high art’, rather than the expectation that the knowledge which spectators may or may not have of surrealist art and theory will determine their response to such symbolism.
- 12 In this regard, Keefer (1997:76-77) refers to feminist interpretations of design, for instance, Buckley’s article, “Made in patriarchy: towards a feminist analysis of women in design”, published in Margolin (1989:251-262).
- 13 Kinross (1992:13) cautions about the possibility of replacing “... a cult of great creators with one of great articulators”.

CHAPTER FIVE

DESIGN AND DECONSTRUCTION

ORIENTATION

The 1980s and early 1990s heralded a period in which the influence of poststructuralist ideas initiated an investigation of new aesthetic and communicative possibilities by graphic designers, variously identified in its practical articulation as ‘the new wave’, or ‘deconstructionist design’. This approach has exerted an influence well beyond its initial milieu of personal experimentation and projects for niche markets in subcultures, and has become the subject of intense and continuing debate in design. As an intellectual movement, post-structuralism may be characterised by extreme scepticism, the questioning of existing philosophic systems and a rejection of the approach of modern literary criticism that aimed to uncover meaning by studying the way in which form and content communicate essential humanistic messages. It is particularly associated with the theories and writing of French scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and their followers (Connor 1990; Miller & Lupton 1994; Selden 1989). Each of them has “looked at modes of representation ... as culturally powerfully technologies that transform and construct ‘reality’” (Lupton 1997:113).

Poststructuralism examines the premises of structuralism which presupposes that society and culture are underpinned by some essential, unifying and universal structures. Poststructuralism shifts the emphasis from centred structures as the key to understanding society and culture, to decentred structures in attempts to show that even so-called essential and basic structures can be broken down into further underlying structures that, in turn, can be broken down

themselves. It postulates that no final structure can be envisioned, and that no underlying truth is beyond questioning. Systems can therefore not be considered consistent or univocal and the possibility of coherent 'master codes or narratives' that ground meaning in a single totalising structure, are rejected. All that ultimately remains, is a free play of relationships between signs. Poststructuralism developed into the radical discourse of deconstruction under the influence of Jacques Derrida who pursued a penetrating interrogation of the intrinsic assumptions of Western metaphysical thinking (Connor 1990; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Lechte 1994; Miller & Lupton 1994; Selden 1989; Stevens 1996).

Three tendencies underlie Derrida's approach to philosophy and, more specifically, to the Western tradition of thought (Lechte 1994). These may be encapsulated as, firstly, a concern to reflect upon and undermine the Western tradition of dependence on the logic of identity. Secondly, the notion of *différance*, and an exploration of writing and language in the broadest sense as *différance*, constitute key components in Derrida's work. Finally, Derrida's approach is infused by a desire to maintain the creativity of philosophy that is exhibited both in the manner in which he undertakes textual analysis and critique, and in his complex and plural styles of writing (Lechte 1994:105-109). Derrida's body of work is extensive, with a conceptual and linguistic density that can only be hinted at in the following brief, and elementary summary that attempts to throw four points into relief: the instability of meaning, the definition of 'text', the question of evaluation, and creative liberation.

According to Derrida, the acceptance of the idea of a centre as the basis of Western thought may be regarded as exclusive, repressive and marginalising. Centring results in binary opposites (nature/culture, inside/outside, original/copy) in which one member of the pair is privileged and becomes entrenched, and inhibits the other member. Examples of this can be observed not only in philosophy, but in social, cultural and institutional practices like religion, mass media advertising, and so on. Deconstruction as a methodology and tactic sets out to reveal centrality and then attempts to subvert it so that the marginalised term becomes central, temporarily overthrowing the hierarchy. The new hierarchy is equally unstable and must ultimately give way,

resulting in the free play of binary opposites and many possible readings. This play of meaning goes on endlessly – each present reading emerges out of a prior one and is already dissolving into a future one. “There is no central configuration that attempts to freeze the play of the system, no marginal one, no privileged one, no repressed one. According to Derrida all language and all texts are, when deconstructed, like this...” (Powell 1997:29). Deconstructionist thinking has “moved philosophy away from meaning-centred discourse and into a sort of flirtatious game-playing around meaning, or with multi-meaning” (Byrne & Witte 1994:117).

Meaning is thus only ever produced within a complex play of relationships in which the final closure of meaning upon a point of original certainty is endlessly deferred. It is generated in a dynamic process or movement, described as *différance*. Derrida coined this term in the light of his research into the Saussurian and structuralist theory of language (Lechte 1994). According to De Saussure, the principle of structure dictates that the sign acquires meaning only as a result of its difference from other signs in the system. This structural principle presupposes that every sign in itself contains a trace of all those other elements with which it stands in a syntagmatic contrast or paradigmatic opposition. This trace implies a temporal dimension: the effect of differences is one of delay, postponement, or deferring an idea. “The passive effect of *différance* and the active process of *différance* caused by the traces inscribed in the signs result in a generative movement which makes interpretation a semantic process of infinite regression. This is why the text, the network of these traces, can have no ultimate meaning. Its interpretation becomes an uncontrollable process” (Nöth 1990:306).

The text itself is broadly viewed not as a self-contained, stable or autonomous entity, but as a differential network, an interwoven tapestry of meaning where intertextuality and context are imperative to its interpretation. Context is unbounded, and what remains outside the text is the latter’s very condition of possibility: “... the essence, or value, or meaning, of an interior never rests simply in this same interior in a permanent and stable manner, but rather results always from the concurrence of such an interior with its exterior – which is why a ‘same’ interior comes to differ in meaning if its ‘exterior’ context is

altered in any way" (Mayer 1997:26). The importance of intertextuality is confirmed by the notion that no text stands on its own, and each text opens continuously into other texts. Nothing remains outside the text, the boundaries that enclose it are dissolved. It is "a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (Derrida 1984:84). The text as a network of references is viewed by Derrida not as an object, but as 'a space' which allows the analyst and/or reader to recognise the potential for more diffuse and indeterminate positions and for the proliferation of endless meanings (Jobling & Crowley 1996; Stevens 1996).

Texts thus offer an open plurality of discourse where priorities continually dissolve and change. Meaning lies neither with the creator, reader or critic, nor with the text itself, but lies in a constantly shifting, intertextual process varying according to audience and circumstance. Within this process, creator and reader are essentially engaged in similar and ongoing activities where there is no possibility of closure and no statement can be regarded as final. Derrida stresses that nobody can 'own' a text, not even its creator is able to control or limit interpretation. By extension, there can be no appeal to any ultimate authority, or universal criteria as a means of validation. Evaluation thus becomes indefensible and virtually impossible (Miller & Lupton 1994; Norris 1982; Selden 1989).

While the autonomy of the text and notions of originality and authenticity are denied, in another and more practical sense, Derrida's work opens up avenues for new creativity: "... the critical reworking of the philosophic basis of the tradition in question results, perhaps unexpectedly, in a new emphasis on the individual autonomy and creativeness of the researcher/philosopher/reader" (Lechte 1994:109). This is exhibited by Derrida's work which offers endless examples of the blurring of boundaries and traditional distinctions, for instance, between 'critical' and 'creative' writing. Derrida not only critically questions the authority (primacy) of a text, but turns this same (primary) text into a source of new inspiration and creativity by means of speculative thought, a play on style and on free or 'improper' associations which reject accepted conventions (Lechte 1994; Lupton & Miller 1996).

The relevance and significance of deconstruction to graphic design may appear improbable at first glance, given deconstruction's transgressive approach and linguistic focus which seeks to draw out conflicting logics of meaning and "to underscore and problematise the complexity of communication" (Jobling & Crowley 1996:284). Nevertheless, it has exerted an influence on design over the last two decades, outlined here in terms of four responses:

- a direct and self-conscious subscription to and adoption of some of the ideas and methods of deconstruction that are interpreted literally, metaphorically, experimentally and functionally in practical applications and in an attitude to designing;
- a mode of design investigation that proposes a decontextualisation and a 'new' or 'alternative' examination and understanding of design which overturns previous or accepted views;
- an acknowledgement of deconstructionist characteristics in design applications, that are seen as an indirect assimilation of tendencies within the general cultural and/or design milieu rather than an alignment with the theory of deconstruction; and
- a sceptical attitude towards the premises of deconstructionist design and a questioning of its compatibility with the professional objectives of graphic design.

DESIGN RATIONALE, DESIGN STRATEGY AND MODE OF INVESTIGATION

The theoretic concepts and methods expounded by Derrida in his series of writings have been absorbed into graphic design theory and practice during the last two decades in three dominant ways. Deconstruction is seen to justify a design rationale which promotes and supports formal experimentation, self-expression and the confrontation of conventional design notions. Secondly, it has been deployed as a deliberate design strategy to engage directly with content in the realisation of specific objectives, for instance, to underscore the complexity of meaning in a text, or to transform meaning as an instrument of social comment or critique. Finally, it has provided alternative frameworks and modes for broadly examining design in terms of aspects such as fundamental

assumptions and historical interpretations.

Byrne and Witte (1994:117) maintain that, of all design forms, typographic design has been the most heavily influenced by deconstructionist ideas as it is “probably the most logical visual extension of deconstruction because of its basis in words and text.” Typographic deconstruction sets out to confront and subvert conventional ideologies and notions (e.g. of aesthetics, type or genre, discipline identity and functions). In its practical application, the conventional visual coding and hierarchy accomplished by style, size, weight and position of typographic elements on a page are dismantled and, in radical applications, text becomes texture. Typographic coding and modulation are often governed by language rather than convention (for example, articulating the content or context of significant words in the text through visual or literary punning). Conventional relationships between figure and ground, and inside and outside are inverted. The juxtaposition of visual elements in layout is based on context rather than traditional presuppositions (for example, the entire character of a particular page being determined by the subject of that page alone, rather than principles of visual continuity). In revolutionary applications, formulaic structure and syntax of both page and final object are redefined to create a new relationship between form and content specific to an individual piece of work. “Deconstruction brings into question and reshapes the entire typographic vocabulary, the orientation of the page, whether there should be a page, and whether type itself should do more than perform its basic historical function of being readable” (Byrne & Witte 1994:119).

Traditional and acknowledged principles of legibility are often considered to be irrelevant in deconstructionist design, and the notion of legibility often equated with familiarity: “... you read best what you read most” (type designer Zuzana Licko in Unger 1994:108). Typography is seen to have purposes that go beyond functional legibility and is used for illustration, atmosphere, entertainment, and self-expression. Explicit assumptions are that the typographic text should be a pleasurable experience, providing sensory and intellectual stimulation rather than being a vehicle for conveying concise information. “... [T]ypography should address our capacity for intuitive insight and simultaneous perception, and stimulate our senses as well as engage our intellect”

(Poynor 1994:87). The widely publicised work of designer David Carsons for the California magazines *Beach Culture* and *Ray Gun* illustrates how typography takes the place of content, rather than serving to present or interpret content (Lupton 1996:133).

A deconstructionist approach to typeface design rejects the traditional basis of classical and/or structuralist ideals, and is informed by a range of subjective, random, arbitrary, vernacular, literary, satirical and craft inspirations (Lupton 1996; Poynor 1994). This attitude, coupled to digital technology, has allowed for the proliferation of highly individualistic typefaces and a contemporary typographic landscape, “... rang[ing] from the austere classicism of the traditional book, to the sensational vocabularies of the mass media, to the technological utopianism of the avant-garde” (Lupton 1996:29). British designer Jonathan Barnbrook’s design of the typeface Burroughs exemplifies the extremities to which deconstructionist type design is taken. As the typeface is used, words generated on the computer screen are randomly turned into a nonsense poem, thus making “explicit reference to the literary technique of the writer William Burroughs, who ‘cut up’ his sentences to achieve random effects, but also ... to testify to the ‘arbitrary nature of the sign’” (Jobling & Crowley 1996:284).¹ Even the exposure, dissemination and marketing of innovative type fonts to the design industry no longer rests with conventional type producers and distributors, but has shifted to independent font producers and publications like *Emigré*, an international design magazine devoted to experimental design and typography. “The dissemination of typefaces has become a form of underground publishing, in which the medium is, quite literally, the message” (Lupton 1996:55).

This attitude and approach to design has been fuelled by formal experimentation “conducted in the kind of laboratory atmosphere of graphic design departments in various colleges around the world (notably at the Cranbrook School in Michigan and at the British Royal College of Art)” (Jobling & Crowley 1996:284). Undertaken as part of an intellectual discourse in the 1980s, in particular, formal experimentation demanded that design should be interpreted on its own terms beyond objective content. Within this ambit, the theory of deconstruction constituted an essential basis for visual exploration. Core

chaos. South African designer Jan Erasmus (1993:23) stresses the importance of “[a] fine balance ... A layout which becomes too chaotic through personal explorations tends to minimise relevance to the contents of the message and ‘comes apart at the seams’, resulting in the loss of the reader.” Other designers emphasise the proactive role of the reader in constructing personal meaning or appear to regard the reader of lesser importance. Vienne (1997:11) comments on the deconstructionist design approach adopted by *Ray Gun*, a publication targeted at a popular music readership: “... *Ray Gun* isn’t meant to be read. It is a forum for design disguised as a music mag forced upon the unbeknownst musicians who purchase it.”

This comment also echoes general perceptions that the experimental and self-expressive approach promoted by deconstructionist graphic design is a form of internal design dialogue. Lupton and Miller (1996) comment on designers’ fascination with formal experimentation which is a poetic and expressive, rather than a political and social approach to deconstruction. Jobling and Crowley (1996:285) maintain that the kind of experimentation promoted by deconstructionist design neither seeks to promote or prefigure social change, but is “primarily concerned with redirecting the practice of design itself”. In South Africa, the design magazine *i-jusi* may be considered to epitomise this objective.

In contrast to an experimental or self-expressive approach, a more considered approach uses deconstruction as a deliberate strategy to engage with content. The aim is not to allow an infinite variety of ‘personal’ interpretations, but to manipulate and exploit design, pictorial and typographic functions explicitly in the achievement of specific objectives. While some approaches set out to support and amplify content or to reveal its multidimensionality and ambiguity, others align objectives with a poststructuralist view that “the power of signs is profoundly social, yielding a critique rather than a celebration of humanist notions of taste and originality” (Lupton & Miller 1996:9). Here design tactics are used for critical purposes to destroy rigid preconceptions and impositions of order, mock and denigrate dominant values and force a reconsideration of entrenched prejudices in a variety of ways by exposing ideological biases within representations. Often used by activist groups to express

opposition to prevailing orthodoxies, the meanings of signs are inverted, subverted and transformed in various ways. Design techniques of self-conscious referentiality and intertextuality, and the adaptation of the graphic languages of mainstream communications (e.g. the seductive and indulgent imagery of advertising), seek to reject dominant representations by turning meaning in on itself as a form of critical practice. Media messages are diverted with graphic interventions and superimpositions in the form of additions such as printed captions in the style of the original manifestation or message, graffiti or overprinted images, which ridicule the original meaning and the embedded ideologies that they reproduce (Heller 1994; Jobling & Crowley 1996; Lupton & Miller 1996; Margolin 1997; McQuiston 1993).²

Deconstructionist design as an authoring strategy, or a means to extend and reveal meaning(s), finds its precedents in both the theory of deconstruction and the manner in which Derrida utilised the material forms and processes of typography and graphic nuances in his own writings to serve his own critical and literary ends. “The visual resources of typography are instrumental to Derrida’s dissection of Western art and philosophy” (Lupton & Miller 1996:11). Derrida’s seminal text, *Of Grammatology* deconstructs De Saussure’s prioritisation of speech over writing and considers writing as an active form of representation rather than a copy of spoken language. Derrida focuses on the rhetorical and typographical forces of writing and stresses the visual and graphic and non-phonetic characteristics of written language by drawing attention to the differentiating typographic aspects of layout, spacing, capitalisation and punctuation (Byrne & Witte 1994; Lupton & Miller 1996).

