

Culture is the Limit: Pushing the Boundaries of Graphic Design Criticism and Practice

This essay attempts to redirect theoretical approaches to graphic design practice away from an emphasis on the design object and production (defined in terms of aesthetics and popular definitions of communication) towards an alternative cultural studies perspective. Conceptualizations of the design environment as the locus of authority over content and of graphic design as the sole mechanism through which interpretation occurs provide limited explanations for graphic design's role in the circulation and formation of meaning. Through a cultural studies perspective, graphic design is a dynamic component of a larger discursive field where meanings are negotiated through cultural forms.

Marilyn Crafton Smith is a professor of art at Appalachian State University, where she teaches graphic design, visual communication and additional courses featuring feminist and multicultural perspectives in art and media criticism. She holds a Ph.D. in mass communication from the University of Iowa (1992). She has published in the Journal of Communication Inquiry and has a chapter on feminist media and cultural politics in Women in Mass Communication. Her research focuses on critical and feminist approaches to visual culture and mass communication.

Appalachian State University
Department of Art

Boone
North Carolina 28608

Visible Language, 28:4
Marilyn Crafton Smith,
298-316

© *Visible Language*, 1994

Rhode Island
School of Design

Providence
Rhode Island 02903

Discourse about graphic design practice in the United States has been strongly associated with an emphasis on the visual "object" and its attendant production practices. However, graphic design is implicated in the circulation and formation of cultural and social meaning. A limited focus on the design object, even when the latter is conceived as something a "message" moves through, has tended to remove the design product from its social moorings and further underscores the lack of engagement design discourse has had with "subjects" of design, interpretive strategies and design as cultural practice. Additionally, there has been little critical elaboration of the relationship between audience and design in terms of cultural sources and contexts through which interpretations are made.

In this essay I review some of the ways graphic design practice has been conceptualized, particularly those whose central concerns are aesthetics and popular notions of communication processes. This review is undertaken in order to examine assumptions about the generation and location of meaning which underlie these frameworks. A cultural studies perspective is then proposed as an alternative means to theorize graphic design practice, a perspective in which the relationships between meaning production and cultural practices are accorded primary consideration.

Residual Frameworks for Graphic Design

Much of the discourse about graphic design has derived from continued attempts to define and reposition graphic design practice as a profession. The outcome has produced numerous conceptualizations of graphic design, as a form of aesthetic expression, communication, persuasion, information management, problem-solving or as a vehicle for social responsibility and/or political activism.¹ While each of these conceptualizations may not be so firmly rooted in the '90s as in the past, the residual thinking about them still guides much of our current understanding of graphic design.

No one can dispute the significance of graphic design's legacy, the dual traditions of art and craft. The location of academic graphic design programs in predominantly fine arts, rather than communication or technology departments underscores this visual heritage. Under the rubric of aesthetics, graphic design foregrounds personal expression and the development of personal style. Through this practice graphic design achieves aesthetic recognition while also accommodating commercial, scientific or public interests.² Design products not only evidence their aesthetic sensibility through their "hand craftedness," but are also associated with a high regard for individual artistic achievement. Although the public may not be familiar with the individual designers whose work is circulated for popular consumption, a quick perusal of trade publications and graphic design history texts reveals this particular discursive strategy for framing popular understandings of design.³ Concern with a cultivation of "craft" also serves to center the object, particularly when this concept refers to technical expertise and the satisfaction of utilitarian functions required of an object's design and production. Finally, graphic designers' preoccupation with aesthetic and perceptual responses to their products has also meant an over reliance on formalist principles, including those derived from gestalt psychology. Frances Butler observes that twentieth-century theories about visual literacy and visual thinking have reified gestalt theses, a "theory of genetic compositional preferences," into models of composition that "infallibly align with man's [sic] genetic

1

Buchanan, Richard. 1992. "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking." *Design Issues*, 8:2, 5-21; Lorraine Wild. 1992. "On Overcoming Modernism." *I.D.*, 39, 74-77. Design as information management is discussed in Bonsiepe, Gui. 1994. "A Step Towards the Reinvention of Graphic Design." *Design Issues*, 10:1, 47-52.

2

A brochure produced by the American Institute for Graphic Arts (AIGA) defines graphic design as an "aesthetic ordering of type and image" that may be used "to interest, inform, persuade, or sell." n.d.

