

"Theory is a Good Idea: Some thoughts on the resistance to theory in graphic design criticism, history and practice"

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Presented at Presented at Looking Closer: AIGA Conference on Design History and Criticism  
February 2001

### Introduction

I was originally asked, many months ago, to show up today to address the gap between "academic-speak" and "real language." However, as I developed my thinking about this issue, I realized that I couldn't simply talk *about* "academic-speak" and "real language" because I had a problem with the terms themselves.

Indeed, the term "academic speak," is - at worst - a sniggering, anti-intellectual reference that only serves to discredit any endeavor the premises of which an outsider cannot immediately understand. In the words of Janet Wolff, author of the important and very relevant book *The Social Production of Art* (Wolff 1993), it is a "false populism which maintains that nobody should say anything unless everyone can understand it." (quoted in Walker & Chaplin 1997, p. 55)

Art; culture; politics; society: these are all marvelously complex phenomena that cannot be readily reduced to binary choices such as right/wrong, yes/no, or even democrat/republican. It is surely understandable, then, that they require commensurately sophisticated and nuanced ideas to interpret them. If we're intent on Looking Closer at a complex world - of which design is an integral part - we need languages appropriate to that function.

"Real language," in contrast to academic speak, has the ring of authenticity and authority about it; it seems at once very sensible and altogether transparent. Put another way, if I tell you that all *you're* capable of is "academic speak" I might expect a bloody nose. If I tell you that you speak "real" language, you might - if I'm lucky - buy me a beer. Both terms are *invested*. And to me they signal an investment not in ridding the world of pretentious theory and even more pretentious academics, but replacing someone else's theory with one's own, however "real" or "non-academic" one might see oneself and one's world-view to be. As the literary theorist Terry Eagleton has argued: "Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own." (quoted in Walker & Chaplin 1997, p.51)

In short, then, we all live *in* theory, whether we adhere to the notion or not. And, as Andrew Blauvelt (1994) has also suggested in a special series of the journal *Visible Language* dedicated to critical histories of graphic design, at least some of this theory manifests as "common sense." As a designer *and* an academic, I have an investment in suggesting to you in the strongest terms possible that phrases such as real language, academic speak, and common sense betray biases that must be thoroughly debunked—biases that have their roots in popular cultural stereotypes perpetuated, in part, by the media—as I hope to demonstrate in a moment. As for the gap between them, you might have guessed that for me it is in many ways inevitable, irreducible, and *entirely productive*.

In some senses what I have to say is not new. Designers and design writers have been chewing this stuff over for some time. For example: Blauvelt in *Visible Language* (Blauvelt 1994/95); Rick Poynor

and Michael Rock in *Eye* (Poynor & Rock 1995), and Tibor Kalman, Abbott Miller and Karrie Jacobs in *Looking Closer* (Kalman et al. 1994). Academics, too, have been hard at work: John Walker and Sarah Chaplin, in their introductory text called *Visual Culture* (Walker & Chaplin 1997), actually have a chapter called Coping with Theory; there's also a great essay on the history and uses of jargon in Marjorie Garber's latest book *Academic Instincts* (Garber, 2001); see also Barthes (1994), Said (1994), Terry Eagleton (1990), Gerald Graff (1992), and Eco (1986). So – not all academics are resistant to being understood, nor are all designers necessarily resistant to theory.

The easiest thing I could have planned to do today is regale you with stories about the essential nuttiness of academia, with its -ologies and -isms and plain old gobbledegook—that is, play into the stereotype. Indeed, it has been said that the best weapon the state has for rendering harmless a dangerous young mind is to put it through a PhD in the social sciences or the humanities. The joke is that the specialist language one is immersed in all but erases one's capacity to talk clearly and simply. (Historically, of course, there have been far worse fates in store for budding intellectuals than merely being ignored.) However, while this strategy might have been a great way to ingratiate myself to you, it would also have been an act of unbridled faithlessness on my own part.