Typographic strategies are used in *Glas* where opposing positions for literature and philosophy are reinforced by juxtaposing two parallel columns of text printed side by side in different typefaces to suggest heterogeneous voices and modes of writing. Throughout Derrida’s writings, graphic devices are employed to illustrate difficult concepts or subtle contradictions in meanings. Abbreviated typographic solutions are utilised to encapsulate and collapse complex ideas, for example, a word crossed through indicates that the term is ‘under erasure’- essential to the text, but inadequate in conveying the desired complexity of meaning. It also signals the adoption of flexibility in reading,

where interpretations may be wiped out and replaced by alternatives. The concept of simultaneous 'absence' and 'presence' is synoptically explained by indicating the phonetic similarity, but orthographic variances between written and spoken words, for instance *différance* and *différence* (Byrne & Witte 1994; Lupton & Miller 1996; Van Eeden & Gräbe 1994)

In a similar vein, deconstructionist design strategies seek to clarify abstractions and ideas and to extend communication in ways that the formulaic and uniform treatment of visual elements might obscure. In academic publishing, traditionally ultraconservative in the maintenance of entrenched typographic and design conventions, this approach to the visual interpretation of theoretical texts is manifested in a number of ways: matching typographic analogues to editorial content; allowing typographic treatments to impose their own veil of commentary on texts; integrating non-academic formats (e.g. verbatim interviews, timelines) into standard texts; incorporating interdisciplinary content as a form of discourse; and actively translating other media (e.g. complex installations and hybrid objects) into the academic medium (Lupton 1996).³

The deconstructionist perspective demands that the reader comprehends and accounts for complex differences in signification and pursues an appreciation that, at one level, a text may mean something and, at another level, it might mean exactly the opposite. In direct response to this, deconstructionist design often employs strategies like layering and positioning to amplify and reveal different levels of meaning in a text. "... [E]ach layer, through the use of language and image, is an intentional performer in a deliberately playful game wherein the viewer can discover and experience the hidden complexities of language" (Byrne & Witte 1994:118). Tactics like the positioning or superimposing of selected portions of text directly over the appropriate area of a related image, in order to comment on or emphasise aspects of their association, encourage and create a visual dialogue that expands the meaning of both.

This mode of application and design rationale demands a highly design-literate audience.⁴ It also demands that designers subject each text to close study and that they bring acute insights to their readings of texts. It assumes a view of the designer's role that transcends the one usually ordained by commerce,

and positions the designer as an author or editor of sorts, where authorship is accepted as shared between writer and/or editor and designer or even as the sole prerogative of the designer. Lupton and Miller (1996:20) envisage this as a viable role for contemporary design(ers) and would like to see that the relevance of deconstruction receives due recognition: "Instead of viewing it as an 'ism' of the late-80s and early-90s, we see it as part of the ongoing development of design and typography as distinctive modes of representation".⁵ In addition, they firmly support deconstruction as a significant and valuable mode of design investigation.

A study of graphic design, informed by a deconstructionist mode of investigation, aims to reveal new perspectives by re-examining the language, materials, processes and assumptions of the discipline. It often calls for a radical decontextualisation of subject matter or for the avoidance of any type of traditional interpretation or evaluation. As an act of interrogation, it parallels Derrida's original method and intent that allow a counter or alternative view to emerge. For instance, Derrida's crucial oppositions of interior and exterior, or speech and writing, could be formulated into parallel design questions, for example: "how does visual form get inside the content of writing? How has typography refused to be a passive, transparent vessel for written texts, developing as a system with its own structures and devices?" (Lupton 1997:114). Mills (1994:130) suggests that deconstruction provides a means to scrutinise all aspects constituting the design value system and offers a penetrating method of analysis that could "radically alter not only the appearance, but the organisation, study, and historicising of design."

Mayer (1997) utilises a deconstructionist orientation and methodology to interrogate the fundamental assumption that graphic design is a purely visual field. In an exemplary execution of Derridian precepts and methods, he argues that the definitive nature of graphic design is constituted by the 'non-visual' rather than the 'visual'. Mayer substantiates his view through an exposition that contends that the visual can only be apprehended by way of the non-visual, and defers specifically to interior and exterior visual relationships and the significance of context in the constitution of meaning and identity. Furthermore, he stresses that the very possibility of any visual value, essence or meaning lies in

the possibility of its translation into non-visual registers: “there is no way of knowing what a graphic ‘circle’ is if it is not possible to know too what a ‘circular’ sonorous structure might be ... what might be a form when touched suggests ‘circularity’, or what might be any other non-visual phenomenon which suggests a recurrent cycle” (Mayer 1997:27). By extension, graphic design would benefit from close collaboration with the blind, who ironically, could demonstrate to designers “the precise sense in which their activity is visual and the massive degree to which it is not” (Mayer 1997:28). This would assist them to a better understanding of their discipline and enable them to view the essential nature of design with greater abstraction and versatility and to reconcile theoretical reflection and practice effectively.

Lupton and Miller (1996:15-22) detail how a deconstructionist orientation to the history of typography could provide an insight into structure and patterns within the material media of visual and verbal writing. Rather than a chronology, or conventional explanations driven by technology, style or designer profiles, this orientation deploys deconstructionist precepts to present a counter-history that shows “how graphic design has revealed, revised or ignored the accepted rules of communication” (Lupton & Miller 1996:20). By visually juxtaposing historical examples, they demonstrate how typographic form, structures and techniques have fulfilled neutral, supportive, invasive, contradictory and innovative roles in the presentation of content and in the evolution of printed genres. Typical deconstructionist concepts and methods of questioning are deployed to describe, explore and analyse the borders between the inside and the outside of texts, the split between form and content, the intrusion of visual form into verbal content through the inversion of figure/ground relationships, juxtapositions of type and image, and the disintegrating coherence and status of graphic design objects across a period of time.

Lupton and Miller stress that such typographic inventions can represent “either deliberate, critical confrontations or haphazard, casual encounters with the social, technological, and aesthetic pressures that shape the making of texts” (1996:20). Similarly Byrne and Witte (1994:116) point out that the contemporary absorption and re-interpretation of deconstruction in graphic design have been active both “directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowing-

ly." Many designers working in deconstructionist directions have little direct knowledge or understanding of its philosophical origins. Even renowned designer David Carsons – identified in the literature as an archexponent of deconstruction, particularly for his work on the magazines *Ray Gun* and *Beach Culture* – disclaims any theoretical basis to, or other direct influences on his work, which he says results from "my computer and intuition" (Blackwell 1997:np).

STYLE AND OPPOSITIONAL VIEWS

Many design commentators dispute the direct influence of critical thought and philosophy on deconstructionist design, preferring to see it as a period style or a banner for a range of styles that incorporates a cluster of visual features and repertoires of visual mannerisms. These are casually labelled as chopped-up, layered, fragmented, textured, complex and digital. Deconstructionist tendencies are attributed more to the outflow of the liberating, versatile and enabling power of digital technology; the current dissemination, filtering, circulation and recycling of ideas and design solutions through the international mechanisms of graphic design itself; and as a response to the evolutionary temperament of contemporary culture (Byrne & Witte 1994; Kinross 1997; Meggs 1994; Poynor 1994; Van Eeden & Gräbe 1994; Vienne 1997).

"We live in a deconstructed world, a world agitated by more and more complexity, where the attention span diminishes hourly (turning us into a society of information grazers) and values appear to change weekly. It is inevitable that heretofore clear and supposedly resolved notions about what design does and the way it does it will begin to blur and ultimately reshape themselves" (Byrne & Witte 1994:116). Vienne (1997) agrees that general attitudes of irreverence, confrontation and disregard for the paternal authority of the word have helped to legitimise complexity, density, ambiguity, uninterpretability and formal experimentation in design. She further comments that individualism has been fuelled by digital working conditions, (e.g. physical isolation, creative liberation), and by certain types of projects (e.g. niche markets in subcultures, personal projects).

The relevance of the digital environment is significant. Not only has it offered creative empowerment to designers, but it precludes the need for many typographic conventions. For instance, the functional purpose of the grid as an organiser and as a unifying structure previously had to be applied as a rigid and consistent structure across an application for production and economic reasons. Computers allow designers to organise empirically, enabling more responsive grids, an exploration of other means of organisation and the elimination of any cohesive structures if so desired (Byrne & Witte 1994). Experimental work being done in the electronic environment has emphasised the nature of typographic perception, reading strategies and the interactive control of sequence and movement through information. Kinross (1997a) argues that digital transmission with its hypertext, intercut and layered with other information or other kinds of media, provides a different experience from that of reading the printed page and has offered designers an inspirational model. Here fluidity and the possibility of change better support the deconstructionist model and rhetoric about the active reader.

The deployment of deconstruction in mainstream design applications may be observed with varying intensity, from surface traces that appear within restricted and conventional structures and hierarchies, to the coded languages of defined groups who are reached through specific products and media usage. Whereas cyberspace and youth cultures were the initial arenas of application – “Illegible typefaces are the graffiti of cyberspace” (Vienne 1997:11) – deconstructionist tactics like layering, ambiguity and subversion, are increasingly used in corporate communications and advertising for visual impact and to capture the attention of a visually overloaded public. In this environment even illegibility has been allocated a specific function. Vienne (1997:11) quotes a comment by a Nike art director: “illegibility is ‘appropriate to the function’ of the product, which is to express irreverence.” While deconstruction as a style and marketing tactic might to be acceptable,⁶ the legitimisation of design liberty and perceptions of the designer as author appear to be less acceptable to critics who focus on a number of key issues. Legibility of typefaces and texts, the attitude of designers, dimensions of reading, theoretical foundations and social responsibility have all been highlighted in critical considerations of deconstructionist design.

The question of legibility is a theme that consistently runs through the history of graphic design and it is one which has been thrown into relief by the deconstructionist orientation in terms of its definition and its desirability. Arguments and revisionist statements offered by design deconstructionists on these matters are criticised for being biased, superficial and elemental. Unger (1994) maintains that arguments about legibility are often counter-productive and static rather than revolutionary. An historical review reveals how rules and definitions of legibility have been consistently based on practical experience, common agreement, emotion and the designer's subjective need for change, rather than on scientific foundations and underlying theories. Both Unger (1994) and Vienne (1997) propose that the concept of legibility can only be understood through a broader and more detailed reflection on the act of reading. This must entail an examination of what reading essentially is and how it functions, rather than the blanket rejection, adopted by advocates of deconstruction, of the optical and readability standards determined through conventional research studies or tacit assumptions. Important considerations could include subjective experiences, intentions and expectations of comprehensibility in reading; the physical and visual contexts of reading; communication objectives; and visual literacy factors.

While acknowledging the value and power of some deconstructionist work, Fenton (1997) and Vienne (1997) criticise the emphasis on self-expression and authorial dominance as self-indulgent, arrogant, indiscriminate and insensitive. In their view, design as a form of authorship often disregards the text, the original intentions of the writer and the resonance of language. It overvalues ambiguity and irony. Fenton, in particular, feels that it does an injustice to serious literature which it over-interprets and suffocates. Surface effects and stylish clichés are often passed off as depth and complexity. He further maintains that the emphasis on self-expression shows a lack of regard for the reader. It is intrusive and denies the reader the opportunity to experience the text himself. Vienne (1997:12) agrees that the tendency to self-expression does not afford the reader the opportunity to determine and extract relevant information from a text. Critics point out that deconstructionist design has failed to achieve stated intentions, particularly those concerned with 'free' interpretation. Paradoxically, deconstructionist design has become a romantic notion,

exactly that which its literary originators sought to destroy.

Fenton (1997) accuses deconstructionist design arguments of lacking intellectual rigour. Proclamations by designers using the terminology and tone of progressive social movements often result in meaningless rhetoric, which is trite, trivial and naive. Ultimately deconstructionist design is socially irresponsible resulting in “vandalism rather than revolution.” According to Fenton, language itself is being subverted and literacy killed on the grounds of enticing the reader or acknowledging diversity. He is “... disturbed by the penchant of contemporary typographers for inserting yet more self-expression into an already narcissistic society and for creating confusion in a world which already seems sufficiently confused” (Fenton 1997:33). Meggs (1994:188) echoes these sentiments. He maintains that graphic design should speak with “a public voice ... [and that] ... arcane language or obscure signification merely cause people in our overcommunicated, postindustrial society to turn away ...”

Deconstructionist design has failed to acknowledge the functional role and purposes of both typographic designer and typographic design, and has ignored the nature of reading, according to Kinross (1997a, 1997b). The emphasis on poststructuralism has produced “... designers who might be well versed in Foucault, Barthes, and theories of discursive space, but who can’t place a heading so that it belongs unambiguously to the text ...” (Kinross 1997b:93). He suggests that inadequate attention has been bestowed on examining the ways in which writing may be configured other than as continuous text, for instance, in tables, lists, formulae and many other forms for which no agreed descriptive terminology currently exists. “These systems of configuration may be used almost unthinkingly, every working day, by typographers, editors, typesetters, and typists. And yet discussions about reading, legibility, print, and the future of the book seem to know only continuous text (a page of a novel, most typically) as their object of reference” (1997a:21).

Kinross maintains that poststructuralism is fundamentally flawed and has limited value as a model for design for a number of reasons. It misinterpreted De Saussure’s original text in its acceptance of meaning as ‘arbitrary’ rather than ‘unmotivated’ and it ignored his acknowledgement that language is created by

a community and that it is used within the constraints of this larger, communal understanding.⁷ Furthermore, poststructuralism does not allow for the differentiation between writing and the essential nature and function of typography and printing as ‘multiplied’ language with a material basis linked to production processes “... of specification and worldly intervention between texts, commissioners, printers and producers” (1997a:22). According to Kinross, even Derrida does not provide “any extended materialist or worldly concept of language: no distinction between texts that are written and those that are typeset, printed, distributed, and sold” (1997a:26). This thinking remains an abstract and intellectual pursuit. In Kinross’ view, deconstructionist design arguments are “a mishmash of the obvious and the absurd” (1997a:19) which possess insufficient rigour and neglect to adopt a social stance, preferring to occupy themselves with ‘free-for-all meaning’, style and resistance to tradition.

For Kinross, “... the idea that design should act out the indeterminacy of reading is a folly” which negates the intersubjective and communal dimensions of reading (1997a:23). While he acknowledges that the process of reading and interpretation is individual and unpredictable, Kinross stresses the critical importance and role of typography and printing in joint reflection and in uniting and connecting individuals within a community and society, by referring to the history of print culture and print languages to support his point. The view expressed by Kinross that typography is inherently communal and essential to the mediation of diversity, the facilitation of common understanding and the fostering of civic values, is echoed in rhetorical theories of design. Ideas regarding the mediation of complexity and diversity, and the power of design to tap into social values and common understanding, are integral to considerations of design as a form of practical argumentation and as a process of reciprocal engagement between design and audience.

NOTES

- 1 Vienne (1997:11) quotes designer Barnbrook as saying that he finds his own typefaces difficult to use. He sees them as "... individual elements rather than part of the larger discourse" and maintains that "[t]he tension between authority and its destruction is a constant theme in my work."
- 2 Within design itself, vehicles like the magazine *Adbusters* provide a platform for popular activist groups to align themselves with alternative viewpoints. The magazine adopts a consistently subversive approach to the ideas and visual manifestations of consumer culture and related ideologies, which is expressed in both editorial and visual content, as well as in visual treatment.
- 3 The article, "Blind designers: a proposal for schools of design", published in *Image & Text* (1998, 7:24-31) demonstrates the use of a deconstructionist approach in an academic medium. Here design is deployed as a strategy to support academic and theoretical content and ideas. For instance, crucial concepts of interior and exterior relationships are played out in the placement of main text between two sets of side notes and in diverse circular manifestations. These also illustrate the idea of essence and identity; and 'translation' related to non-visual sensory modes and in terms of dimensionality. The idea of circularity (essence, identity) is reinforced by centring and type runarounds, instead of a justified setting style. Strict academic conventions of subdued typographic tones and even texture are replaced with varying type sizes and weights which are used to emphasise key statements and ideas in the text.
- 4 As a counter to the proposition that deconstructionist design is best suited to a highly literate audience, Van Eeden and Gräbe (1994:28) quote the view of designer Erasmus that it has relevance particularly to South Africa with its multicultural population comprising differing levels of education and visual literacy. It allows access to a text perhaps previously denied by entrenched typographic conventions.
- 5 In their own series of writing and publications on design, Lupton and Miller, who are both practising designers, consistently use design as a tool of analysis, explication and extension, and as a means to merge design theory and practice in a concrete way.
- 6 Reference can be made to the increasing prevalence and acceptance internationally and in South Africa of a category called 'guerrilla advertising' which consciously attempts to subvert and overturn traditional visual, medium and production conventions with the specific aim of establishing a presence in competitive environments. Paradoxically, the same visual tactics initially employed for social critique have been appropriated and legitimised by the commercial mainstream.
- 7 Kinross (1997:20) quotes the following passage from De Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*: "The word arbitrary also calls for comment. It must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker. (We shall see later that the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community.) The term implies simply that the signal is unmotivated: that is to say, arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connection in reality."