3

I refer to trade periodicals such as *Communication Arts*, *Graphis* and until recently *Print*, and, to a lesser degree, to graphic design history texts such as that by Philip B. Meggs. 1983. *A History of Graphic Design*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

cognitive map.”⁴ According to Butler, these models have been used by graphic designers to “assure the transmission of their intended message to the perception of the audience.”⁵

Graphic design’s alignment with technological and scientific values, what Victor Margolin identifies as a “modernist” impulse,⁶ may indicate design’s turn toward the function of communication. Conceptualizing graphic design as communication realigns its professional identity with social utility.⁷ However, as Raymond Williams has cautioned, much of what is called communication is “no more than a one-way sending, no more than a transmission in itself.”⁸ There needs to be greater clarification of the use of the concept “communication.” Often when designers and theorists speak of communication, what they refer to is a mechanistic transmission model of communication and attendant concerns about audience that are based on a long line of mass media audience research.⁹ My concern is that a reductionist model will unquestioningly be reproduced when communication is defined solely in terms of imparting, sending, transmitting or giving information to others; perhaps more problematic is the fact that central to the mission of transmitting messages is the purpose of control.¹⁰ In contrast to the idea that meaning is derived from an engagement with the design object, or “text,” by the audience, it is assumed that the authority of the message and “source” of meaning are located primarily in the designer/client relationship.

To rectify the simplified notion of communication as transmission, structuralist and semiotic approaches have been applied to graphic design. In their application greater attention is given to the discrete structural components that comprise a message, and the interaction between designer and recipient of the message is rendered more complex by the consideration of cultural signs and codes. An appropriation of semiotics manifests itself in the designer’s engagement with “encoding” messages into designs, the latter constituting material artifacts that are later “decoded” by viewers. This encoding/decoding model assumes the transmission of transparent messages “from and to fully autonomous subjects.”¹¹

4

Butler, Frances C. 1984. “Eating the Image: The Graphic Designer and the Starving Audience.” *Design Issues*, 1:1, 30-31; an additional critical perspective is offered in Lupton, Ellen. 1987. “The Mystique of Visual Language.” *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, 5:3, 9.

5

Butler. “Eating the Image,” 30-31.

6

Margolin, Victor. 1989. “Introduction,” in Victor Margolin, editor, *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 10.

7

Frascara, Jorge. 1988. “Graphic Design: Fine Art or Social Science?” *Design Issues*, 5:1, 20, 24-25; Margolin, Victor. 1994. “The Age of Communication: a Challenge to Designers.” *Design Issues*, 10:1, 65-70.

8

Williams, Raymond. 1983. *Culture & Society: 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 302; Carey, James W. 1975. “A Cultural Approach to Communication.” *Communication*, 2:3.

9

Some examples of this research are based on “effects,” “uses and gratifications,” “agenda setting” and “cultivation analysis;”



There is a danger that semiotic analytical employment will remain at the level of the designed product itself, featuring the designer's efforts to embed cultural codes into visual language. While audience responses may be acknowledged during the designing process (encoding), designers as well as design theorists may assume that the receiver will "get" the message as set forth by its producers. When this occurs, concern with audience stops at the point of delivery of the message — hence a return to the idea of transmission. Even applying the compositional formulas associated with perception (gestalt principles) tends to replicate the transmission model of communication: their application assumes a clean transmittal of visually organized content to a genetically predisposed (and welcoming) viewer.

Recognizing the limitations of the transmission model, other graphic design critics argue for a more dynamic interaction between audience and designer. They contend that linguistic approaches to graphic design, as achieved through the lens of semiotics, enable design practice to be seen as a relationship that includes designers, audiences and the content of communication. While this more dynamic conception of graphic design has the capacity to account for relations between graphic design practice and the construction of meaning, its explanatory potentiality will be curtailed when the communication goal is restricted to that of persuasion.

For example, Richard Buchanan argues that the outcome of the relationship of designer/content/audience for visual communication is that designers are no longer expected to "decorate messages," but to actively engage in persuasive argumentation.¹² Jorge Frascara's theorization of graphic design is similarly based in behaviorism. His intent is to shift the designer's center of attention away from an engagement with visual components to the moment of contact between the design object and audience. However, Frascara then proceeds to set up numerous hurdles to his project. He clearly situates graphic design within the framework of communication, and sees communication efficiency as a goal of that process. However, communication efficiency is determined solely at the level of individual behavior insofar as

see McQuail, Denis. 1984. *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.

10

Carey, James W. 1975. "A Cultural Approach to Communication." *Communication*, 2: 1-22. Carey points out that the transmission model derived from metaphors of geography and transportation; in the nineteenth century, the movement of goods and the movement of information were conceived as identical processes and described by the common noun "communication" (p. 3).

11

Ang, Ien. 1985. "The Battle Between Television and Its Audiences: The Politics of Watching Television," in *Television in Transition*. Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson, editors. London: British Film Institute, 250.

12

Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," 12.

the goal of graphic design is defined as behavioral change. Frascara conceives of visual communication as “the modification of people’s attitudes or abilities,” suggesting that a review of the entire field of graphic design would indicate that “specific changes in attitudes and conduct are, indeed, the final aim of graphic design in most areas.”¹³

Frascara’s construction of the recipient as “an active participant in the construction of the message”¹⁴ is contradicted by the latitude of freedom ascribed to the viewer, which as outlined throughout his article, is limited to behavioral responses. Conceived in this way, the activity of decoding is entirely prescribed through the designer’s production of the message. The only recourse the audience member is permitted as an “active participant” is to willingly participate in behavior modification stipulated on someone else’s terms.