Theory is wrong – isn't it? / My first encounter

A biographical note: After an undergraduate degree in engineering and a stint in art school I then spent four years in advertising as an art director. When the cognitive dissonance got too great, I wound up taking a long vacation in Vancouver, British Columbia, and from there ended up, almost by accident, in grad school. (I actually began taking classes because I found it was the only legal way to prolong my stay in Canada.) Imagine my surprise, then, when I came across *this* statement in the introduction to a very important book on advertising: "Obviously people invent and produce adverts, but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak for them, it is not their speech." (Williamson, 1978, p. 14)

Here, then, was my own induction into the complexities of theory: In taking it upon myself to reject the idea that the world is driven by this thing called "common sense"; that life's complexities cannot be reduced to one thing over another but require commensurately nuanced theories to help explain them – I had to realize that while Williamson seemed to be taking exception to my very existence, she was in fact making a profoundly important point: that advertising, and by extension design, rely on a set of cultural codes that are recognizable to most of us in order to communicate meaning and, as such, their "authors" are largely involved in assembling and reassembling those existing codes to suit a particular purpose. Hence the notion of the "Death of the author." (Barthes 1981) It doesn't mean that creatives everywhere are in imminent danger of collective heart failure, it just means we are never the omnipotent, *absolutely* original folks we sometimes claim to be.

Theory as a weapon; Theory as a defense

An unpleasant reality of scholarly life is that some people do in fact talk bollocks. I've been witness to, and even the target of, the use of complex ideas by certain individuals *as a weapon*. I've heard them referred to as "theory jocks"; I would certainly agree that it's a guy thing: using language as a way to outwit or belittle everyone else – especially other grad students.

While theory will always be used by a certain few individuals in radically disingenuous ways, its inevitable complexity has also served as a form of strategic defense. Historically, intellectuals have developed and used highly specialized language as a way of, in the words of Gerald Graff, "speak[ing] in voices that would be resistant to co-optation by the dominant discourses." (Graff 1992) Antonio

Gramsci, the intellectual imprisoned by one of Mussolini's judges with the words (and I paraphrase here) "we must stop this brain from thinking for twenty years", continued to write but used code, for example deploying the phrase "Philosophy of Praxis" as a substitute for "Marxism."

In the inhospitable atmosphere of Thatcherite Britain, where, as Andrew Howard recently noted in an important article in *Eye* magazine, there was apparently "no such thing as society" (Howard 1997), the group of intellectuals responsible for the earliest genesis of cultural studies had, as their unofficial mantra, "keep it complex." To be fair, however, Stuart Hall – a seminal figure in this field – always saw cultural studies as a two-pronged approach: being both "at the very forefront of intellectual theoretical work" *and* recognizing "the responsibility of transmitting those ideas...to" everyone else. (Hall 1996, p.268) (If cultural studies can be criticized, it is for the repeated omission of this second obligation by some of its practitioners.)

### Hard vs Soft Science

One of my first professors once told me a great story regarding his pursuit of a PhD in sociology, which I'll now attempt to recount. After he received his doctorate he began—quite legitimately—to use the title "doctor"; that is, until the day he was paged in an airport and asked if he could assist another passenger who had collapsed. As he commented afterwards, he would gladly have obliged if he'd thought for one second that a concise explanation of Marx's notion of the fetishism of commodities might make the poor guy feel better.

Somehow, then, the knowledge of one kind of doctor seems precisely useless when compared with another. The "hard" sciences—medicine or physics, for example—can produce *concrete* results, however dubious: they find ways to replace hearts or clone sheep; they put people and objects in space. When we say something "isn't rocket science", or someone "is no brain surgeon" we're actually passing on an indirect complement to hard scientists everywhere. The inference is that these professions represent the pinnacle of human endeavor. The fact that they also depend on utterly impenetrable vocabularies seems to be of little consequence. In fact, in some contexts we find jargon positively entertaining.

Take a scene from a recent episode (in fact, take *any* scene from *any* episode) of the TV show *ER*: a mother looks on in horror and awe as the busy doctors fuss over her critically ill young son. The woman – and by extension we the audience—are drawn in by the dazzling jargon of the doctors and nurses, while simultaneously being rendered helpless and frustrated by it. As she pleads with the medical staff for some inkling of what is actually being done to her boy's body, one doctor condescends to translate this deliciously opaque jargon into ordinary language, even as he works. (And this we call entertainment! I urge you to note who gets to speak, and in what manner, next time you watch the show.) So, whether we choose to see another community's jargon as useful, dramatically attractive, or even beguiling depends on the esteem in which we hold that profession.