CHAPTER SIX

DESIGN AS VISUAL RHETORIC

ORIENTATION

Rhetorical theories tend to regard communication as an invention of arguments (logical, ethical or emotional) that induce acceptance or identification in an audience. A perception of visual communication as practical and influential argumentation and graphic designers as communicators “who seek to discover convincing arguments by means of a new synthesis of images and words” (Buchanan 1994a:10), has shifted thinking in graphic design away from the consideration of formalistic expression and the critical approaches of semiotic and deconstructionist design analyses. Emphasis is given to the formulation of discursive relationships among and between graphic designers, audiences and the content of design communications.

A consideration of design as visual rhetoric rejects the premises of modernism and objectivity, as well as mechanistic views of communication as the transfer of a state of mind from the speaker to the audience – a passing of information and emotion. Communication is regarded as uniquely motivated and contingent on a unique response, and emphasis is placed on the role of audience and the active engagement between designer and/or design and user. Buchanan (1989) contends that rhetorical theories provide an alternative to the negativity of poststructuralists who emphasise industrial capitalism as the matrix which sets the parameters for design activity and provides the material for social critique. Rhetoric also provides a valuable contrast to semiotic theories of communication, which he feels are essentially grammatical, and to Marxist or other dialectical theories that regard communication as significant only in

relation to some economic or spiritual truth. Design thinking in its broadest sense may be viewed as a new form of rhetoric, or practical reasoning and argumentation, suited to an age of technology (Buchanan 1994a).

Rhetoric as a framework for design production and analysis finds its precedent in antiquity, where the core art of rhetoric established a basis for systematic thought. The art of rhetoric provided the techniques, defined the standards, shaped the style of the message and outlined the body of rules to be observed in creating and judging both polished literary forms and common discourses. The rhetoric of discourse was connected with wider popular and general participation in democratic governance and public institutions. Boorstin (1993:221) states that, “[e]ver since Plato’s time the arts of persuasion have been associated with popular institutions, with the pursuit of compromise and the acceptance of relative and temporary solutions instead of the pursuit of Truth, of the utopian and the ideal.” According to Boorstin (1993:220-229), Isocrates (436-338 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC) and Demosthenes (382-322 BC) were chiefly instrumental in systematising the body of knowledge pertaining to rhetoric. Forms or models of rhetoric were classified into forensic (judicial), deliberative (political) and epideictic (daily life, ceremonial) according to where they were to be used. The temporal orientation of past, future and present was allocated to each model, respectively, and the best prose style for each was described. Demosthenes provided real-life models for every form of public persuasion, demonstrating particularly the importance of rhetoric as a political weapon where the dominant spirit was a posture of attack.

Aristotle regarded rhetoric not as a science, as it had no special subject matter, but as a mode for action aimed at the probable to which men could be persuaded. According to him, the three main forces of persuasion were the character of the speaker, the emotion of the audience, and the powers of logic (Boorstin 1993). The chief object of rhetoric is eloquence and, for Aristotle, rhetoric was thus specifically concerned with “discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation either to instruct an audience (rational appeal), to please an audience and win it over (ethical appeal), or to move it (emotional appeal)” (Ehse 1989:188).

It is necessary to differentiate between popular definitions of rhetoric as artificial or ostentatious expression and manipulation, and the classical view of rhetoric as the literary and oratory art of using language eloquently to convince or influence. Despite negative connotations and articulated prejudices,¹ persuasion is not necessarily an underhand device, but has come to be accepted “not as fraudulent procedure but a technique of ‘reasonable’ human interaction controlled by doubt and explicitly subject to many extralogical conditions” (Ehses 1989:188). This perception has been influenced by thinking and work in language studies and exponents of ‘the new rhetoric’ that reinforce a view of communication as functionally determined, and by opinions on the relativity of knowledge. Ehses (1989:188) quotes semiotician Umberto Eco in this regard: “Almost all human reasoning about facts, decisions, opinions, beliefs, and values is not longer considered to be based on the authority of Absolute Reason but instead intertwined with emotional elements, historical evaluations, and pragmatic motivations.”²

The spirit of rhetoric is overwhelmingly pragmatic, presupposing the possibility of choice and the selection of appropriate means to achieve desired ends. Ehses (1989) feels that pragmatism firmly connects design and rhetoric. Choice is a key term in design and as a communication-oriented discipline, design always has to pay attention to pragmatic motivations and functional considerations. Design has rhetorical dimensions and Ehses maintains that the knowledge and application of rhetorical principles and devices can enhance visual communication and facilitate audience interaction in both rational and emotional ways.

Although the study of persuasive communication has a history of more than two millennia, the focus of this scholarly tradition has tended to be on linguistic and verbal strategies. The systematic investigation of visual rhetoric is still in its infancy and the manner in which design as rhetoric is structured, presented and understood is currently explored from diverse perspectives:

- as a means to conceive and express visual ideas, and as a consideration of the way in which devices, techniques, structures and intent are used in the invention, construction and presentation of design statements;

- as the idea of argument which connects all the elements of design and becomes an active engagement between designer and audience or potential audience. The designer creates a convincing argument that comes to life whenever a user considers or uses design as a means to some end. Design becomes a form of discourse between the design and/or designer and the audience who may be influenced to adopt new means, values, or attitudes to achieve certain objectives;
- as a debate in which opposing views about issues that make up the texture of postmodern, postindustrial living (e.g. technology, daily life, identity) are placed in the public arena. Design thus presents and represents arguments about how life should be lived; and
- as an underlying characteristic of all design which can be utilised for the purposes of revealing embedded ideologies, and as a basis for a unifying theory for design which serves to consolidate disparate design disciplines as well as link design practice to theoretical reflection.

DESIGN STATEMENTS AND DESIGN ARGUMENTS

The system of classical rhetoric formulated basic principles and precepts for the production of a message based on five stages: discovery and invention of ideas and arguments; arrangement of ideas and arguments; forms of expression; memorisation; and means of delivery appropriate to the argument and audience (Buchanan 1994a; Ehses 1989). The pattern of rhetoric in contemporary design thinking builds on these distinctions, frequently concentrating particularly on the third phase which deals with expression and style. Rhetorical figures, or figures of speech are considered to be crucial stylistic and expressive tools with which to lend credibility, emotional appeal, novelty and innovation to a design argument. Aneceshi (1996) refers to them as figures of visibility. In graphic design, rhetorical figures are employed to make ideas vivid and memorable and to add vitality and impact to communication.

The essence of a rhetorical figure lies in the artful departure from an ordinary method of expression. In linguistic and verbal articulation, rhetorical figures are usually divided into two groups: schemes (departures from the usual positions of words in sentences) and tropes (departures from the usual significance

of words and idioms). At an elementary level in design theory, attention has focused on taking up the rules, categorisation and classification of tropes in the design lexicon. Many introductory texts (Meggs 1992; Morgan & Welton 1986; Walker & Chaplin 1997) illustrate their visual duplication and classify them into groups using criteria of resemblance (simile, metaphor, personification); contrast (antithesis, irony); contiguity (metonymy, synecdoche, periphrasis, puns, homophones, homonyms); gradation (amplification, hyperbole, litotes); repetition (alliteration, assonance, rhyme); imitation (parody, quotation, paraphrase); and symbolic representation (allegory). Metonym and metaphor are particularly prevalent in visual argumentation where they are deployed to invoke generalised associations and forge conceptual connections.

Ehlses (1989:187-198) views rhetoric as the central issue in making design statements. According to him, design involves two major operations: the formation of visual concepts and their graphic visualisation. Both rhetorical principles and rhetorical figures are highly relevant to these stages. Ehlses illustrates this by means of the design of a poster publicising the performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The central problem in designing the poster involves finding an idea that expresses the play in some respect or capacity, and then translating this idea into a visual manifestation. The designer essentially has to forge a meaningful relationship between the form of the content (i.e. the textual characteristics of the play) and the form of expression (i.e. the graphic poster).

To identify an appropriate visual concept, the designer must consider the interplay of two sign systems (linguistic and visual)³ and find a suitable rhetorical pattern (e.g. metaphor: *Macbeth* is a human beast) which will allow the creation of a graphic image with an equivalent meaning nucleus (e.g. a stylised man/beast head wearing a crown). Graphic encoding of the idea is likewise governed by rhetorical figures. For instance, to express the concept of a human/beast or 'beastness' graphically, the designer can omit certain features of a human face and substitute them with the features of a predatory animal. The underlying rhetorical figure that is deployed, is an oxymoron, the yoking of two terms that are usually contradictory, to produce a startling effect. Expert use of design media and techniques enables refinement and the achievement

of finer visual nuances in the visualisation. Ehses compares this to the use of adjectives and adverbs to modify and qualify nouns and verbs in a sentence. According to him, rhetorical procedure constitutes a secondary grammar, of which the understanding presupposes a basic knowledge of the grammatical forms and lexical content that were departed from in transforming a literal order into a higher rhetorical order. Successful application is also governed by an audience's ability to perceive the difference between the substitute and the substituted way of expression and to reference any pre-existing cultural knowledge that may have contributed to the ideas and expression in a design.⁴

Buchanan (1989) proposes that a design argument comprises three elements or qualities: technological reasoning, character and emotion (logos, ethos and pathos). These are interrelated by the designer in various ways to provide the substance and form of design communication. Technological reasoning entails a mechanical premise (natural and scientific principles) and a human premise (human circumstances that include the attitudes and values of potential users and viewers and the physical conditions of use). The individual expression of the premises and their syntheses are the fundamental sources of persuasion in design arguments. For instance, a design solution may present a functional argument (overt or covert suggestions for use) or a metaphorical argument which invites the audience to participate, and often encourages complex imaginative processes. In essence, technological reasoning is the way in which the designer manipulates materials and processes to solve specific problems and to suggest that a design is useful for a specific purpose and to a specific group. Buchanan (1989:98-99) maintains that audiences can be divided into two broad groups. Firstly, specialists who can follow and judge technological reasoning as a process. Secondly, a general audience who are only concerned with results and have limited abilities to follow complex trains of technological reasoning. Two fundamental issues in contemporary design are the extent to which a general audience should be involved in the process of technological reasoning and the identification of different ways to engage the mind of the audience and convey or make this reasoning more accessible.

Although sometimes used to conceal poor technological reasoning, the other two elements of design arguments, character and emotion, may enhance the

persuasiveness of a design and the satisfaction to be had in using or engaging with it, by complementing good technological reasoning. The designer imbues an object or image with certain characteristics or specific qualities which will engender confidence in potential users and persuade them that the design has credibility in their lives. Persuasive forces could be that the design conveys a sense of being sensible and practical, mysterious and elegant, familiar and comfortable and so on. Buchanan suggests that one of the reasons why post-modern designs, which present “an ethos of spirited, unruly, and sometimes intelligent imagination”, have little authority among the general public is because they “lack virtue or trustworthiness as judged by the standards of mass audiences” (1989:102). The resources for emotional persuasion are generated by “physical contact with an object or from active contemplation of objects before, during, and after use” (Buchanan 1989:103). The aim of emotional persuasion is to suggest to an audience that a design is desirable or valuable in their lives and to encourage them to identify with the expressive qualities reflected through aspects like style or the deployment of visual techniques such as colour, line, scale, texture and pattern used to reinforce specific experiences.⁵

For Buchanan, design arguments are a form of demonstrative rhetoric, “growing out of the past (as in traditional shapes and forms or in already known scientific principles that provide the premises for construction and structure) and suggesting possibilities for the future (as in future activities that a given object may make possible), yet existing primarily in the present as declarations” (1989:107). Designed objects and images ask for recognition through all three modes of argument. Convincing and credible arguments enable a design to declare its identity, presence and ‘use-value’ as well as the ideas and beliefs that inform the process of design (e.g. technical, ergonomic, stylistic, specific context). If design affects and shapes attitudes, it does so through persuasive assertions which may be recognised or not, rejected or accepted by potential audiences.

The recognition that design solutions can easily be perceived by the public as proposals to be accepted, resisted or refuted, assumes that the audience is a dynamic participant in the creation of meaning and that effective communica-

tion must be directed by an audience's responsive capacity. Functionally, aesthetically and economically excellent design solutions sometimes do not initiate the desired response or gain acceptance and use. Balaram (1994:140) reminds us that "meaning is in the mind of the beholder" and that designers have to "educate that beholder's mind or make use of myths already existing, beliefs already held, or meanings already familiar to the mind of that beholder." The designer must discover specific forms of address which evoke responses from diverse audiences and which will allow the unfolding of acceptable arguments.

Tyler (1994:104-112) provides a comprehensive view of the interactive nature of design argumentation based on an analysis of primary communication goals (induce action, educate, create an experience); the use of formal devices and strategies; the use of existing beliefs; and the role of the audience in accomplishing the communication goals. This analysis methodically elucidates the core idea of the argument; how formal devices are used to position the audience (i.e. observer, self-identification, voyeur); the types of beliefs referenced and their mode of presentation; and how the audience transfers, replaces, transforms, maintains or rejects existing beliefs. She states that it is "the use of existing beliefs, as much as the attempt to induce new beliefs, that contributes to maintaining, questioning or transforming social values through argument" (Tyler 1994:105).

For instance, a poster advertising the New York Aquarium persuades an audience to visit the institution by promising them an emotional experience. The poster presents an argument which defines and describes a future situation – if one attends A, one will feel B. Formal devices (scale, angle, and proximity of the image, pastel colours and soft focus, layout and composition) place the audience in a position of intimacy, while referencing and reinforcing beliefs regarding the friendly and mutually beneficial relationship between individuals and nature (Tyler 1994:105-106). A review of an educational brochure demonstrates how audiences are persuaded to accept the credibility of information about a swamp's ecosystem as factual and scientific. Existing beliefs about the logical and rational order of nature are referenced and formal devices are used to present the information in a highly organised and systematic way

and in a manner that projects an objective and authoritative tone (Tyler 1994:109).

In both these examples, the audience is expected to transfer existing beliefs to the subjects of the communication material. Other examples dealt with by Tyler show how design arguments are constructed to place audiences in positions of confrontation or ambiguity where a greater degree of active participation is demanded. Audiences are asked to transform their own values or to consider certain values which have been displayed (rather than reinforced), and then make a personal decision about them. The controversial series of advertisements for Benetton, the clothing manufacturer, are cited as examples that suggest the audience's deeper engagement with the communication process (Tyler 1994:111-112). These advertisements, which have included images normally considered intensely private or socially unacceptable, create an experience for the audience through the display of social values. The images are used without any explanatory or contextualising text and presented in a documentary style. The audience is placed in the position of voyeur and no attempt is made to persuade them to adopt a particular belief. They are left to draw their own conclusions about communication intention and to arrive at a personal orientation.

Of some importance to design in South Africa with its developing communities, is Balaram's (1994:127-143) suggestion that design should expressively tap into the cultural myths of a society as a means of evoking a response from an audience. Writing from within the context of Indian design, he criticises contemporary Indian designers for adopting a Western approach that is predominantly analytical, intellectual and logical and for failing to understand the deep significance of symbolic relationships in the everyday lives of Indians. He proposes that contemporary designers should support and interpret the powerful myths of Indian culture in a way which facilitates credible and convincing communication. Unfortunately, designers and theorists are "often attracted to the surface appearance of these mythological forms, to their grammar and medium as opposed to their social roots. This superficiality is perpetuated by a simplistic and historical semiotics that analyses whole forms into separate signs and symbols at the neglect of references to the larger mythologies that

underlie the stories of everyday life in India” (Balaram 1994:128).