A brief detour through mass communication theory may prove instructive to graphic design if only because so much thinking about audience response has been dealt with there.¹⁵ I want to recall two early models of mass communication which, I believe, underlie some of the current thinking about the communication function in graphic design, particularly when communication is linked with persuasion or behavior modification. Earlier “effects” research was based on a stimulus-response model: single message — individual receiver — reaction, and dealt with behavioral responses to mass media. This research takes for granted a more or less direct effect which is related to the intention of the initiator and built into the message.¹⁶ It was developed to account for the relation between the sender and receiver, at the level of the individual.¹⁷ However, little evidence of direct effects was found because this approach failed to account for intervening factors such as selective exposure or selective perception.¹⁸ Following the effects research, “uses and gratifications” of the media were proposed as the intervening variables mediating sender and receiver.¹⁹ Here, the emphasis on effects of the producer became the effects of the audience, the move from “effects” to “uses and gratifications” representing a shift from causal to functional approaches. Critics of this research point

13

Frascara, “Graphic Design: Fine Art or Social Science?” 25.

14

Frascara, “Graphic Design: Fine Art or Social Science?” 25.

15

My inclusion of mass communication theory is not to imply that graphic design is simply another form of mass communication. Some parts of it may be, others may not and graphic design will have to develop its own theories and problematics applicable to specific practices in the design discipline.

16

McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 183.

17

McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 182-184.

18

Carey, James W. and Kreiling, Albert L. 1974. “Popular Culture and Uses and Gratifications,” in *The Uses of Communication*. J. G. Blumler and E. Katz, editors. Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 227.

to its weaknesses: 1) while this approach may indicate that consumption of the media has functions, it failed to show that mass media was the only means of satisfying the functions; and 2) because it is unable to link functions of the mass media with symbolic content and to explain the actual experience of interpreting the media, uses and gratifications research provides no way “to conceptualize the significance of symbolic experience.”²⁰

Graphic designers know little about the specific ways their audiences respond to graphic design and the ways that graphic design is made meaningful to their lives. Few practitioners or critics have put much effort into understanding these audiences, whether through systematic studies of their audiences or by theoretically assessing the ways audiences make meaning of graphic design products.²¹ Graphic design’s close alignment with business suggests marketing strategies as a model for understanding audiences. However, in addition to the fact that such strategies are suspect among many designers,²² lingering marketing approaches are problematic because they construct the audience solely in its commodity form — that of advertising.²³ In this form, audience members are conceived narrowly as buyers of products rather than as viewers who actively make meaning from graphic design.

The conceptualizations discussed thus far provide limited ways for thinking about the interaction between audience and design. Audiences respond to design works from a number of positions, perhaps as consumers, but also in ways that fall outside the behaviorist, functionalist or commodity models. Once a cultural product, such as that which results from graphic design practice, is put into circulation, the meanings assigned to it and the uses to which it is put are not necessarily “fixed” nor determined by the producers/designers of this “text.” Graphic design criticism needs to forego the task of defining strategies for determining or controlling meaning. Whether as practitioners, theorists or educators, all those associated with graphic design practice need to pursue making relationships between audience and design honest ones.

19

The “uses and gratifications” research was grounded in functional and systemic theories in sociology, and in functional and gestalt psychology; the particular sociological context for audience effects and the manner in which perceptions are organized mediate an audience member’s experience of mass communication. Carey and Kreiling. “Popular Culture and Uses and Gratifications,” 227-228.

20

Carey and Kreiling. “Popular Culture and Uses and Gratifications,” 227-232.

21

Butler. “Eating the Image,” 28; exceptions include the work found in *Design Discourse*, Section II, “The Interpretation of Design,” Victor Margolin, editor. 1989. See in particular: Butler. “Eating the Image,” 157-170; Lupton, Ellen. 1989. “Reading Isotype,” 145- 156; and Kinross, Robin. 1989. “The Rhetoric of Neutrality,” 131-143.

22

Butler. “Eating the Image,” 28; Holland, D.K. 1993. “Think First, Design Later,” *Communication Arts*, 34, 30.

23

Allor, Martin. 1988. “Relocating the Site of the Audience.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5, 220.

Developments of new means of communication, starting with the beginning of the “mass media” press, brought with them the unworkable formula of mass audiences. In answer to his own question, “Who are the masses?,” Raymond Williams notes that masses are conceived as “other people,” but that “there are in fact no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses.”²⁴ While graphic designers do not necessarily think of their audiences as “masses,” the key lesson to be learned from Williams is that “*the way that audience is conceived will proceed from our intentions*” (emphasis mine).²⁵ The way we conceptualize the audience is a crucial first step to understanding how meaning derives from graphic design. When design is conceptualized in a mechanistic form of communication, it is requisite that the “intentions” of transmission be examined. As the next section will show, the ways that graphic design has been conceptualized as communication, thus far, have proven inadequate for explaining graphic design’s role in the formation and circulation of cultural, symbolic meaning.