Compare this with the movie *Funny Face* (US, 1957), for example, in which Audrey Hepburn plays a bookish, intellectual wannabe in love with the philosophical ideas of a groovy French beatnik. She is finally disabused of her naive pretensions by—who else?—a singing, dancing, fashion photographer (played by Fred Astaire). Tellingly, "academic-speak" is framed as being *doubly* foreign here: it's both unfamiliar *and* un-American. Given examples like these, it seems that the anti-intellectuals are having their cake and eating it too.

### Designers and Theory

I think one of the main reasons designers are rightfully suspicious of “foreign” theory – is the science of signs, better known as semiotics, or semiology. As the joke goes, “semiology” is another way of saying “half an ology”—and we could be forgiven for concluding as much, given its *apparently* half-assed premises. Here’s what an expert on the subject recently had to say: the “semiological literature has remained elusive to most people. The main reason for this is fairly simple: its advocates have written in a style that ranges from the obscure to the incomprehensible.” (Lewis 1991, p.25)

I’m certainly not going to defend or damn semiology right here, suffice to say that, like love, it’s better to have had it and lost it than never to have had it at all. I *do* think that, at least in design circles, it has inadvertently served to lend credence to the stereotype of intellectual endeavor as self-serving bollocks. At least one of the reasons why designers really seemed to get their fingers burned by theory in general is that semiology was never conceived of as a tool for design. To me, that’s a little like using a telescope to make a cake.

### Academic Stereotypes

One does not have to look far in American popular culture to find deeply-rooted suspicions about academics, especially those in the “soft” sciences. By this I mean stereotypes: those clusters of ideas about certain kinds of people that pass themselves off as knowledge but are in fact a substitute for actual information. Once a stereotype is in place—and “out there” in culture (in movies, news, jokes, TV shows, etc.)—it’s very difficult to get rid of it. A familiar example is the notion that *Designers don’t read*.

There are many variants on the academic stereotype, that range from the clownish (The Nutty Professor), to the *ever so vaguely* credible, such as the savagely witty caricatures to be found in novels such as *Nice Work* by David Lodge, *Publish & Perish* and *The Lecturer’s Tale* by James Hynes, and *Straight Man* by Richard Russo (though it’s worth noting that the targets of ridicule are most often women, or non-white, or both; it’s also worth noting who’s writing these stories). The stereotypes of academics in these books are all very entertaining (me? I laughed ‘til I stopped) precisely because they’re so mischievously drawn, but very unhelpful as a substitute for concrete information.

Take for another example the academic as flighty, unreflective, and a slave to fashion—in this case, fashionable ideas. One could be forgiven, for instance, for getting the impression that scholars travel, en masse, from one funky new theory to another as soon as the opportunity arises. That, like a herd of buffalo – albeit buffalo sporting very fashionable glasses—everyone (myself included) first weaned ourselves on semiology, then stampeded to the watering hole called feminism, then grazed on cultural studies and deconstruction, then queer theory, and so on without so much as a glance over our very hairy shoulders. While attractive and even amusing as an idea, I can say with hoof on heart that for *most* of us – and I repeat, *most* of us – this is not the reality of academic life. It’s like suggesting that all culture in the US amounts to is an eternal, infantile desire for pet rocks, cabbage patch dolls, beanie babies and tickle-me Elmos.

### Academics According to The Media

I think it’s important to understand that only occasionally do new ideas generated in the academy make their way into the media—and thence into the popular realm. Unfortunately, as with its attitude to most things, the media tend to focus on the outlandish; business-as-usual is not news. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida has pointed out: “The one thing that is unacceptable these days—on TV, on the radio, or in the papers—is intellectuals taking their time, or wasting other people’s time.... Time is what media professionals must not waste—theirs or ours.” (Derrida 1994, p.30) So,

for example, some of you may have noticed that, at least according to the media, the latest fad to sweep universities and colleges across the land is the study of whiteness.

While I would not want to characterize *The New York Times* as a bastion of anti-intellectualism, a recent article about the study of whiteness in the *color* magazine (of all places) did raise my suspicions. The headline read "Getting Credit for Being White." What's interesting here is that, although the article itself presents a *fairly* even-handed exploration of some of the leading scholars in this area, the headline clearly betrays a distinct hostility—framing the topic not as an extension of existing concerns over the dynamics of racial inequality, but as a disingenuous bid for legitimacy. (Marjorie Garber (2001) has recently referred to journalism such as this as "aren't they silly?" articles.)