As a supreme example of credible and meaningful persuasive communication, Balaram holds up the rhetorical devices and symbolic strategies adopted by Mohandas Gandhi, leader of India’s independence movement. Gandhi’s rhetoric “not only conveyed certain values but raised political awareness and successfully persuaded the Indian masses to adopt certain attitudes towards the economy and form a [historically unprecedented] social movement” (1994:129). According to Balaram, Gandhi understood the ability of most Indian audiences to transcend surface reality and readily enter into a different realm of symbolic meaning. He appreciated that even ordinary tools, everyday objects and clothing are seeped in religious and social symbolism originating in Indian mythology.

The rhetorical devices that Gandhi selected and used (e.g. Charkha, items of clothing, Khadi cloth) were familiar, archetypical manifestations that conveyed known values and created a strong sense of identification and belonging with the widest possible audience. These artifacts contained within themselves enormous transformational potential and a capacity to transcend the limitations of linguistic communication. For instance, the Charkha became an easily understandable icon for the complex principles of self-reliance, active employment and productivity. It also came to represent the transition from tradition to modernity. As a visual metaphor, it had even greater significance in its connection to cultural and religious concepts. It resembled the “wheel of righteous action” and could be associated with “the universal law of motion, the cycle of life, death and rebirth, the universe as seen with the inner light of illumination, the concept of continuous change, the Buddhist Wheel of Law, and so on” (1994:140). The surface qualities (forms, colour, texture) of rhetorical devices were stripped of ornamentation and presented in terms of simplicity, austerity, economy and minimalist attitude. The avoidance of surface treatment rendered devices less identifiable on a local level and brought them closer to the non-materialism of the Indian sages (Balaram 1994:141).

Balaram contends that Gandhi’s rhetoric achieved credibility and acceptance because of its symbolic coherence (of objects and the manner of their presenta-

tion); the sense of personal involvement that is conveyed (unity of action and actor); and the sustained compatibility between the audience's interpretation of the meaning invested in rhetorical devices and the primary and overriding messages that are conveyed. Obviously, the rhetorical analysis presented by Balaram belongs to the particular socio-cultural and political context of Gandhi's own time. Nevertheless, he feels that these precepts offer valid insights into questions of semantic and motivational stability, which are particularly relevant in terms of audiences in developing contexts and the fast-changing socio-economic circumstances of their daily lives.⁶

COMPETING PROPOSALS: COMPLEXITY, PLURALITY AND DIVERSITY

Rhetorical theories accept that design as a discursive practice fills the role of a mediating agency and suggest that design may directly influence the actions of individuals and communities, change attitudes and values, and shape society in fundamental ways. As communication, design is perceived as an attempt to persuade an audience that a given design solution is useful, while at the same time presenting premises, attitudes and values about how life should be lived. Buchanan (1989:109) notes that, from "the smallest, most incidental object to the largest integrated technological system, designers are providing an amplification of ideas." He comments that "design is a debate among opposing views about such matters as technology, practical life, the place of emotion and expression in the living environment, and a host of other concerns that make up the texture of postmodern, post-industrial living" (1989:95). According to Margolin (1989:17) design "involves the vivid expression of competing ideas about social life."

The complexity and range of competing design proposals, presented to an audience in the consumer environment, are illustrated by Partington's (1996:204-218) study of perfume packaging and its role in gender identity. Even though the study has been undertaken from the position of postmodernist gender studies and with the specific intention to re-theorise gender, it emphasises that design should be understood as a discourse and as a source of cultural codes placed at an audience's disposal. In Partington's view, design offers pos-

sibilities to the consumer “to participate in the production of social, collective identities” (1996:104); it provides consumers with the raw material for differing from established gender identities and “new ways of relating as gendered subjects” (1996:105); and it assists the consumer to “inhabit multiple/contradictory/changeable identities” (1996:214).

Partington refutes the historical gendering of identity as a duality of male/female and heterogeneous/homogeneous, suggesting rather the tenuous construction of specific and unprecedented polyvalent identities which are not absolute. She contends that gender and identity should be understood respectively as “*performance* rather than *expression*” and “*practice* rather than *essence*” (1996:204) and supports this view through the consideration of consumer culture and an analysis of the graphics and imagery of perfume packaging. According to Partington, contemporary consumer culture is inherently unstable, “its forms are sites of conflict over meanings, rather than or as well as means of reproducing values as in a traditional culture” (1996:206). She suggests that the stimulation of heterogeneity, the fragmentation of markets and the use of design as a marketing tool have fostered the acquisition, combination and interdependence of two main types of consumer skills: “the ability to objectify commodities, and the ability to identify with them ... these skills have been developed in men as well as women” (1996:208). This may be exemplified in the packaging and consumption of perfume.

As a consumer product and fashion commodity, perfume represents the contingencies of identity bound by the potential and limitations of the body as a means of articulation. It appeals to and engages a wide range of people, even those not interested in contemporary fashion experiment with fragrances. The connotations that accompany its status as a gift and as an object of private use imply that it can acquire many additional meanings. As a fashion commodity, perfume is marketed within an increasingly complex and contradictory system. Difficulties in finding markets and the unpredictability and inventiveness of consumers have resulted in the provision of as wide a choice of products as possible. Partington mentions that there are only three types of manufactured scent, but over 400 fragrances on the market.⁷ Producers have had to develop ways of diversifying products into an ever-expanding range of options and

preferences, each with its own sense of exclusivity and distinction which relies heavily on design for its enunciation.

The visual vocabulary of perfume packaging has remained fairly stable despite diverse applications, thus it has established widely accepted modes of presentation and specific connotations. Partington maintains that analyses of packaging design tend to perpetuate the assumption that consumers are passive victims of capitalist imagery and that there is a fixed opposition between feminine (narcissistic) identification with commodities and masculine (voyeuristic) objectification of commodities. She refutes this division as simplistic, suggesting that four basic patterns or design approaches are adopted in perfume packaging and that consumers are able to move fluidly between them by making referential links within each approach, and between different approaches and other commodities.

In terms of design aesthetics, the masculinisation of perfume has depended on a functional appearance (machine aesthetic; dark and neutral colours and tones; abstract, geometric and/or minimalistic forms), or an uncluttered classical style, both of which imply detached, objective and rational relationships with the object. The feminisation of the product has used a range of expressive styles and motifs that have incorporated “organic or illustrative forms, pastel or bright colours and tones, decorative, textural, sculptural or sensual surfaces, and symbolic references to birds, flowers, eggs, shells, fossils, landscapes, sensuous materials and precious stones” (1996:209). According to Partington, androgynous packaging (i.e. Calvin Klein’s *One*) attempts to reduce gender distinction, while more radical perfume packaging reveals the performance status of gender. These designs appear to celebrate gender differences – they can be read as sexist – but also as ironic quotations of stereotypes. “This type of packaging, or rather this way of reading it, suggests a proliferation of gendered identities through pastiche and parody. Rather than trying to create an alternative to the gender distinctions which have already been established through design, such design borrows and quotes from them” (Partington 1996:210). Its efficacy relies on intertextuality and the consumer’s capacity to interpret by referencing or quoting from existing imagery. Examples of designs using this approach are Paloma Picasso’s *Minotaure*, Rabanne’s *XS*, Chanel’s

Coco, Laroche's *Drakkar Noir* and Jean-Paul Gaultier's *Haute Parfumerie* (Partington 1996:210).

The diversity of styles and imagery adopted in perfume packaging “means that the consumer must adopt an objectifying relation to objects in order to discriminate between alternatives, while at the same time identifying with chosen commodities in order to articulate a particular persona” (Partington 1994:212). In Partington's view, this has enabled a very particular mode of self-presentation or ‘masquerade’, where consumers identify with shifting images and are able to assume plural and/or contradictory identities and invent multiple selves. Design proposals coupled with the use of sophisticated consumer skills thus offer scope for self-stylised transformations and provide opportunities for individual engagement with the style games of postmodern fashion.

While Partington describes the diversity of competing design proposals within a well-defined and specific area of consumption, Buchanan (1989:91-109) points to the multitude of products in contemporary culture (from words and images to material objects, activities and systems) which offer an empirical diversity that needs to be probed. He suggests that the puzzling diversity of the postmodern environment can be reduced to an intelligible pattern when viewed from a rhetorical perspective. “[W]e may do well to regard the apparent confusion of our product culture as a pluralistic expression of diverse and often conflicting ideas and turn to a closer examination of the variety and implication of such ideas” (Buchanan 1989:109). Such an idea, for instance, could be the nature of order in contemporary life, which Buchanan suggests is a central issue in postmodern design. The unstable relationship between order and disorder resulting from technological, scientific, philosophic and political thinking in postmodern society, is reflected in the creative explorations of designers. Some designers seek a harmonious integration of design and technology through the classic ideals of orderly design, while others “look for order in new ways, and some even deliberately overturn conventional expectations of order, as if to challenge us to rethink the meaning of order in our lives” (Buchanan 1989:95). The idea of an inventive exploration of order/disorder provides a way of distinguishing design ‘voices’ and allows an intelligible pattern to emerge from a seemingly impenetrable and chaotic diversity.

ALL DESIGN IS RHETORICAL

Design can never be neutral. It is intrinsically rhetorical, ideologically grounded, culturally and historically determined and conveys a specific view of communication (Ehse 1989; Kinross 1989; Lupton 1989). The rhetorical interlarding⁸ of design implies that it can be read on two levels – the explicit or practical level and the implicit or rhetorical level. Both Kinross and Lupton challenge the purported neutrality of design with a stated intent that is purely informational, suggesting that the conventional distinction between design to inform and design to persuade is not tenable. Both contend that the field of information design and its products cannot be neutral, objective and free of ideology as has been claimed, and support their position through the detailed examination of design examples and the broader social, philosophical and political dimensions of their production context.

Kinross (1989:131) quotes design theorist Bonsiepe: “[p]ure’ information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction. As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, to bring it within the range of experience, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins.” To illustrate the use of rhetorical means for the move from concept to visible manifestation, Kinross reviews and compares the design of train timetables from the London North-Eastern Region in the 1920s, a 1974 British Rail timetable and a 1970-71 Dutch National Railway timetable. He likens their internal organisation (e.g. deployment of formal graphic elements, choice and resonance of typography, layout structures, use of colour) to the constitution of a framework of eloquence and enhanced comprehension. He further contends that the motivation to design and redesign the timetables is aimed “to say something persuasive about the organisation that publishes them” (Kinross 1989:134), and that each design approach gives a sense of cultural reference when viewed historically in the light of the overall design style of trains and train interiors of the respective countries of production.

According to Kinross the current assumptions, attitudes and beliefs of information design – which he summarises as “commitment to the rational, the sceptical, the democratic socialist, the international” ; a belief “in simple forms and economies of effort” (1989:139) and a style that “provide[s] a sense of effi-

ciency, sobriety and seriousness" (1989:142) – do not present a design rationale of neutrality and objectivity. They can rather be traced back to the ideals of modernism from between the two world wars and mutations of the ideals of this movement after World War II, caused by the influences of information theory, an analytic approach and a mechanistic view of communication. Kinross contends that design communication cannot be objective. Design decisions are always uniquely motivated and contingent upon larger, underlying historical shifts. He supports this viewpoint by isolating and considering visual components, form and content, showing how they can be traced to the ideas and beliefs that inform the process of design within an historical period. For instance, the initial choice of typefaces Gill Sans and the subsequent change to Univers in the timetable designs mentioned above, can be attributed to acknowledgements of the new traditionalism in British typography in the late 1920s and the importance of systematic and flexible typographic application in the 1960s, respectively. Kinross emphasises that "nothing is free of rhetoric ... visual manifestations emerge from particular historical circumstances ... ideological vacuums do not exist" (1989:143).

Lupton (1989:145-156) reinforces the view that design is rhetorically infiltrated and argues that even the supposedly universal and objective language of pictorial signage is a popular version of logical positivism and is bound to the concept of vision as an autonomous and universal faculty of perception. Lupton questions the validity of universal 'self-evident' form, and emphasises the cultural meaning and theoretical polemics attached to it. Meaning is not an innate quality of forms or an automatic reaction of the brain, it is discovered by relating it to personal and cultural experiences. She suggests that Isotype – the forerunner of contemporary signage systems developed in the 1920s by Otto Neurath, a Viennese philosopher and social scientist, as a universally readable language of vision with an alphabet of simplified pictures – relies heavily on the rules and graphic techniques of reduction and consistency. These rules have both explicit, practical functions and implicit, rhetorical functions.

Rhetorically, the reduction techniques of silhouette, flatness, isometry, elimination of interior detail and arbitrary scale, serve to heighten the alphabetic quality and generic status of the isotype character and suggest "that the image has

a natural, scientific relationship to its object” (Lupton 1989:152). Consistency techniques of stylistic uniformity, standardised use and extended, systematic visual application create the effect of grammatical coherence and authoritative factuality. According to Lupton “[t]hese constructive rules project an image of empirical, scientific objectivity: they also reinforce the ‘language quality’ of picture signs, making individual signs look more like letters, and groups of signs look more like complete, self-sufficient languages” (1989:151). Lupton points out that many of these precepts were continued by graphic design internationally after World War II and that their legacy may be found in the design of statistical charts and visual symbol sets from travel, pictorial sport and directional signage to corporate identity marks and the infographics increasingly deployed in popular journalism.⁹

Looking at the more contemporary medium of clothing manufacturer Benetton’s publication *Colours: A Magazine about the Rest of the World*, Tyler (1996) suggests that the underlying design and visual argumentation supports dominant forms of cultural ideology, rather than serves as an agent for social change, the stated aim of the publication. In her view, the arguments presented in *Colours* often subvert the editors’ intended goals to extend acceptance, tolerance and understanding and to “change the world” (1996:60). Tyler builds her stance on the premise that design is an argument comprising not only the presentation of subject matter, “but the implications based on that subject; as well as an authorial voice or voices; and an implied audience. All these aspects construct arguments and convey beliefs”¹⁰ (Tyler 1996:61). She examines nine issues of the magazine produced from 1991 – 1995 in terms of these criteria and in the subject categories ‘tribes’ (the depiction of countries, cities, cultures and subcultures around the world); ‘AIDS’ (information and education demonstrating the risks of HIV infection); and ‘cults’ (the depiction of diverse bandings like environmental destruction, political despots, hate groups). The analyses not only point to how the subjects are presented and represented, but also how techniques are deployed to define audiences and authorial voices, and ultimately how “*Colours* homogenizes the very individuals and groups it is attempting to celebrate, denies important aspects of cultural identity, and reinforces an all too common, simplistic approach to social and cultural dynamics” (Tyler 1996:62).

In each of the three categories, Tyler demonstrates the manner in which a simplistic and unproblematic view of society is held up and the individual social responsibility and culpability of audiences are neutralised, but also the ways in which visual argumentation is constructed to unite implied audience and authorial voice in appreciation of the subject (tribes); unite implied audience and subject through personal identification (AIDS); and unite authorial voice and implied audience against the subject (cults). Within the argument, the audience is assumed to accept, share, or at least positively consider the beliefs put forward, any position outside of this is denied. Tyler suggests that ultimately, the argumentation for social change is stylistic rather than substantive, and that it fundamentally fails to present any vision apart from that of the mainstream. "The visual and topical activity seems to be a substitute for any exploration of the complex nature of social issues, and masks the rigidity of argument" (Tyler 1996:76).