24

Williams. 1983. *Culture & Society: 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 299-300.

25

Williams, 1983. *Culture & Society: 1780-1950*, 303.

Towards Reconceiving Graphic Design as Cultural Practice

Sophisticated means for interpretive approaches have been provided by contemporary theorists employing a range of perspectives, among them cultural studies, critical communication theory, feminist criticism, literary criticism, semiotics and/or structuralism. In the sections that follow I want to: 1) outline particular theoretical contributions from the cultural studies tradition; 2) situate the practice of graphic design within a cultural studies perspective by introducing a model for cultural production; 3) argue for enlarging the definition of the object of design studies; and finally, 4) return to the audience/text nexus as a location for exploring the relationship of graphic design and signification.

Cultural Studies’ Intellectual Precedents

The cultural studies “tradition” that I draw upon is based in the theoretical work initially identified as British cultural studies which originated at the Contemporary Center for Cultural

Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, England under the leadership of Stuart Hall and others.²⁶ The goal of cultural studies analysis at its inception was two-pronged: to reject the reductionism and economism of classic Marxism (economic determinism), and to break with elitist conceptions of “culture.” As evidenced by its early work, cultural studies has been characterized throughout its history by a willingness to traverse a wide range of intellectual terrains. Among the intellectual forays that have contributed to and redirected cultural studies at different historical moments are the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, a philosophical rereading of Karl Marx, appropriation of Antonio Gramsci’s work on state and civil society and his metaphor of hegemony, Louis Althusser’s work on ideology, Jacques Lacan’s reworking of Sigmund Freud, and in more recent years, development of a theory of articulation derived from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,²⁷ and feminist work on gendered subjectivity and the reconceptualization of power.²⁸ This tradition understands culture not only as lived traditions and practices, but also as the meanings and values of social groups that derive from specific historical conditions.

Implicit in this cultural approach is the conception of society as unequally structured and comprised of diverse groups that are positioned in asymmetric relations to structures of dominance. In recognizing unequal relationships of power, cultural studies analyses contrast with the “objectivist” stance of traditional social science and with the restrained use of politics in criticism aimed at promoting an appreciation of elite culture.²⁹ An explicit acknowledgment and interrogation of relations among culture, language, ideology and the symbolic is a distinguishing feature of the cultural studies endeavor (particularly as developed through the British tradition). The aim of cultural studies goes beyond offering explanations for cultural and social practices; it strives to transform structures of power as they currently exist.³⁰

26

For a theoretical history of the Center see Hall, Stuart. 1980. “Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems,” in *Culture, Media, Language*. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, editors. London: Hutchinson, and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 15-47. More recent discussions of this approach are found in Grossberg, Lawrence, Nelson, Cary and Treichler, editors. 1992. *Cultural Studies*. New York and London: Routledge.

27

Laclau’s theory of articulation is adapted by Stuart Hall in Hall, Stuart. 1986. “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” Lawrence Grossberg, editor, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10:2, 45-60.

28

Previously formulated by Althusser and Lacan, the “subject” is explored further by feminist critics attempting to explain the unconscious processes of becoming engendered as female subjects. Kristeva’s work first comes to mind, although it has been criticized for its lack of theoretical attention to wider social relations and its strict adherence to a Lacanian perspective. On Lacan’s



A Model for Cultural Production

Traditional communication research has conceived of the communication process as constituted by at least three discrete components (sender/message/receiver) and has tended to focus on a single component of the process (either sender, message or receiver) instead of addressing the connections among all three. In contrast, cultural studies attempts to show the relationship between cultural “texts” and social systems through a focus on social meanings. Cultural studies move interpretive analysis beyond the text or object, and, instead, conceives of the latter as one component among many in a larger discursive field.

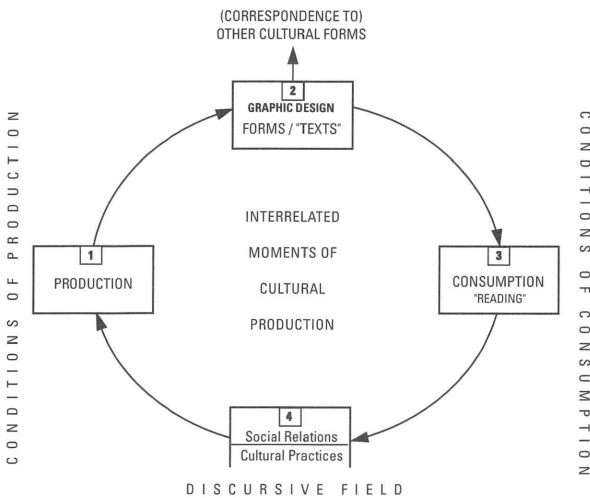


Figure 1

For the purpose of proposing an alternative formulation of graphic design practice, we can adapt a model for cultural production developed by Richard Johnson. Following Johnson, this model diagrammatically represents “a circuit of the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products,” with each “moment” in the circuit contingent upon the others. (*figure 1*)³¹ Not only are the moments of production, circulation and consumption conceived in complex and interactive relations with each other, they also engage with “lived cultures and social relations.” Much of the emphasis in graphic design has focused on the object and its production strategies.