Compare this with the poster for an on-campus presentation by another one of the leading thinkers on this topic. Richard Dyer has been writing about whiteness, not since yesterday lunchtime, but for around a decade. His lecture was called "Whites Are Nothing", to emphasize the invisibility of whiteness as a racial category. Sure, the title's equally provocative, if not more so, but here at least the obligatory pun is absolutely appropriate (nothing = invisible). The implicit target here is the subject matter itself, *not* the practitioners; the message, *not* the messengers.

This is just a fleeting example, but I think it serves to suggest that media representations of intellectuals can often be wantonly misleading and, at their worst, *ad hominem*. As Todd Gitlin has recently commented: "Everyday life, supersaturated with images and jingles, makes intellectual life look hopelessly sluggish, burdensome, difficult. In a video-game world, the play of intellect – the search for validity, the willingness to entertain many hypotheses, the respect for difficulty, the resistance to hasty conclusions—has the look of retardation." (Gitlin, 2000, p. B8)

### **Why I study Design**

Now to a subject closer to all our hearts: Graphic design is very well positioned to become a conspicuous cultural force in the coming years. There is now an awareness among many designers and design writers that graphic design is on the verge of becoming more than merely one among many anonymous cultural industries. Its cultural—and now political—import is, I think, undeniable.

This is amply illustrated by comparing two mailers I recently received, one from the AIGA advertising the 2001 annual conference, titled *Voice*. Over an image of the now-infamous butterfly ballot were the words 'Design Counts.' And surely it does: the conference, to be held in Washington DC, includes in its schedule political lobbying efforts on behalf of the profession. Compare this with a poster that arrived from the Art Directors Club a few days later. As one folded it open, the following legend was revealed: "Imagine a World Without...Art Direction." *Art direction?* If the design profession is beginning to raise its sights, to recognize its own importance in the world as the AIGA mailer suggests, it appears (at least based on the ADC poster) that our first cousins in the advertising business are utterly content to continue gazing at their beautifully art-directed navels.

So—what excites me about design is that its range of potential commitments, be they cultural or political, is far broader than advertising. I'm thrilled that the profession itself is reaching a stage in its growth where it can recognize and seize its own moment. My plea is that designers, design writers, and students of design (I include myself in all these categories) remain alert to the corrosive force of anti-intellectualism, and make every effort possible to continue making inroads into other people's theories and to recognize our own; to send out roots that will help to situate design in relation to those "foreign" theories, for all that it might do to enhance our understanding of what we do, and our place

in the world. Further, I hope that people coming up through college into the business will eat up whatever theory they can get their hands on with all the healthy skepticism they can muster.

For my own part, there is now a small group of scholars using cultural theory to analyze various cultural industries: advertising, fashion design, graphic design. Together, we see these activities as worthy of examination—not as monolithic, primarily *economic* institutions, but as cultures of workers who should be investigated for their own values and beliefs. Even this kind of initiative has to be fought for in order to convince other scholars that what we're doing is right, and of consequence. For my own part, I've presented research on graphic designers and ad creatives at venues such as the International Sociological Association's annual conference, a recent workshop in England on something called cultural economy, and I've written about them/us for journals such as *Mass Communication & Society*, and *Cultural Studies*.

Furthermore, in my five years' work as the resident graphic designer for the Media Education Foundation ([www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)), I have been part of an orchestrated effort to make cutting-edge theoretical ideas about the representation of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in the media as accessible as possible to non-specialist audiences; in other words, to develop video programs that seek to explain complex ideas to college and high-school students who take media and culture-related courses (such as classes on film, news, television, etc.). This is what I mean by the *productive* gap between "academic-speak" and "real language."

### **Concluding comments**

I'll end by imploring you to read widely and wildly; to steer clear of theory jocks; to beware simplistic oppositions, especially since, under the dubious tenure of President Malaprop, thoughtful, critical reflection will be the target of more ridicule than ever. We need to cultivate a healthy regard for theory—any and all theory—to evaluate it on its own terms, take what we need, and remember that if graphic design is to truly mature, it needs theory not merely as a design tool, but as a way to make it truly significant and consequential in the decades to come. And, as the cultural critic Stuart Hall has noted, "The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency." (Hall 1996, pp.265-266)

Theory, my friends, is always a Good Idea.

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