Throughout the publications, the category 'tribes' is dominated by a rhetoric of amelioration. Acceptance of individuals or groups occurs through a realisation of 'sameness' which leads to tolerance and to the achievement of conflict resolution. The central tactic, consistently repeated as a theme in various articles, is to assert this fundamental similarity between people and then to point to the interesting differences that distinguish groups and cultures. People are differentiated and grouped based on visual similarities (clothing, skin colour – that is, stylistic or surface variation), and placed in visual compositions suggesting unity (lined up, centred left to right, looking directly at the camera and viewer, with space on each side so that the group and not the setting is defined). Groups often perceived as odd or hostile by the general public (drag queens, gay and lesbian police officers, interracial partners), are presented as non-threatening (friendly, smiling, approachable) and 'normalised' within an innocuous setting. Cultural context is conveyed as geographic place (New York, Russia) rather than a system of beliefs and values. The temporal context is always the present, history is deemed unnecessary to an understanding of culture or subculture, and any areas of existing conflict or anger are glossed over or excluded.

The articles extensively use photographic images of subject groups, rather than

illustrations, which are presented as recordings and given additional impetus by the caption-like and objective format of the text that is kept to a minimum to convey a non-interpretive impression. The idea of documentation in the visual treatment is further reinforced by the verbal text which adopts an anonymous reporting tone and serves to define the author as someone other than the subject. The audience is placed in a voyeuristic and safe relationship to the subject group, viewing it from the same distant position as the camera and author. By joining authorial voice and audience, Tyler suggests that the argument assumes that the audience not only takes the spatial perspective of the communicator, but the ideological perspective as well, and in so doing, is folded into the dominant culture. "In attempting to raise up diversity in one arena – the subject, the strategy of argument employed in *Colours* effectively erases and denies diversity in another arena – the audience" (Tyler 1996:68).

Tyler suggests that "[s]trategies of argument based on 'sameness' often are based on the dominant culture's view of who or what is 'normal'" (1996:70). The vision of normality put forward by the dominant culture in the mass media, is usually a vision that reflects itself. In *Colours*, alternative groups, cultures and subcultures are portrayed as deserving fairness and tolerance. However, tolerance hinges on acceptance, with its conferring or withholding lying with the dominant culture, an assumption never questioned by *Colours*.

Buchanan (1989, 1994a, 1995) adopts a more encompassing view of design as rhetoric. He maintains that a rhetorical perspective not only enables a systematic interpretation of the designed environment, but in a more comprehensive sense, provides clarity about design as a twentieth century practical and theoretical activity. Historical, sociological, aesthetic and cultural studies of design, when dealing with the functions of design, the influence of designers and the effects of design on individuals or society, move into the domain of rhetoric. Buchanan (1995) proposes that the identification of rhetorical commonplaces, fundamental in alternative approaches to design practice and speculation, allow for a systematic classification and mapping of influential design thinking and prominent individuals in design during the twentieth century. In this regard, he suggests that four dominant themes are to be found in twentieth century Western design: character and discipline (design grounded in the envi-

ronment of action); spiritual and cultural ideals (design grounded in being or transcendental ideas); material conditions and science (design grounded in physical nature); and power and control (design grounded in the agency behind action).

The manner in which design organisations, management and corporate policy shape a design can be viewed as rhetorical. The practice of design itself involves the practice of rhetoric, “not only in formulating the thought or plan of a product, through all the activities of verbal invention and persuasion that go on between designers, managers, and so forth, but also in persuasively presenting and declaring that thought in products” (Buchanan 1989:109). Argument is the central theme that cuts across the many technical methodologies employed in each design discipline. Buchanan (1989, 1994a, 1995) believes that rhetoric should be the basis for a unified theory of design which could serve to consolidate disparate design disciplines and link design practice to theoretical reflection. He suggests that the different modes of argument, or lines of reasoning, currently employed by diverse design disciplines (i.e. ideas of necessity, contingency and possibility) are increasingly being recognised as interdependent. Design applications are moving toward a “new integration of signs, things, actions, and environments that address the concrete needs and values of human beings in diverse circumstances” (Buchanan 1994a:20). Design thinking connects useful knowledge from the arts and sciences alike “in ways that are suited to the problems and purposes of the present” (Buchanan 1994a:4). The transcendence of traditional disciplinary boundaries and a more inclusive concept of practice are under review.

NOTES

- 1 For instance, Walker and Chaplin (1997) accentuate its manipulative dimension in stating that politicians, advertisers and pressure groups are the main producers of rhetoric.
- 2 Ehses (1989:188) acknowledges that theories of design rhetoric have also been influenced by the manner in which principles from verbal rhetoric have been transferred in relation to various other media, for instance, painting, architecture and music.
- 3 Both semiotics and rhetoric are incorporated in a theoretical grounding for graphic design by Ehses.
- 4 Tyler (1994:104-105) suggests that Ehses's 'grammatical model' is of limited value. Its intellectual focus fails to acknowledge the role of audience values and beliefs and the active participation of an audience in the formation of meaning.
- 5 The logo for the visual identity of the Federal Alliance political party, launched at the beginning of 1999, presents a good example of a visual argument that conveys a strong moral and emotional position. It is sure to appeal to the attitude and values of its target group, but exhibits weak technological reasoning in formal and technical considerations like dimensions of scale, visual detail and relative proportion of visual elements. These factors could impact on successful application in physical environments and negatively influence media reproduction and media translations and conversions.
- 6 Discursive systems and visual rhetoric within global, national and regional context; their interdependencies, the perceived dominance of Western graphic design and the surface application of regional and vernacular idioms are themes which are increasingly entering the graphic design discourse. See Bush (1998) and Fernández (1998) for some of the dimensions of this debate.
- 7 Partington refers to the United Kingdom market. However, product ranges and packaging of fragrances are very much the same in South Africa.
- 8 Rhetorical interlarding is a term first used by design theorist Gui Bonsiepe in his seminal article *Visual/Verbal Rhetoric* published in 1965 and frequently referred to by subsequent design writers. In their writing on visual rhetoric, authors Kinross (1989), Lupton (1989) and Ehses (1989) all acknowledge that Bonsiepe was one of the initial design theorists to demonstrate that visual rhetoric is possible on the basis of verbal rhetoric.
- 9 For further explorations and discussion of pictorial and environmental signage, pictograms and infographics in relation to entrenched ideologies, cultural and historical conditioning, and subjective experience, see Lupton and Miller (1996, 1997).
- 10 Tyler prefers the term 'authorial voice' which, she points out (1996:61), accommodates the idea that designers and/or editors create and develop arguments that reflect views other than their own, whether or not they are those of the represented client or subject.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KEY ISSUES

ORIENTATION

Design theory provides the concepts and instruments with which to undertake a systematic study of the nature, processes, practices and products of design and to review and explain many instances of design in a variety of circumstances. The previous four chapters set out to establish an orientation to contemporary design theory, with a particular emphasis on the theoretical frameworks deployed in design production, and to examine design outcomes. Theoretical viewpoints were selectively consolidated with the aim of clarifying the mechanics of design and probing dominant ideas and impulses which currently inform both the creative production and analysis of design. At the same time, it was reflected how theoretical viewpoints open up critical routes that indicate new ways in which design may be looked at.

The overview reinforces perceptions of significant changes in design thinking and practice over the last three decades, but suggests that these are by no means comprehensively understood or even uniformly accepted within design. There exists no monistic vision of design: contemporary design may rather be characterised by pluralism, dualities and tensions, continuity and disjunction. A systematic analysis that necessitates intense, detailed and multi-dimensional examination of graphic design outcomes and visual semantics, tends to reflect an evolving, but powerful resource and tool, open to flexibility in accommodating a range of objectives, diversity of interpretive perspectives and theoretical values. Analytical consideration reveals design meaning to be multilayered and complex. Views of its negotiation and construction move

from the accentuation of universal meaning to varying emphases in a network of interrelationships and contexts which include that of its own internal organisation, intertextuality, social interaction, cultural dimensions and the subjective domains of creators, analysts and viewers.

A number of key issues, relevant to the objectives of this study, have been extracted from the polemics of current theoretical debates and are presented in terms of two clusters. The first cluster delineates some salient characteristics and dilemmas of an emerging design environment which point design research and practice in certain directions, while the second considers design/meaning relationships with a similar objective in mind. Finally, some of these variables are identified as a means to investigate how design might address issues that are important in the functional and applied arenas of corporate organisations.

DESIGN AND MEANING

Rather than adopt a conventional approach to the examining of the functions and constructs of design within traditional subareas like corporate identity, packaging and so on, the theoretical overview allows design/meaning relationships to come forward. The nature of these relationships may be captured in terms of three dominant themes: the objectification of meaning, a view of design as shaping meaning, and the impact of context on meaning.

Objectification of meaning

Each of the theoretical frameworks considered in the overview provide powerful ways of examining design as meaning and for revealing the dimensions of visual meaning. In this regard, meaning was classified in terms of specificity (e.g. monosemic, polysemic, pansemic) and variously emphasised as universal, relative, unstable, indeterminate and shared. These dimensions enable a reflection on design meaning that ranges from the established and fixed relationships and associative values of traditional design with its clearly defined conventions and symbolic integrity, to views of meaning as fluid, open and changing, possessed of ambiguous associations and values which may be recy-

pled, appropriated and reappropriated to suit diverse and plural situations and perceived requirements.

Meaning in design is multilayered and complex, conceived of and elucidated by theorists as levels or orders of meaning. The first level or order of meaning is considered to be immediate, denotative, manifest, obvious, specific and explicit, often equated with the primary or utilitarian value or function of design and those ends for which the design was originally developed. Subsequent levels of meaning are regarded to be implied, connotative, implicit, manifold, symbolic, open and usually equated with the secondary functions of design. Such levels rely on cultural exposure and increasingly on advanced design literacy and competency for comprehension and appreciation. Secondary levels of meaning may be probed to reveal how design embodies values (e.g. social, economic); represents ideological values (e.g. dominant and entrenched social, political, design ideas), contains alternative or contradictory values, or how it presents pluralistic arguments about diverse and often conflicting ideas within specific or general areas of daily life.

Design shapes meaning

Design as a mediator of meaning and the contribution of the designer in this regard, place a focus on the disciplined and systematic construction of meaning. The mechanics of design, irrespective of the adopted theoretical perspective, facilitate an awareness and articulation of the processes and means available to designers. Each of the theoretical frameworks that were reviewed, offers concepts and instruments with which to dismantle design into elemental components possessed of specific qualities, and principles and techniques of synthesis, which enable the composition or construction of meaning. A matrix of selected variables, dimensions and factors may thus be compiled and the individual roles or interrelationships of variables may be employed to probe design and its response to specific objectives.

The nature of the relationship between design and its objectives and how design is able visually to express, clarify, reinforce, extend, amplify and reveal multiple meanings and to transgress meaning imply that the designer com-

mands certain capabilities and skills. These allow him/her to envisage and visualise, organise and integrate, contextualise, articulate and modulate visual ideas and information, and to constrain or expand meaning implicitly and explicitly in accordance with the type of response desired. By extension, the specificity of desired response may be related to the instrumental purposes, functions and specific areas of design application. For instance, in applications such as instructional graphics or wayfinding systems, limited responses are invoked by deploying fixed and prescribed conventions. Such applications are accompanied by assumptions of a closed, captured or uniform audience who either know or must learn the used codes, or situations where specific associations will be entrenched. Design applications which encourage motivational responses, for instance marketing initiatives, tailor meaning relative to predetermined situations which could potentially require a range from fixed to open responses where meaning is shaped by subjective imperatives and interactive participation by the viewer. Constraining design meaning presupposes that the designer holds a notion of the cognitive model with which viewers approach, explore and interact with designs.

The routing from the conceptualisation and visual translation of meaning into manifested visual form, is broadly framed in accordance with preconceptions of design roles. Current design theory is particularly concerned with how design roles and identity are actualised in a postindustrialised society, which is defined in terms of postmodern conditions, poststructuralist thinking, as well as professional imperatives. Postmodernism, especially – with its polarities, tensions and debate generated by ideas of fundamental and intrinsic shifts and emphases on a mediated society and consumption – is postulated as a theme that has profoundly affected graphic design over the last two decades. Defined by design specifically in terms of the interrelation of theoretical orientations, social, cultural and economic dynamics and digital technology, ideas of postmodernism are played out in various guises as design philosophy, ideology, attitude, style, mode of analysis, and creative inspiration. Aspects are very often set up or framed as a counter to the rationality, empiricism, social ideals, metanarratives and universal standards of design modernism. These have led to different perceptions of design problems, a reorganisation of design according to new perspectives, and differing views on broad roles for design.

Two orientations appear to have crystallised into a conservative role for design, on one hand, and a progressive one, on the other. The first stresses the maintenance of some measure of traditional continuity in design values and techniques of message presentation. The second aligns itself with revolutionary and fluid dynamics. It embraces radical changes as a matter of democratic course and an acknowledgement of an audience's ability and right to interact with messages and images in varied and imaginative ways. It presupposes increasing levels of visual sophistication and media literacy among audiences, and expects that viewers will exhibit varying degrees of involvement in the personal construction of meaning and demonstrate acquired skills with which to assume multiple and differing subjective positions in their confrontations with design.

The positioning of design in terms of emphasis, direction and orientation within the social/cultural/economic/technological/design/designer nexus brings perceptions of desirable role(s) for design and critiques of current roles into sharp focus. Ongoing social changes, the demographics and changing profiles of pluralistic and multicultural audiences have necessitated a renewed consideration of the dimensions of meaning, as well as of the relationships between design and culture, and a questioning of the role and values of design in society. Tensions can be marked between differing opinions regarding the priorities assigned to the economic or marketing and humanistic roles of design and the manner in which they are actualised. While competitive differentiation places an emphasis on style transformation, visual impact, novelty, entertainment, assertiveness and image, the humanistic paradigm favours a communal role which honours traditional differences between social groups, respect for social mythology and archetypes, explanation and mutual understanding, and rational analysis of social, cultural and individual needs.

On a more pragmatic and functional level, theoretical orientations in conjunction with digital technology, audience plurality and market segmentation have bolstered intradisciplinary shifts and allowed the designer to claim a more independent and proactive role within the commercial arena. This spirit of independence is conveyed by the stance of individual designers on formal experimentation, a rejection of existing professional conventions, quests for

greater self-expression and ideas which promote varying levels of personal authorship in design applications. It is pointed out that design may be seen to fulfil various roles, including neutral, supportive, invasive, contradictory and innovative ones. The tendency in the literature has been to focus on the work of individual designers and/or on visual articulation in relation to specific genres (e.g. cultural products for the music industry) and well-defined subcultures (e.g. youth, design itself), without pursuing in any depth or objectively how perceptions of independence and proaction are being actualised within mainstream professional sites and relationships.

Context determines meaning

Context as a determining factor in the construction of design meaning is an overriding theme that emerges from the theoretical overview. In essence, meaning is projected as the effect of a number of factors, an interwoven web of powers and interrelationships. The metadesign context which was dealt with extensively, sets out to elucidate how meaning may be related to the contexts of a design's own internal organisation and to the network of interactions generated by its external contexts. These include its interconnection to other meaning-generating objects or systems, or intertextuality which serves to modify, alter or reinforce meaning in both integrative and differentiating ways, and to a broader ecology of cultural, social, economic and professional dimensions and complexes.

Contexts of reception and use, as well as contexts or sites of production were indicated as crucial to the appreciation of design meaning, but referred to only as 'presumed' or 'ideal' situations in the theoretical overview. Nonetheless, certain suppositions about the cognitive and social contexts of viewers are thrown into relief. For instance, audiences were projected as naive and unknowing or as able to negotiate and invest meaning in designs, use meaning in instrumental and socially constitutive ways and repurpose meaning to suit individual needs. A better empirical investigation and understanding of design audiences, with an insight into cultural, social and communal audience values, were intimated as indispensable to both the achievement of the plural and complex design objectives dictated by contemporary requirements and situa-

tions, and the measurement of design performance. Here design finds a close connection with the methodologies of the social sciences.