subject, his rereading of Freud, and Kristeva’s appropriation of Lacan, see Weedon, Chris; Tolson, Andrew and Mort, Frank. 1984. “Theories of Language and Subjectivity,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, 200-208. For a review of feminist cultural studies and the collaborative efforts of U.S. and British critics in this area, including work on subjectivity, see Schwichtenberg, Cathy. June, 1989. “Feminist Cultural Studies.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6:2, 202-208.

29

During, Simon, editor. 1993. *The Cultural Studies Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 1-2.

30

Hall, Stuart. 1992. “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” in *Cultural Studies*. Lawrence Grossberg et al., editors. New York and London: Routledge, 279.

31

Johnson, Richard. 1986/87. “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?” *Social Text*, 16, 46. While Johnson’s primary goal is to analyze “the social life of subjective forms” and construct a theory of the subject (62-63), I adapt his model to emphasize the more basic point of the distinct “moments” and their relationships with one another that a cultural product must be conceptualized through.

If graphic design is reconceived as a cultural practice in the larger sense, further critical consideration may be directed to the various “moments” that proceed from the designed object’s production. Design can be theorized in terms of the various moments that constitute the life of the object.

Each moment in the circuit may be distinguished by its own characteristic form. For example, a cultural product such as graphic design must undergo a process of production. It is not possible, however, to understand the conditions of production entirely through a deliberate examination of the graphic design products or “texts.” Similarly, the meanings that are generated by “readers” of graphic design products cannot be determined by analyzing the products themselves nor can they be inferred from conditions of production.³² Assessing the specific conditions under which messages are transformed and given meaning provides insight into the ways cultural forms are inhabited subjectively by their readers.

From Object to Text: Decentering the Text as Object of Study

Whether the design object itself is conceived as a single entity, a combination of related parts, a genre (a particular form of graphic design) or a medium, it is a closed system for understanding how meaning is communicated and constructed by the reader. Such a system assumes that audiences make interpretations based solely on their interaction with the text. Far from being a discrete entity, a cultural product such as graphic design is characterized by a “proliferating intertextuality” and, thus, is encountered by the viewer through its relations with coexisting media. Johnson cautions that this “proliferation of allied representation in the field of public discourses” may present large problems for anyone involved with the study of contemporary cultural studies.³³ Cultural studies redirects the study of representation beyond the single text, to decenter the text as an object of study; instead of focusing on the text for its own sake or for the sake of its social effects, the text is studied for the “subjective and cultural forms it realizes and

32

The terms “reader” and “reading” are commonly used in cultural studies to suggest a pro-active response to cultural products. Reading implies “perceptual and cognitive activities closer to a form of ‘construction’ than to passively and merely reactive operations suggested by the term reception.” Corner, John. 1983. “Textuality, communication and media power,” in *Language, Image, Media*. Howard Davis and Paul Walton, editors. New York: St Martin’s Press, 267.

33

Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 61.

makes available.”³⁴ To Johnson, the text is only a means in cultural studies, a “raw material from which certain forms (e.g., of narrative, ideological problematic, mode of address, subject position, etc.) may be abstracted.”³⁵

One of the stronger insights provided by cultural studies is the recognition that cultural products exist in a culture which pre-exists their production, their materially realized form. Culture is made of multiple sign systems — signifiers — that coexist in any given society and are in existence prior to the encoding of cultural products. Culture comprises the conceptual forms and accumulated stocks of knowledge by which social groups and heterogeneous subcultures structure their everyday experience within a social and material context.³⁶ Whereas the specific conditions of production (encoding) and reception (decoding) vary, the cultural material from which texts are produced is also available to enable readings of those texts. These resources exist in the culture and beyond the text (extratextually). Textual materials may be described as “complex, multiple, overlapping, coexistent, juxtaposed, in a word, ‘intertextual’ they are “interdiscursive,” indicating that they consist of “elements that cut across different texts.”³⁷ Readers bring to their interpretations “common-sense” meanings (in Gramscian terms) that have emerged out of private cultures; their individual contexts include their social locations, their histories, subjective interests, private worlds and the contexts of both immediate situations (domestic) and the larger historical one.³⁸ Thus, to read (in the most active sense) popular cultural texts, readers draw from a variety of textual material as well as their own store of knowledge to become “producers,” themselves, of cultural meanings. Although the combinations inherent in “intertextual” interpretations cannot be determined, in advance or if ever, through formal or empirical means of analysis, referencing them in a study of a cultural text may enhance our understanding of textual strategies relative to signification. To speculate on how readers may be positioned within a text, or foresee its popularity, we must first know “which stories are already in place.”³⁹

34

Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 62.