Contexts or sites of production, perhaps more aptly described by Krippendorff (1989) as the context of genesis, include all the stakeholders and all the issues pertaining to a cycle from the initiation of a design, through the creation, production, dissemination, consumption and use, discarding and recycling, and experiences which feed back into a subsequent generation of designs. According to Krippendorff, designers are involved in two critical processes. They are responsible, firstly, for conceptualising or creating design proposals and evolving design specifications (e.g. media, materials, reproduction processes). Secondly, they must convince others to accept their proposals. Designers thus need to tailor their proposals and design meanings not only to audience factors, but to what clients require, are able to produce and are willing to accept. A number of implications are inherent to this situation, two of which are thrown into relief here. As pointed out in chapter 1, difficulties in communication between designers and clients could be rooted in a series of differential factors, including professional histories, conceptions, knowledge, expectations and experiences, all of which need to be bridged by designers. Designers thus need to understand, and make explicit, in a specific and broad sense, how design might meet the requirements of clients. Furthermore, the increasingly complex and changing design environment sketched by the overview, suggests that the emerging dimensions of this environment need to be aligned to critical imperatives in the broad operational arena.

EMERGING DESIGN ENVIRONMENT

Graphic design is in a state of transition. The nature of this transition was broadly intimated by the theoretical overview and certain characteristics of an emerging design environment explicitly and implicitly revealed. These need to be expanded and re-examined, suggesting specific areas and topics for theoretical and practical consideration. The clarification of professional issues like design standards and evaluation, the exploration of new areas of design practice, and the primacy of Western paradigms in South African design are some of the aspects that point to a more pragmatic and empirical investigation and

understanding of the contexts of design production and reception, but also to greater theoretical reflection appropriate to South African circumstances. The practical relevance of theory to practice and the translation of theory so that it feeds back into practice in a way that is accessible and comprehensible to designers, underline the necessity for meaningful connections to be established between theory and practice.

Status and professional reception of design theory

Although underdeveloped compared to many other subject disciplines, graphic design theory is slowly being formulated within a broader scope that includes issues and problems that were often embedded in earlier practice, but seldom explored. Two general tendencies are apparent. There appears to be a growing awareness of the value of theory and a call for the adoption of a self-consciously theoretical approach to graphic design which embraces linguistic, cultural, social and historical values, as well as aesthetics and visual appeal. South African designers, Clucas and Lamprecht agree "... that the intuitive approach adopted by the majority of South African designers needs to be complemented by stronger intellectual integration, a greater exchange of ideas between designers, rigorous debate and critical design studies" (Sauthoff 1989:14). Secondly, in exploring and attempting to articulate theoretical issues clearly, design has looked to other subject disciplines for examples of precepts and methodology. Here particular reference is made to the impact of structuralist and poststructuralist critical theory and other linguistic models which have added to the design repertoire of concepts, terminology, ideas and methods.

This movement has facilitated the expansion of design theory, allowed design to confront the complexity of the contemporary environment and led to the identification of substantive themes and nodes around which intellectual inquiries may be organised. The dismantling of the traditional visual boundaries of design thinking and reference to other disciplines and subject matter provide opportunities and means for looking at new questions, and for emphasising interdependencies within the discipline and connections to related areas outside of design. While these developments have been viewed in a positive

light by many theorists, a number of problems have been identified and voiced. These include issues related to an uncritical acceptance of theory, the suitability of non-visual models and imported themes to design, cultural emphasis, pragmatic relevance and appropriate presentation.

Accusations of a naive and unseptical adoption of theoretical models and constructs without the rigorous interrogation of the fundamental premises and assumptions on which they were based, are levelled at current design theory. The imposition of non-visual models is seen as artificial and contrived, with insufficient acknowledgement of the distinctive nature of the discipline and the traditional terminology of design practice. A more rigorous form of design theory, in which positions are clearly stated and defended, would help to forge a better interface between theory and practice. The relevance and usefulness of theory to graphic design practice are considered to be particularly problematic. Theory is thought to be too culturally oriented, framing design as a cultural rather than a professional activity. This impacts on design practice: for instance, it fosters a view of design as 'cultural therapy' (Keefer 1997) and influences designers' perceptions of themselves, complicating issues like industry regulation, title protection and professional certification (Lange 1998). This is not to suggest that design is not linked to culture or does not have a potent cultural role, but rather to comment on the emphasis adopted in certain theoretical perspectives. The pragmatic relevance of design theory is further obstructed by a negativity, social critique and anti-corporatist stance which is very difficult to incorporate into many practical design situations in a constructive manner. An implied audience as opposed to real users, and the absence of testing assumptions against reality have led to calls for less apriorism and a more in-depth measuring of response within contexts of reception.

Design theory and writing are often criticised as being esoteric and hermetic. The arcane tendency of poststructuralist writing, in particular, results in a closed discourse. Sociologist Stephen Katz comments that "[t]he postmodern era has given the world some really good ideas and some really bad writing. From Derrida on down to humble troopers in the trenches of academia, a style that has come to prevail among postmodernists is one of endless complexification and obscurity" (1996:88). In all fairness, it might be added that the

impenetrability of research writing is not only prevalent in postmodern debates. Often, statistical data and models are just as incomprehensible to designers, impacting on the integration of theory and research into practice. Buchanan and Margolin (1995:xii) call for a “distinctive method of deliberation and presentation” which is suited to design and which makes concrete and practical connections to the “formal and tacit knowledge” of the discipline. This matter is not trivial. At present, it appears that designers bring varying levels of theoretical knowledge, insight and commitment to practice.

Antagonism towards theory and an anti-intellectual stance are not unusual attitudes in design practice. These attitudes have been characterised as a stated resistance to theory and a reaffirmation and emphasis on the creative intuition of designers, their innovative spirit and ability to create from the imaginative world of the individual. A direct, knowledgeable, deliberate, critical and/or creative confrontation with theory is becoming apparent in some writing and comments by designers themselves. Their depth of knowledge is difficult to gauge, as the assumptions, preoccupations and positions that underlie their writing are not often explicit. However, these comments provide an illustration of how designers use and visually interpret theory in various ways from guidelines for creative production, to the justification of subjective approaches and as a basis for creative experimentation, visual reformulation, transformation and the transgression of conventions.

There are suggestions that many designers have little direct knowledge or understanding of theory and that their engagement with theory is indirect, unknowing, haphazard and casual; a result more of the dissemination, filtering, circulation and recycling of visual techniques and manifestations. The ‘visual look’ of theory and elements of terminology are appropriated, and not the underlying ideas. Design commentators have pointed to a real danger that if research and writing become too inward-looking with an insistence on an own theoretical agenda, it will be rejected by the wider design community. Such a development could negate and obstruct the valuable benefits which theory offers to professional practice. Critical insight and the systematic explanation of design are the obvious ones highlighted in the overview.

Self-identity

The influence of linguistics, considerations of cultural and historical determinism versus form and aesthetics and the active construction of meaning by the viewer or audience have enabled theorists to de-emphasise the role of the individual designer. Irrespective of the stance adopted by theorists, the modernist precept of creative intuition and individual creative vision is still deeply embedded in design culture. This was noted above in designers' reception and use of theory. The designer's personal need for creative and aesthetic satisfaction has been expressed by both modernist and postmodernist designers alike. Modernist designer, Paul Rand (1970) defined the designer's problem in terms of the duality of anticipating the viewer's actions and meeting his own aesthetic needs. Postmodern South African designer Jan Erasmus (1993:22) states the "... need to actualise my role in three different directions. I need to use design as art – both experimental and personal, design as science – logical, informational, systematic, design as language – through semantics and semiotics".

Maintaining the equilibrium between personal, aesthetic and professional objectives is problematic. Poynor (1998:95) comments that two cultures divide graphic design into "... teams dedicated to the pursuit of creative freedom above all other goals and the larger, mainstream companies who see design primarily as a business and subordinate creative goals to the imperatives of commerce." Nevertheless, a sharp critique has been levelled at an undue emphasis on visual style and aesthetics and designer-centred ideologies. These have been castigated as disruptive to perceptions of functional relevance and appropriateness to audience profiles and requirements, and damaging to credible professional roles for design (Butler 1989; Stiff 1997).

Questions of creative integrity and design originality have not been extinguished by postmodern theoretical impulses either, and are still deemed to be of crucial importance by both design practitioners and commentators. The celebration of formal experimentation and the fascination with the 'stuff' of design are fundamental to a designer's self-identity. The careful selection and emphasis on innovative images and design solutions, and descriptions of how

these are absorbed and modified to become a source for mainstream design, continue a tradition that is still prevalent in design publications. Many of these presentations eschew critical or explanatory commentary, remaining fairly inwardly focused, a practice also apparent in South African design. For instance, formal experimentation and industry selection of award-winning designs are seldom accompanied by open and objective analysis or critique. While the internal design dialogue in South Africa must be regarded as essential to the development of the profession and industry, there is a need to devise flexible and appropriate vehicles, methods and formats to open up important aspects of this dialogue to wider audiences.

Digital technology

Although not explored in any great detail in the theoretical overview, digital technology may be identified as a continuous thread running through contemporary design practice and writing. In fact, it is a theme which has been lifted out of the modernist/postmodernist context and debate that dominated design writing and discourse throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Digital technology now appears as a crucial component in creative execution and in defining professional design identity and practice. The fundamental realignment of human/machine relations animates the examination of design and points to a number of clear directions. A sharper focus must be placed on cognitive factors and the user contexts of the electronic environment. Interfaces and interactivity, information structuring and navigation, all contribute to a complex web of activities in which design must situate itself. Postulations of the dissolving of mass production and mass media markets resulting in narrow casting and a myriad of small, more highly defined groups who use electronic media, underscore the types of skills and insights that designers will increasingly have to bring to professional situations (McCoy & McCoy 1996).

Digital products that integrate different media (i.e. utilise print, audio and video); integrated design solutions (i.e. demanding cross and interdisciplinary participation); integrative design tasks (i.e. consolidation of creative and reproduction aspects of design); and the need for the systemic integration of design, transcend conventional notions of design and indicate that a more inclusive

concept of practice is under review. The democratic use of digital technology, teamwork situations and issues of authenticity, creative originality and design copyright cut to the very essence of design and lead to a questioning of who can legitimately claim the title of professional designer. South African design practice has fully embraced the digital environment. Developments taking place in the practising arena are progressing without much methodical observation or documentation. New conceptual and analytical frameworks, new working configurations and new design purposes must be systematically explored within a reconsideration of local production sites and contexts.

Design standards and evaluation

New areas of activity, new professional design specialisations, new media with, as yet, no established conventions, add to one of the central dilemmas in design practice: that of making value judgements. The acceptance of plurality, diversity and disciplinary convergence, the rejection of many traditional conventions, and a lack of professional consensus on what might be considered 'good' design, have all contributed to the disruption of uniformly accepted evaluation criteria and necessitate an urgent review of professional standards and the establishment of new grounds for making assessments of effectiveness and value. The question of quality is not trivial in design practice as it must be acknowledged as a matter of professional definition and professional credibility. Theorists suggest that the fragmentation and pluralism of graphic design will remain. Poyner (1998) proposes that new critical yardsticks are required to meet the new diversity of applications and that these will have to respond to the particularities of context, rather than depend on preconceptions. The accepted standards of one sphere will not necessarily apply in another. This presupposes that any evaluation of design, of necessity, must acknowledge context and that designers and critics will increasingly need to possess an understanding of contexts of production, reception and use.

Other theorists and designers are less sanguine about design evaluation and standards, suggesting that critics and designers cannot abdicate responsibility for proclaiming standards for design. They question responses to postmodern thinking and impulses, where interpretation has replaced evaluation as theo-

rists and critics have strived to confront and reveal meaning and ideology in design outcomes rather than offer judgements about quality. An acceptance of the relativity of meaning and the implication that it signals freedom, openness and liberty have led Huygen (1997:42,43) to wonder whether contemporary design critics "... aren't hiding themselves behind this postmodernist facade which seems to provide them with an excuse for not tackling any real issues", and to speculate that postmodern theoreticians have lost themselves in abstractions which reduce "meaning and experience to a sign, a subject or a system." He suggests that the philosophical Western humanistic tradition and the values of similarity and continuity, rather than "the dictatorships of the difference" (Huygen 1997:43) still offer a valid critical paradigm.

Buchanan agrees that designers and critics cannot abdicate responsibility for articulating design criteria by accepting the postmodern premise that a unifying design ideology and metanarrative no longer exist, and that there are no standards for evaluation and no grounds for "... challenging the limitations of ideology, aside from political and institutional power" (1998:8). He expresses an impatience with the impoverished two-term dialectic of most postmodern theory and the idea that culture is merely an ideology, and calls for a return to the original meaning of culture as cultivation. "From this perspective, culture is not a state, expressed in an ideology or a body of doctrines. Rather, it is an activity. Culture is the activity of ordering, disordering, and reordering in the *search* for understanding and for values which guide action" (Buchanan 1998:10). According to Buchanan, it is from this broader vision of culture as activity, not as hegemony or ideology, that evaluations of design principles and their expression must be articulated.

Primacy of the Western paradigm

The Western and entrepreneurial design paradigm, with its emphasis on competitive differentiation, consumption and the mediated society, predominates design theory and the contemporary literature of design. The alignment of South African design with international and Western paradigms is very strong. Design practice appears to define itself in these terms. Design research and writing appear to rely largely on overseas precedents and models. For instance,

the selection and textual analysis of media material (particularly advertising) follow international patterns with a focus on Western thinking, ideologies, institutions, and so on. The ongoing formulation and articulation of a South African visual identity with regard to both content and style, appears to be motivated essentially by formal experimentation, global competition and differentiation. Although it has been picked up as an important theme in reflections on graphic design in this country, its popular reception (comprehension?) has not been monitored; aspects like cultural appropriation, cultural convergence and/or visual melding have been accompanied by little fundamental explanation, comment or critique. Innovative practices in a forum like the design magazine *i-juse* have tended to be interpreted as a pragmatic and experimental redirection of design itself, with less attention to semantic and semiotic dimensions.

Issues that have been stressed in many postcolonial contexts (e.g. representation of other cultural groups of themselves, the recuperation of indigenous cultures and histories, and tracking the work of exiled professionals and theorists¹) have as yet to receive serious consideration by South African graphic design. Personal design experiences and interpretations of the problems of integration, domination, transformation and indigenous expression posed by the Western/African and the first/third world dichotomies have not received the type of exposure in South Africa comparable to those documented and articulated, for example, by Black Kenyan designer and design educator Pido (1993; 1995a; 1995b). Neither has the conceptual positioning of South African design relative to the Western paradigm received the in-depth exploration demonstrated by considerations such as those by Ghose (1989), Fry (1989) and Greeley (1998), who invoke a centre-periphery model in reviews of design in Asia, Australia and the United States Latino community, respectively. In contrast to a vision of domination by Western design, Bonsieppe (quoted by Greeley 1998:24) suggests that Latin America “with its torn social fabric ... can provide a testing ground for the development of an ethics of design which can [form a] bridge between the enormous technological advances of the last decade, and the need for a praxis of design for social benefit.”

While Western design paradigms have provided valuable and useful insights

into and guidelines for South African design, these have facilitated pragmatic orientations and actions around the themes of economic competitiveness and issues of development, rather than critical and theoretical reflection. While some pertinent and unique aspects of South African design production and reception have been identified, the way in which they are being addressed, needs consolidation and greater systematic clarification and evaluation. In essence, a more encompassing view of design which accommodates broader theoretical and practical dimensions must be encouraged.

RE-VIEWING GRAPHIC DESIGN

A number of multifaceted, sometimes contradictory, but interlinked and overlapping tributaries or features can be assigned to contemporary graphic design. Each comprise a cluster of factors that are not mutually exclusive, but which can be replayed in various guises. Contemporary graphic design may be looked at and described in a number of ways. These include:

- **Communication:** design offers a powerful graphic language with primary (utilitarian) and secondary (symbolic or sign) functions, able to shape, direct and constrain meaning in accordance with perceived roles, contexts, instrumental purposes, and desired responses. In its thinking, design involves understanding, discovering and expressing meaning. In its reflection, it considers how meaning becomes attached to objects, images and words.
- **Context:** design context is presented as an interwoven web of powers and interrelationships that modify, alter or reinforce design meaning in both integrative and differentiating ways. Context defines and delimits design objectives and applications, conditions meaning and interpretation, and frames evaluation. Three broad and interrelated contexts of design, client and audience are implicated in the production arena.
- **Transformation:** design is subject, sensitive and open to transformation. In its thinking, techniques of articulation and final manifested form is able to envision, prefigure, embody, promote and reflect change. It is in a state of transition with regard to professional conventions, values and applications.