35

Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 62.

36

Gottdiener, M. 1985. “Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Semiotic Approach.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 90:5, 991.

37

Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 67.

38

Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 67-68.

39

Johnson, “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 68.

In order to rethink the place of “text” in a cultural analysis, Johnson suggests as a first step the reformulation of each moment in terms of the others. For example, to examine the moment of production, semiological questions could be introduced about how graphic design draws on codes and conventions, how it transforms them and reworks them, to whatever end, at the same time anticipating the other moments. A text-based study, similarly “enlarged,” could take into account production and readership views, to seek out signs of the production process in the text and anticipate reader-produced meanings.

40
Johnson. “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?,” 74.

To explain the expanded notion of “text,” Johnson draws attention to the double layering of representation. For example, if we understand a graphic design product as a form of representation, and, significantly, if we comprehend what we are analyzing is a “representation of a representation,” it is apparent that “the first object, that which is represented in the text, is not an objective event or fact, but *has already been given meanings in some other social practice*” [emphasis mine].⁴⁰ By taking into account the two layers, we can better determine the text’s salience for particular groups. That is, we can examine the relationship between the characteristic codes and conventions of a social group and the forms of representation these take in a particular design environment. Moreover, we can focus on the indeterminate stocks of knowledge, common understandings and the disparate signifiers which offer some possibility of coherence within a cultural text. This type of analysis simultaneously highlights the moments of production and reading through the use of two concepts, *intertextuality* and *intersubjectivity*.

Intertextuality involves the process of drawing on previous multiple, interrelated forms and conventions to construct meanings. This may occur at both encoding and decoding moments although the combinations of intertextual materials utilized in the signifying process may vary. The prior existence of such forms or conventions, or codes, does not imply a neutrality of their part in that such raw material is also linked to specific ideologies and social practices. Disclosing linkages

between different texts may reveal “familiar” messages, which, through intertextual analysis, are legitimated as part of the present message.⁴¹

Subjectivity is encountered in the possible reading positions established by textual strategies which suggest, but cannot claim to equate with, possible positions of the agency of readers. A subjective response, or even speculation (inferences) about a single, individual reader is analytically distinct from the way in which a reader as a member of a community learns the meanings of conventions or symbols, or the *intersubjective* response.⁴² The former response indicates those private interpretations that are derived in “specific circumstances unique to the individual,” whereas the latter implies the activation of meanings that are widely-based in a community, meanings which draw on common-sense knowing and are activated in the public realm.⁴³ While readers’ responses are not so clearly separated as is indicated by this analytical dichotomy, this distinction is necessary in order to highlight the arena where communication takes place. Meaning will remain private knowledge without conventions which enable the communication of that meaning. Therefore, a cultural text must appeal to the wider system of meanings, however transitory they may be, that constitute intersubjective interpretations.

A Return to Audience/Text Interaction

At different periods in the history of cultural studies the relationship between audience and text has been formulated according to differing notions of ideological power attributed to the text. Much of this theoretical work has focused on mass media, television in particular. Although graphic design needs to be examined more specifically in terms of its various forms and specific audiences, the television studies have provided much groundwork for understanding text/audience interaction. The way the individual “reader” has been conceptualized may be very generally described as moving from a “subjected subject” to a “resisting reader.”⁴⁴

41

de Lauretis, Teresa. 1979. “A Semiotic Approach to Television as Ideological Apparatus,” in *Television: The Critical View*. (2nd Ed.). Horace Newcomb, editor. New York: Oxford University Press, 108.

42

Cluysenaar, Anne. 1987. “Text,” in *Modern Critical Terms*. Roger Fowler, editor. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 247.

43

Cluysenaar, “Text,” 247.

44

The former is exemplified by Brunson, Charlotte and Morley, David. 1978. *Everyday Television: Nationwide*. London: BFI/Open University, and the latter by Fiske, John. 1986. “Television: Polysemy and Popularity.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 391-408.

In the 1960s and early '70s, when cultural studies began to incorporate semiotic and structuralist analytic methods, it began to acknowledge the power of "texts" and the significance of the social and political contexts of their production and reception. Out of this project came questions about the power of the text over audience and how culture was implicated in the production of meaning. Central to this project was the way in which the audience for cultural texts was theorized, not as an homogeneous mass, but rather as a mixture of social groups bound in different ways to dominant ideological practices and meanings.

In the '70s a strict form of structuralism derived from the work of Louis Althusser and psychoanalytic concepts saw individuals as structured in ideology. Much of the critical work assumed that texts were ideologically closed; that is, interpretations of the text were linked with larger systems of domination. A less rigid form of semiotics entered cultural studies through the theoretical concept of *polysemy*, a term implying that a signifier is embedded with multiple meanings (signifieds). In Hall's 1980 model for encoding/decoding, his reconceptualization of decoding proved significant in many ways for theorizing audience interaction with cultural texts.⁴⁵ He argues that although a dominant, ideologically "preferred" meaning is provided in the text, audience members may take up two additional positions in relation to the text: they may "negotiate" or "oppose" this "preferred" one, depending on their specific class positions. Thus, this audience-based theory acknowledges varying degrees of symmetry between the two points of encoding and decoding, and notes that any correspondence between the two is constructed, not given.

All too often the reception or decoding process is thought of as a simple mirror image of the production/encoding process.⁴⁶ In his critique of Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model, Wren-Lewis notes that, for Hall, the basis for the "fit" between these two points (or lack of it) are the "codes of encoding or decoding [which] may not be perfectly symmetrical;"⁴⁷ that is, the symmetry depends on "the degree of identity or non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit or systematically distort what has been transmitted."⁴⁸

45
Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding and Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*. Stuart Hall et al., editors. London: Hutchinson.

46
Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding and Decoding," 131; cited in Wren-Lewis, Justin. 1983. "The Encoding/Decoding Model: Criticism and Redevelopments for Research on Decoding," *Media, Culture, Society*, 5, 179.

47
Hall. "Encoding and Decoding," 131.

48
Wren-Lewis, "The Encoding/Decoding Model...", 180.

Subsequently, cultural critics have emphasized that the asymmetry between encoded and decoded meanings is not based in the non-identity of codes. Instead, it is the result of differing conditions underlying the two practices of production and reception/interpretation.⁴⁹ Thus, in application to graphic design, the process through which a designer encodes his or her work may be described as a “signifying practice selecting and interpreting a whole world of signifiers;”⁵⁰ the decoding of the same work requires that viewers negotiate with an object whose interpretive realm is strongly defined through graphic design practices.

In his study, *The Nationwide Audience*, David Morley applies Hall’s theory of preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings. Morley’s study was a sequel to an earlier textual analysis of the same television program.⁵¹ In his empirical analysis he showed a single episode to a variety of audience groups and then analyzed their group discussions in terms of the three “readings.” What he found was that the “preferred reading” theory of Hall was inadequate to cope with the variety and complexities of the responses. Morley’s work also clearly indicated that particular readings cannot be predictably aligned with class positions, although they are socially motivated.

John Fiske exploits the notion of polysemy further as he develops the concept of “semiotic excess.” He is concerned with the question of how each text, conceived as a “polysemic potential of meaning,” intersects with the social life of the viewer or group of viewers.⁵² He argues, in reference to television and through the work of John Hartley, that [a cultural product] is not simply a clean, self-contained discourse but one that is “dirty, contaminated through interaction with culture.”⁵³ The deconstructionist insistence on the inherent instability of meaning, the multiplicity of meanings found in language and the possibility of various reading positions offered to viewers, allows Fiske to develop his idea of semiotic excess, that is, meaning that cannot be controlled by dominant discourse. Although dominant discourse is present, excess meaning “spills over” to become “available for the cultural interests of the subordinate.”⁵⁴ His work is noted for framing

49
Wren-Lewis. “The Encoding/Decoding Model...,” 180; and Ang. “The Battle Between Television and its Audiences: The Politics of Watching Television.”

50
Wren-Lewis. “The Encoding/Decoding Model...,” 180.

51
Morley, David. 1980. *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*. London: British Film Institute. The earlier study referenced in the text is Brunson, Charlotte, and Morley, David. 1978. *Everyday Television: Nationwide*. London: BFI/Open University.

52
Fiske, John. 1986. “Television and Popular Culture: Reflections on British and Australian Critical Practice.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 204.

53
Fiske. “Television and Popular Culture: Reflections on British and Australian Critical Practice,” 209; Hartley, John. 1984. “Encouraging Signs: Television and the Power of Dirt, Speech, and Scandalous Categories,” in *Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives*. Willard D. Rowland Jr. and Bruce Watkins, editors. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.

54
Fiske, “Television and Popular Culture: Reflections on British and Australian Critical Practice,” 209.

the audience as “resisting readers,” thus, returning to them power over the text.⁵⁵

In his analysis of the ways that “audience” has been employed in audience research, Martin Allor contends that locating the impact of the media through this concept has come to embrace the “space of the individual/social distinction.”⁵⁶ He suggests that the recent focus on audience has permitted media theorists to reconsider the place of the individual within the social formation in ways that move beyond the present discourses of structural functionalism and social psychology. Cultural studies work today addresses the tensions between the individual and the social, highlighting the question of how the individual becomes social.