- **Convergence:** design integration is defined by the merging of discipline theory and interdisciplinary boundaries; of professional discipline roles and of media and design tasks. It is postulated in the inclusivity of form, content and expressive style; in blurring the separation between visual and linguistic domains; and manifested in the visual reconciliation of cultures and in the synthesis, fusion, and cross-functionality of type and image.
- **Pluralism:** diversity in design is projected by theoretical positions and interpretative perspectives; in the acknowledgement of cultural identity; in audience differentiation and market segmentation accompanied by concomitant communication needs and strategies; as a counter to the legacy of modernist and unitary design beliefs, values, modes and techniques of expression; and by definitions of design roles and functions.
- **Complexity:** design intricacy is implicit in ideas of the concept 'design' which is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive; of design's operating within a large number of parameters and variables; and in the equilibrium and compromise needed in confronting sometimes conflicting requirements. It is presented by the Western/African and first/third world dichotomies; and in the density of design problem and solution dictated by technological developments. It is exhibited by visual ambiguity, oblique and open-ended design meaning; and accepted in evaluating design performance and outcomes.
- **Digital technology:** technological development is inextricably linked to design and fundamental change at many level. Its ascendancy as new design discipline and medium; creative facilitator, tool and enabler to both designer and audience, is a dominant theme in contemporary design.

It is clear that each tributary permeates layers of design activities from theoretical consideration to aspects of practice and visual expression in design outcomes. Separately and in unison, these tributaries and features suggest new methods and modes of collaboration and new areas of design application that transcend conventional notions. They may also provide a guide to understanding and examining the role of design within corporate organisations and indicate how design might best look at the organisation.

NOTES

1 Shapira (1995) refers to the late Selby Mvusi, a South African who was instrumental in establishing a Department of Design as part of the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Development at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s. Mvusi studied in the United States and taught in the then Northern Rhodesia before moving to Kenya. He died as a result of a car accident in 1967, but his thinking and writings about design in low-income, non-industrialised countries has served as a lasting legacy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

APPLICATION, FINAL REVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS

ORIENTATION

Ideas surrounding the themes of transformation, complexity, convergence and integration, diversity and pluralism, and digital technology identified in the previous chapter, present an expanded and multifaceted view of graphic design and suggest that a similar view should inform the contemplation of graphic design's intersection with contemporary organisations. The most obvious line may be to consider, in a literal sense, how these dimensions are being expressed, actualised and defined in the concrete terms of professional graphic design practice in South Africa. While the role of design as mediated communication and the nature of graphic design practice are theoretically relatively easy to define, in reality, professional graphic design practice in this country defies clear categorisation and description for a number of reasons. The classification, structure and size of graphic design as a unitary industry, as well as modes of practice and specialist services offered by practice are difficult to indicate, as fundamental definitions have not been agreed to, nor has a comprehensive database been compiled.¹ No professional registration, certification or indeed qualification is required to practice graphic design in South Africa. The pervasiveness and economic impact of graphic design are thus difficult to determine, but the number of design schools in South Africa, the range of courses on offer and the number of graduates produced every year suggest that graphic design presents a viable career option and that a fairly large number of individuals practice as graphic designers.

While there is clearly an urgent need to map the dimensions of and shifts in the

graphic design industry and practice, this final chapter adopts a stance that allows a multifaceted contemplation of design applications to emerge which serves to both illuminate the potential of design as an organisational resource and to underscore the necessity of design practice reassessing the nature of its interface with client organisations. Furthermore, in keeping with the underlying spirit of the study, it supports the idea that design information to client organisations should move beyond advocacy and the promotion of traditional areas of practice, to foster an appreciation of design based on an holistic and integrated vision of purposes and a better understanding of the intrinsic capabilities of designing.

With this in mind, a selective consideration of the factors and shifts hinted at previously are framed within the context of current organisational imperatives and presented as a means to 'look at' graphic design and corporate organisations. A directive, speculative and perhaps provocative view of potential graphic design application is thus pursued and some of the implications of this approach are indicated in the final review of and conclusions to the study.

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND ORGANISATIONAL IMPERATIVES

In a consolidation and review of Western management theory, Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997) suggest that the three themes that have dominated contemporary management theory are the changing structure of organisations, globalisation and the nature of work. These have generated four streams of debate related to assumptions of the size, strength and structure of organisations; the use and management of knowledge and information; corporate leadership, strategies and accountability; and the impact of change on the world of work and workers (where do we work, whom do we work for and what do we do). In dealing with these issues, it becomes quite clear that social, humanistic and developmental dimensions, as well as economic, growth and expansionistic dimensions may be identified as inherent to organisational imperatives, thus presenting desirable roles for design.

This observation is echoed more specifically in a South African context by the

management view that the strategic issues for the following four years, polled consecutively from 1996 to 1999 (albeit with varying priorities), are growth opportunities, global competitiveness, improving skills, human resource issues, vision, social stability, transformation, state legislation, information technology, affirmative action and product development (*Sunday Times* 18 April 1999). Scenario planners (Sunter 1996) concur, suggesting in a more compact manner that the values shaping the business environment are information and information technology; global cultures, but national identities; pluralism; ethics, accountability and transparency; and social responsibility. They also suggest (Huntley *et al.* 1989) that sustainable development in this country depends on the interrelationship of economic growth, environmental issues and the quality of human life, thereby directly implicating corporate organisations in issues which they might consider to be outside their accepted and traditional domains and boundaries. For instance, basic information, education, and the promotion of lifestyle changes related to identified areas and topics (health, literacy, energy, water) among all sectors of society, have been placed within the ambit of corporate concerns.²

This broad and general picture has been sketched as a backdrop to proposals that graphic design needs to look at the organisation in both an expansionistic way and a humanistic way – how may graphic design be assigned to support strategic and operational business objectives and to confront social and humanistic issues in the macro and micro environment of an organisation? Two trajectories are briefly and synoptically presented as possible ways of considering how some organisational requirements may be met. The first attempts to position design specifically within the organisational context, the second notes some implications of broader conceptions of design practice.

Extending reach: realignment and new connections

The growing significance of design in the marketing mix, particularly a recognition of the importance of visual identity and branding (corporate, service and product) in competitive and creative differentiation, are encouraging a more informative approach and a description and explanation of the specific contributions that design can make to both long-term strategic and immediate

marketing issues.³ Prominent consultancies and individuals have opened a dialogue in the professional domain which seeks to demonstrate how design can be responsive to organisational requirements by

- identifying and proposing possible design functions and positioning these within the organisational framework of business and marketing strategies;
- explicating design and visual dimensions, functions, and conceptual approaches to visual identity, for instance, relating brand value to colour, typographic configuration of logo and visual style;
- developing new design products and design methodologies or processes;⁴
- indicating the function and role of the electronic media, specifically the importance of visual identity and branding in interactive advertising and electronic commerce and the contribution of graphic design in facilitating accessibility and client/company dialogue, developing a cohesive voice for the brand and in supporting the strategic integration of media; and
- suggesting that concepts of accountability and responsibility should be more clearly articulated and accepted as integral aspects of marketing and design communications.⁵

Similarly, the prominence of design in corporate identity and image management have come under closer scrutiny in South Africa as a result of corporate restructuring and (re)positioning.⁶ While the manifested presence of corporate visual identity in the public environment appears to indicate an acceptance of its value, less clearly articulated or promoted in the professional arena, are how successful design consultancies have been:

- in facilitating the integration of visual identity programmes and precepts into the systems and culture of client organisations, in terms of both operational and functional dimensions, reception and acceptance, and as a means to promote internal cohesion and corporate values;⁷
- in clarifying and promoting an understanding of the pervasive quality of visual identity and the extended articulation of the core values it should embody in all media and applications. For instance, the importance of symbolic coherence and the need for credible and consistent visual argumentation goes beyond the provision or application of visual standards, to visual

interpretation, sustained visual rhetoric and an on-going manifested visual articulation of values.

These issues are not trivial and have been amplified by the growing tendency of decentralisation and the devolution of functions, responsibilities and accountability within organisations, essentially due to two main factors: digital technology and business process re-engineering which both cut across all functions and departments, generating a multiplicity of communications options. These developments have served both to democratise design functions (e.g. everyone is potentially a designer, brand manager, strategist, or media communicator), and to contribute to the volume of information in internal circulation. While there is currently a growing recognition and exploration of graphic design as a resource and tool in certain well-defined areas, such as corporate identity, there appears to be less appreciation or understanding of the role of design as a means to find order and opportunity in internal areas of South African organisations, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Three potential areas within the internal environment are briefly emphasised below.

- Information management: how could graphic design assist the flow and organisation of information in the internal environment, increase accessibility to information by making it understandable (i.e. decipher intricate information, simplify processes and construct frameworks that lead to understanding), signal source identification and visual continuity, and establish a cohesive voice for the organisation, particularly, but not exclusively, in the electronic media; in a manner compatible with functional circumstances of use?
- Employee focus: how could graphic design support a humanistic management paradigm^s which acknowledges the individual and individual fulfilment, given the diversity of employee profiles in South African organisations? If an aspect of corporate involvement in individual development is viewed as mediating, organising, translating and creating access to information for those segments of an organisation who could most benefit from – but are routinely excluded from – the information culture, then an understanding and implementation of guidelines from design research (e.g. spe-

cific strategies and appropriate graphic techniques, participative and collaborative design processes) are essential.

- Corporate visibility: how could graphic design help the organisation to consider, in an holistic sense, how it represents itself and how it is required to make itself transparent in ways which facilitate both empirical and cognitive orientation and interaction within the organisation? These matters relate not only to wayfinding systems or to how policies, procedures and processes are rendered more transparent in the daily life of employees, but to how the organisation may deal with identified issues. For instance, transformation is a critical and multidimensional concept in South African organisations. Graphic design is intimately connected to ideas of transformation in its thinking, intrinsic techniques of articulation and manifested final form.⁹

Anceschi (1996) suggests that the concept of 'visibility' defines the essence of both what the designer does and the discipline of graphic design itself. He suggests that we "... live in an optical and visual world, but certainly not a visible one" (1996:5). Thus, while the general tendency is to emphasise the importance of the visual in daily life and in scenarios of technological futures, an oppositional view throws 'a civilisation of blindness' into relief, due to an excess of visual noise and visual stimulation, a lack of symbolic order, and the concealment of information. The concealment of information within an organisation may be intentional (e.g. competitive culture of secrecy), or as a result of the denial of access resulting from an inability to organise information adequate to the human mind. It may result from obtrusive and obstructive organisational frameworks and structures, and the factual complexity produced by the totality of an organisation's structures. Anceschi proposes that, in a world of declining visibility, the designer's role is not one of art and visual problem-solving only, but of design competencies that include those of the critical consultant, able to make broader and complex problems visible and willing to assume responsibility as "... the representative of users at the project negotiators' table" (1996:8), in addition to making the visions of managements tangible and visible.

An extended role for design consultants is also projected in ideas of how to improve the systemic integration of design into organisations (systems and contexts) contained in notions of fourth order design and fourth order design

consultancies, as described by Buchanan (1998) and Golsby-Smith (1996). They argue that design practice should move in a widening path from concern for images, artifacts and products to strategic planning, which accommodates both user dimensions and organisational objectives and seeks to place design at the earliest moment in the formulation of fundamental decisions related to the design process, to a concern for organisational culture. This culmination defines 'fourth order design'. Fourth order design consultants consider how the design process, design decision-making and design outcomes may be better integrated into the culture and values of the organisation. The incorporation of diverse knowledge, an exploration of values and principles, broad participation and dialogue are viewed as central themes. Discussion, collective deliberation and collaborative decision-making are suggested as means of addressing a conflict of competing values and directing attention towards agreement on what is possible.

The views presented above suggest that design consultancies must see their interaction with organisations in terms of understanding, co-operation and negotiation, regarding graphic design as a complex and diverse practice. They need to interact with client organisations across a broad spectrum that ranges from a championing interface which advocates, promotes, clarifies and informs, through all the mediation and explanation processes demanded by design projects, to a counselling interface that cultivates a climate of acceptance and understanding of design, its use and application in both general and specific ways. The best alignment of design to the characteristics and requirements of the organisation are considered here and could include, for instance, the transfer of inherent designing skills like design analysis and interpretation, visual presentation, graphic facilitation, and strategic visioning. An holistic vision of design is presupposed, echoing the growing emphasis in design literature on aspects like total design environments, strategically integrated systems and scenario planning¹⁰ (Keeley 1992, 1996; Margolin 1995; Mitchell 1996; Moles 1989, 1994).

Widening the design domain: broader horizons and scope

The situations sketched above do not imply that many of these issues are not

being addressed by graphic designers in South Africa, but rather to intimate the need for the circumscription of a more encompassing view of graphic design in its intersection with corporate organisations. The traditional perception of graphic design has tended to favour the compartmentalisation of design into inwardly focused segments that offer defined design services based on core competencies. The conditions enunciated above advocate a more inclusive, knowledge-based form of design professionalism aimed to combat fragmentation and the interpretation of clients' needs in terms of own disciplinary focuses only, and a practical consideration of discipline and role convergence.

An impetus to broaden the scope of design services offered by South African practitioners may be inferred from the current debate and initiatives in the practising arena regarding alternative modes of practice. For instance, multi-disciplinary professional configurations, co-operatives and alliances; and strategic and integrated approaches which in or outsource design expertise in accordance with dictates appropriate to the devising of an optimal solution to clients' projects are variously being implemented (*AdFocus* 1999). Other tracks which attempt to define a more encompassing and inclusive vision of professionalism must be activated. This requires that designers should

- critically assess and reflect on their current contribution, knowledge and practices. For instance, the developments in professional configurations sketched above, need to be scrutinised more closely in terms of a number of variables, including how they are understood by clients and the perceptions and response invoked in client organisations; the impact of new configurations on professional expectations of design education; the detailing of design tasks; and whether subcontracting allows the coherence of a strategic plan to be lost in execution;
- move away from the focus on very narrow portions of organisations, develop a comprehensive understanding of the workplace and how it is changing, and formulate an integrative understanding of graphic design's intersection with the organisation;¹¹ and
- further explore, develop and clarify the fundamental role and functions of graphic design, the dynamics of its processes and procedures appropriate to organisational strategies, objectives and contexts of organisational use and

culture. This must include harnessing and integrating knowledge from design research and from related disciplines.

Although graphic design has been viewed in the context of the organisation, the implications regarding the themes that must increasingly guide design education as emphasised by this intersection, have a universal resonance. An encompassing view of design professionalism demands from education:

- the ongoing critical review of how the theoretical basis of graphic design is formalised, systematically structured and taught;
- design tasks which incorporate cross, inter and intradisciplinary questions, multisensory user experiences and multicultural user profiles, as well as the linguistic dimensions of client/designer relationships; and
- strategies which develop both strong design specialist expertise and design generalists who have the intellectual range to relate this expertise to broad spectrums of activity.

As part of the more inclusive vision of design, a second track is opening up in graphic design education which entails teaching graphic design knowledge, thinking and skills to 'non-designers' or non-specialists, who may be defined as collaborators in professional design production (e.g. editors, multimedia developers)¹² or interested persons. Although this development is allied to the democratisation and collaborative processes stemming from digital technology, graphic design here begins to find connections with Buchanan's (1989, 1994b) view that design is the new liberal art of technological society and Cross'(1995) opinion that varying levels of design ability can be developed in everyone. Conventional notions of graphic design practice and graphic design education are under revision.

FINAL REVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was prompted by the observation that, in an increasingly complex and competitive environment, graphic designers are called on to account for the conceptual methodologies and impulses that inform design production and the interpretation and analysis of design outcomes. This process of articu-

lation has been rendered more difficult as a result of traditional modes of education which privilege the development of creative intuition framed by the subjective domain, and the fact that, historically and relative to other academic disciplines, insufficient attention has been paid to formalising and systematising graphic design's theoretical basis.

Given the conceptual diversity, eclecticism and perceived fragmentation of graphic design theory and design criticism, the study consolidates and reviews four conceptual frameworks and demonstrates how each provides the mechanisms with which a graphic designer may explain, at a basic level, how design is able to imbue design products and outcomes with individual expressive qualities (personal, aesthetic, intellectual, cultural, political), and visually translate and articulate the vaguely formulated ideas of client organisations into manifested forms which match objectives and communities of use. The theoretical overview confirms the strength and capability of design as a powerful communication tool and suggests that organisations need to appreciate the value of both its expansionistic and humanistic capacities, as well as its functional, associative and symbolic dimensions. It also reinforces the importance of practising designers having a sound theoretical understanding as a basis from which to practice, and implicitly supports the notion that design practice should consider and investigate inherent opportunities for specific interventions which could assist the development of an informed appraisal of design solutions and foster the optimal utilisation of graphic design. Furthermore, the study suggests that design education, in turn, needs to foster understanding in the disciplines of design thinking.

While acknowledging perceptions and criticism that graphic design thinking has sometimes been colonised by imported theories in a reactionary matter, the theoretical overview emphasises how basic theory from a number of sources is being worked upon and moulded to the discipline with a growing degree of confidence. This confidence may be sensed in the manner in which theoretical perspectives have facilitated a wider engagement with the issues related to the nature and character of design, as well as its methods, and in the range of viewpoints that contribute to the contesting of central values. In the selective reflection on the dialectic and dialogue of positions and counter-positions in the

nascent discourse, the study supports the stance that design practice and theory should not be allowed to retreat to extreme sites (e.g. of aesthetic self-expression, complex cultural theorisations of ideology and hegemony, or design criticism as the application of theory). It attempts to illustrate this by showing how design critics and commentators continually endeavour to shift the theoretical focus back to the 'designed object', ideas (and ideals) of professional compatibility, and pragmatic concerns of production. This is not to devalue the diversity of current theoretical positions, but rather to reinforce the point that theory should be made "... accountable in the objective results of what is done and what is made" and the necessity for encouraging a recognition that design has "... objective and demonstrable worth" (Buchanan 1998:18,10).

The value of the broad methodological approach adopted by the study has been reinforced in a number of ways. It has allowed the nature of the graphic design discourse to emerge more fully and it illustrates that a measure of coherence is to be found in conceptual theory, despite its intrinsic level of development and perceptions of fragmentation. It has accentuated graphic design as multifaceted and complex, but has shown that a number of underlying themes are played out in various guises, irrespective of the conceptual framework that is adopted. The presentation of broader pictures and patterns has enabled the identification of some of the fundamental design dilemmas of identity, role and place in the contemporary world. It has further enabled the tracing of shifts from modern to postmodern thinking, sensibility and expression, to considerations of postcolonialism and the current confluence and interaction of first/third world and Africa/Western world, that the study suggests, South African graphic design has neither adequately confronted nor properly conceptualised.

These deliberations point to critical new routes and questions in the design environment, demonstrate interconnected determinants and throw new and alternative configurations of graphic design into relief. In addition, a set of criteria has been provided against which to monitor, elucidate, clarify and critically reflect upon design thinking and practical developments in South Africa. Clearly, this broad approach indicates a model which suggests that it is essen-

tial for graphic design education and practice in South Africa to adopt multiple viewpoints, follow their implications in the broadest possible way, and to permit these considerations to influence design development in the country.

Although the study stresses the transitional aspects of contemporary graphic design, the broad approach accommodates the identification of the enduring characteristics and qualities of design and design culture and, in so doing, suggests possibly that contradictions are often exaggerated and differences polarised by design theorists and critics. Nevertheless, the emphasis on dualities and paradoxes provides a useful way of commenting on graphic design in South Africa, in terms of inward and outward orientation. The study suggests that graphic design in this country is too outwardly oriented in the content and methodology of its discourse, in that it neglects to address issues related to the totality of its national, internal environment and culture adequately. Furthermore, the study speculatively supports the perception that graphic design appears to focus on external constituencies and the expansionistic dimensions of corporate organisations and does not pay adequate attention to the internal constituencies and the integration of design into the functional and cultural environments of client organisations. On the other hand, the internal design dialogue, intrinsic to the professional arena, needs to expose the understanding and skills required to share design concepts and knowledge with outsiders to a greater extent. Professional practice as the inward-looking protection of vested interests and the compartmentalisation of design into inwardly focused segments seem to be inappropriate to an encompassing vision of design professionalism and the anticipatory stance implicit in the sketch of the intersection of graphic design with corporate organisations.

A possible disadvantage of the methods and approach adopted in the study is that these preclude the penetrating interrogation of any single area or topic. However, the study does offer a number of important confirmations, in addition to directive and provocative suggestions. The study confirms that research and criticism in South African graphic design have not kept pace with developments in the practising arena. In this regard, reference is made specifically to the status of the discourse and its emphasis on the Western design paradigm; the objective documentation and critical reflection of the impact of

digital technology on configurations of practice; the study and analysis of the broad implications of diverse modes of operation in the professional design arena; and fundamental and penetrating considerations of the articulation of a South African graphic language as a search for values, understanding and identity within the broader contexts of change in South Africa. Pragmatic themes of design for development and economic competitiveness deserve greater theoretical consideration and consolidated review.

In looking at graphic design's intersection with corporate organisations, the study hints at a reconciliation (albeit simplistically) of design as a humanistic endeavour situated within the cultural circumstances of an organisation, and as a response to the impact of both information technology and contemporary management processes. It repositions graphic design within the parameters and ideas of the learning organisation which recognises the value of collaborative initiatives, explanation and the integration of many kinds of knowledge, and speculatively suggests a view of an extended and more encompassing role for graphic design consultants which presupposes the adoption of an holistic understanding of design. While the theoretical overview holds up a vision of the designer as artist, focused on imaginative and expressive synthesis; the final chapter holds up a vision of the designer as collaborator, focused on practical and systemic integration.

Ultimately, this study has neither answered specific questions, nor provided clear-cut solutions to graphic design problems. It has sought to explore and demonstrate the nature and value of a defined area within the spectrum of the theoretical basis of the discipline and to contribute to the debate about the future of graphic design in South Africa by offering some perspectives on the opportunities, directions and choices available to graphic design in this country.

NOTES

- 1 Graphic design in South Africa is differently, indiscriminately and casually viewed as a discipline within the traditional spectrum of the design professions; as a discipline within the broader communications industry; as an advertising and marketing discipline, service and/or medium. It resorts in the portfolio of the Department of Arts, Science, Culture and Technology where it is classified under Arts and Culture.
- 2 Good examples are Transnet's Phelophepa health care train and Edu Clinic (Hammond 1999), and corporate involvement in Project Literacy, an NGO undertaking extensive work in the field of adult literacy training (*Pretoria News* 1999).
- 3 See Schilperoort (1998), Sampson (1998) and Selsnick (1998) on design and branding. Although Sampson and Selsnick provide short and elementary comments on design, the forum in which these articles appear, is significant.
- 4 See Schilperoort (1998) and Schiller (*AdFocus* 1999:162) on HiBrand Design, NuBrand Design and KineticBrand Design. See Lange (1998a, 1999) on employer identity, which is postulated as a co-ordinated framework and strategy to guide a coherent management image.
- 5 See Oosthuizen (1996, 1998).
- 6 Kieser (*AdFocus* 1999:162) suggests that corporate image and identity design in South Africa has followed three surges over the last two decades: disinvestment, privatisation and globalisation. Perception, management and visual aspects of corporate identity have received the attention of marketing and management sciences in South Africa. See, for instance, Puth (1991) and Van Heerden (1993).
- 7 Restructuring, multicultural and multi-ethnic employee compositions have accentuated the importance of corporate culture as a management asset "... that stands on a par with labour, material, capital and information" (Micklethwait & Wooldridge 1997:262).
- 8 Puth (1994) presents historical trajectories in the development of a humanistic management paradigm, describes its salient characteristics, and details the implications and principles for management communications. Although these relate to interpersonal communication, the ideas have relevance for mediated communication within an organisation as well.
- 9 Lange (1996) identifies some ways in which design may assist organisational transformation in South Africa. These deserve greater exploration and clarification.
- 10 Exploration and experimentation in think-tank and scenario situations that foster a broad vision, innovation, connectivity, inter and cross-disciplinary participation centred around identified themes, research projects and alternative solutions to specified problems, are increasingly being considered internationally as a means to understand and deal with the complexity and scale of contemporary, postindustrial design problems (Meurer 1999; Thackara 1995). This option also offers a possible approach to design for development which may be considered equally complex. Although South Africa cannot sustain this type of strategy on a permanent basis, the recent *Interdesign 99 Water* initiative (Fresh 1999) demonstrates the viability of co-operative, multidisciplinary design exploration in the search for solutions to development problems.

- 11 The necessity for designers to adopt an integrative and comprehensive perspective is reinforced by a short systematic analysis (Lam-Po-Tang 1999) that illustrates how extensively electronic media and electronic commerce channels intersect with internal departments and functions in an organisation, compared to more traditional design media.
- 12 The development and structuring of such courses at the University of Pretoria have demanded a fundamental reconsideration of graphic design by graphic design educationists, which subsequently has also encouraged a critical re-assessment of specialist design courses.

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SUMMARY

This study comprises a broad-based consideration of contemporary graphic design. It was undertaken in response to observations and perceptions that graphic design is in a vulnerable position unless it is able to articulate and systematically clarify its role and ability to address issues of significance in the social, economic and cultural arenas. Although the importance of design for development in South Africa is acknowledged, the study is sited within the parameters of design development with a concomitant focus on the professional and theoretical dimensions of graphic design. The study has sought to contribute to the debate about the future of graphic design in South Africa by offering some perspectives on the opportunities, directions and choices available to graphic design in this country.

The primary aim of the study has been to explore and demonstrate the nature and value of conceptual frameworks and interpretive strategies in graphic design within the spectrum of the developing theoretical basis of the discipline. It considers graphic design as visual language in order to elucidate the fundamental thinking and guiding principles that enable the production and analysis of design solutions. It examines semiotic approaches and poststructuralist deconstruction and their theoretical application to graphic design. It also looks at graphic design through the lens of visual rhetoric. Systematic analysis necessitating the intense, detailed and multidimensional examination of graphic design outcomes and visual semantics, tends to reflect an evolving but powerful resource and tool, open to flexibility in accommodating a range of objectives, and a diversity of interpretive perspectives and theoretical values. Analytical consideration reveals design meaning to be multilayered and

complex, moving from universal meaning to a variety of other emphases in a network of interrelationships and contexts which include internal organisation, intertextuality, social interaction, cultural dimensions and the domains of creators, analysts and viewers.

The adoption of a broad approach has allowed the nascent graphic design discourse to emerge and enabled several of the dominant ideas and impulses, that inform creative production and analytic interpretation, to be probed. The study identifies and elucidates some of the fundamental design dilemmas of identity, place, role and values in the contemporary world and traces the shifts from modern to postmodern thinking, sensibility and expression; to considerations of postcolonialism and the current confluence and interaction of South Africa/Western world. It reinforces perceptions of transition in design thinking and practice, but suggests that these are not comprehensively understood or uniformly accepted within the design arena. A number of multifaceted, interlinked and overlapping tributaries or features can be assigned to contemporary graphic design, allowing it to be viewed in terms of communication, context, transformation, convergence, pluralism, complexity and digital technology.

These salient characteristics provided a useful means to position graphic design within the context of the challenges facing corporate organisations in South Africa. The study suggests a more inclusive, knowledge-based form of graphic design practice which presupposes an holistic understanding and use of design within the functional and cultural parameters of the corporate environment; and as a response to the impact of both information technology and contemporary management processes. It proposes that an encompassing vision of graphic design, which accommodates broader theoretical and practical dimensions, must be encouraged in South Africa.

OPSOMMING

'n Breë ondersoek is op die gebied van eietydse grafiese ontwerp gedoen. Die studie is onderneem na aanleiding van waarnemings en persepsies dat probleme te wagte kan wees, tensy grafiese ontwerp sy rol en vermoë om betekenisvolle aspekte op maatskaplike, ekonomiese en kulturele gebied aan te spreek, kan artikuleer en sistematies uiteensit. Hoewel die belang van ontwerp vir ontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika erken word, is die studie binne die parameters van ontwerpontwikkeling met 'n gepaardgaande fokus op die professionele en teoretiese dimensies van grafiese ontwerp geplaas. Daar is gepoog om 'n bydrae tot die debat oor die toekoms van grafiese ontwerp in Suid-Afrika te lewer deur perspektiewe op die geleenthede, rigtings en keuses wat plaaslik beskikbaar is op die terrein van grafiese ontwerp te verskaf.

Die hoofdoel met die studie was om die aard en waarde van konseptuele raamwerke en interpretasie-strategieë in grafiese ontwerp, binne die spektrum van die ontwikkelende teoretiese grondslae van die dissipline te ondersoek en demonstreer. Grafiese ontwerp word as visuele taal oorweeg om die fundamentele denke en beginsels vir die produksie en ontleding van ontwerpresultate en -oplossings te verhelder. Semiotiese benaderings en poststrukuralistiese dekonstruksie en hulle teoretiese toepassings op grafiese ontwerp word in aanmerking geneem. Die studie beskou ook grafiese ontwerp deur die lens van visuele retoriek. 'n Sistematiese analise wat 'n intense, omvattende en multidimensionele ondersoek van grafiese ontwerpresultate en visuele semantiek behels, neig om 'n veranderende, maar kragtige huplbron te toon wat buigsaam is in sy aanspreek van 'n verskeidenheid doelwitte, uiteenlopende interpretasie-perspektiewe en teoretiese waardes. 'n Analitiese ondersoek toon

aan dat ontwerpbetekenis multivlakkig en kompleks is. Dit beweeg vanaf universele betekenis na ander belangrike aspekte in 'n netwerk van onderlinge verhoudinge en kontekste, insluitende interne organisasie, intertekstualiteit, sosiale interakse en kulturele dimensies asook die domeine van skeppers, analiste en gehoorlede.

Die breë benadering het die groeiende diskoers oor grafiese ontwerp op die voorgrond gebring sodat verskeie dominante idees en impulse onderliggend aan kreatiewe produksie en analitiese interpretasie ondersoek kon word. Die studie identifiseer en lig sommige fundamentele ontwerpdilemmas ten opsigte van identiteit, plek, rol en waardes in eietydse wêreld toe, en speur veranderings van die moderne na die postmoderne denke, ontvanklikheid en uitdrukking na. Postkolonialisme en die huidige samevloeiing van en interaksie tussen Suid-Afrika en die Westerse wêreld word in oënskou geneem. Die studie bevestig persepsies van onlangse veranderings in ontwerpdenke en -praktyk, maar suggereer dat hierdie ommeswaai nie deeglik begryp of alom aanvaar word in die ontwerparena nie. 'n Aantal veelvlakkige, verweefde en verbanhoudende vertakkinge of kenmerke kan aan hedendaagse grafiese ontwerp toegeskryf word, sodat dit in die lig van kommunikasie, konteks, transformasie, samevloeiing, pluralisme, kompleksiteit en digitale tegnologie beskou kan word.

Hierdie opvallende kenmerke was waardevol vir die posisionering van grafiese ontwerp binne die konteks van die uitdagings waarmee korporatiewe organisasies in Suid-Afrika te kampe het. 'n Meer inklusiewe vorm van grafiese ontwerp wat op kennis berus, word voorgestel. Dit voorveronderstel 'n holistiese begrip en aanwending van ontwerp binne die funksionele en kulturele parameters van 'n korporatiewe omgewing, en neem die impak van inligtingstegnologie en huidige bestuursprosesse in aanmerking. 'n Omvattende visie vir grafiese ontwerp, met breër teoretiese en praktiese dimensies, word vir Suid-Afrika aanbeveel.