55

See for example Fiske, John. 1986. “Television: Polysemy and Popularity,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 391-408.

56

Allor. “Relocating the Site of the Audience,” 217.

57

Kinross, Robin. 1993. “Design History: No Critical Dimension,” *ALGA Journal of Graphic Design*, 11:1, 7.

Conclusion

Cultural studies can be seen as an alternative theoretical approach to the traditional formulations of graphic design discussed here — personal expression and communication. When graphic design is theorized as communication, design criticism, like mainstream communication research, tends to separate the communication process that it attempts to study from the social order as a whole. Redirecting graphic design practice and criticism toward an emphasis on the construction of meaning is a more productive avenue to follow if we are to understand the means of symbolic production and expression, the relationships between graphic design practice and cultural meaning systems (including the production of commonsense knowledge), and how audiences “produce” meaning.

Rather than simply include graphic design as “one more item” in the menu of culture,⁵⁷ cultural theorists need to specify the contexts, forms and practices that are unique to graphic design. Whereas broadcasting and literature have been influential resources for thinking about audiences, “reading” or viewing contexts that are specific to graphic design may be examined in conjunction with other ongoing practices outside these dominant models. For example, we could ask how audiences traverse museum displays — (are they connoisseurs or are they

there to pick up a date?); are there unique contexts in which audiences engage with periodicals or other published materials that evoke particular responses?; are there additional cultural practices in operation when audiences navigate sign systems at a public zoo or an airport?

Since all communicated messages do have a material point of origin, the designer/client relationship can be examined in terms of the level of intent. Conscious intention of a message may result from professional ideologies operating within graphic design practice, ideologies needing critical assessment. However, conscious intention is also bounded by an assemblage of unconscious ideological practices from which it must be distinguished.⁵⁸ By investigating how larger sets of cultural meaning influence the individual designer at the moment of design/production, cultural critics also engage theoretically with the individual/social distinction.

Whereas there may be greater similarities present in the production context (this would have to be discerned relative to different subjects and forms of design), the contexts of reading or interpreting design products vary considerably. As Morley points out, the practice of decoding suggests a single act of interpretation but in actuality it may involve a set of processes. Issues of attentiveness, relevancy and interpretive strategies can be addressed through cultural critique. If viewers are to be discursively literate they must learn the rhetorical competencies needed for functioning within a discourse. The degree to which viewers are competent corresponds to the degree of interpretive “work” they must undertake, and consequently, to the amount of pleasure they derive from interaction with graphic design products.⁵⁹

Traditionally, the design object and its form have been given primary emphasis in graphic design practice and criticism. Instrumentalist notions of form, that form is a tool for the transmission of pregiven meanings, must be revised to consider the links among the content, ideological themes and the particular form a graphic design product takes. Rather than relinquish form altogether, cultural studies needs to recuperate

58

I am indebted to David Morley's prior discussion of intentionality, the instrumentality of language, decoding and form for the points I raise in reference to graphic design. Morley, David. 1981. "The Nationwide Audience' — A Critical Postscript." *Screen Education*, 39:4, 10.

59

Condit, Celeste. 1989. "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6, 103-22. Condit's point concerning interpretive work is made in reference to two different viewers' responses to a *Cagney and Lacey* episode on abortion. However, her discussion of the differential workloads required of viewing audiences for different types of "readings" — dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings — is quite useful.

it by showing its relevance to content and the production of meaning. An audience member may respond positively or negatively to a graphic design product as a particular cultural form. Additionally, there may be a correspondence between two cultural forms, that of the graphic design piece and that of an external but related cultural form.⁶⁰ The interdiscursive connections of these forms may possibly contribute to how the viewer responds to the design product.

Although cultural elements may exist prior to their integration into cultural products, through their employment they are articulated to dominant discourses, the means with which we think about and frame the world. The notion of a “preferred reading” implicitly implies that power relations underlie the circulation of cultural meanings, and that some meanings are privileged over others. Design criticism must continually assess the various levels of determination when addressing issues of interpretation.

Application of a cultural studies critique to graphic design enables not only our understanding of the cultural rules which organize practices of graphic design production and consumption, but also of the organization and production of culture. The cultural studies model proposed here requires that the moments of production, circulation and consumption be assessed for their interrelationships, but always in relation to the larger discursive field where meanings are negotiated through cultural forms.

60

Morley cites the work of Cohen and Robbins who argue that a crucial factor in the popularity of one genre of texts (Kung-fu movies) among urban/working class/male/youth is the linkage of “two forms of ‘collective representation’ — a linkage between the forms of some oral traditions in working class culture and some genres produced by the media — i.e., a correspondence of form rather than content.” Morley, “The Nationwide Audience — A Critical Postscript,” 11; Cohen, P. and Robbins, D. 1979. *Knuckle Sandwich*. London: Penguin.

