Teal Triggs

Alphabet Soup: Reading British Fanzines

The absorption of subcultural graphic ephemera into mainstream culture warrants careful consideration within academic study as it challenges conventional methodologies used in design history research and writing. Fanzines represent one form of subcultural communication which embrace specific visual and textual languages — elements often appropriated from mainstream cultural and media sources. Found within the realm of amateur publishing, fanzines offer "alternative critical spaces" for dialogues between like-minded individuals who share a passion for a chosen subject. In Britain, the growth of fanzine production has grown steadily over the last twenty years while maintaining consistent language paradigms with well-considered historical precedents.

Teal Triggs is course leader for the School of Graphic Design at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, London and a design historian with specific interest in graphic design history and theory. She has lectured widely and participated on panel discussions in England and in America, Europe and the Far East. Her writings have appeared in a number of books as well as design publications including Eye *and the* Journal of Design History. *She is editor of a forthcoming book entitled* Communicating Design *to be published by B.T. Batsford Limited, London.*

School of Graphic Design
Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication

Walden Road
Chislehurst, Kent BR7 5SN
United Kingdom

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Rhode Island
School of Design

Providence
Rhode Island 02903

I'm curious: do you, the reader, like a zine which places considerable emphasis on layout and graphics?
Or would you rather (or just as soon) have a publication featuring fiction, poetry and a minimum of art?

Laurie, editor of *Galactic Discourse 3*, July 1980

Introduction: The Recipe

For almost twenty years Britain's fanzines have flourished. Collectively, they provide a valuable record of subcultural manifestos and other responses to established and orthodox notions of society. Fanzines are vehicles of subcultural communication that arose from a history of amateur and political printed ephemera, offering "alternative critical spaces" unconstrained by the rules and conventions of mainstream publishing. Fanzines are journalistic, but often include literary works of the subcultural "avant garde." Narratives are constructed interactively by both readers and producers of fanzines emphasizing their non-commercial nature and their legitimacy as accurate indicators of community views. The fanzine's theme is intentionally selective and promotes the producer's ideology and intent; it communicates and responds to a like-minded audience. The market is limited and distribution occurs through well-established networks of members and subscribers who use postal services and to a limited extent, alternative record and book shops. One element distinguishing fanzines from other forms of "zines" (e.g., magazines), is its amateur status. Profit is rarely a motive for fanzine production, rather its producers have an implicit passion for the chosen subject. The passion is its true raison d'être.

The profile of underground publications has been elevated recently by the media resulting in an increased awareness of fanzines by mainstream culture. In Britain, the dramatic rise in fashion fanzine numbers alone prompted the London *Evening Standard* to report on what it described as an "Overdosing on fanzines."[1] Recently, a new specialist publication *The Zine (figure 1)*, that acts as a clearing house for many of Britain's

1
Delaney, George. 1994. "Overdosing on fanzines," *Evening Standard*, Tuesday 3 May, 44.

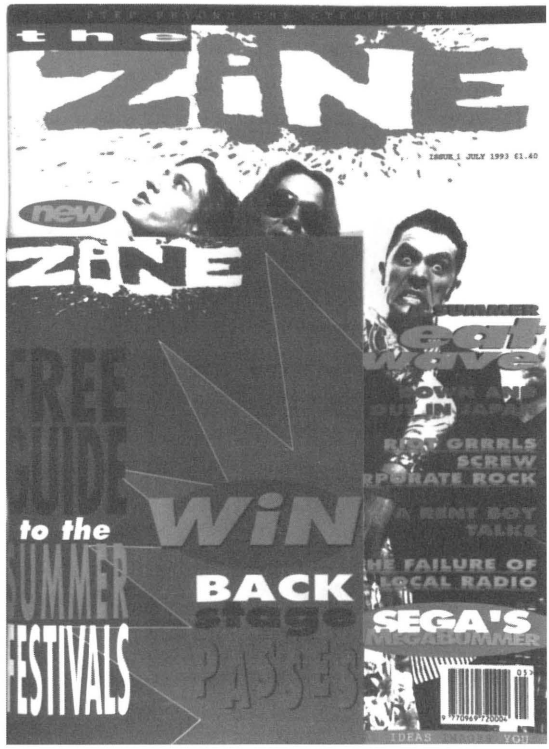


Figure 1
The Zine. 1993. Issue 1 cover, July.

fanzines, demonstrates this increase by the number of new titles it lists each month. Issue six (February 1994) of *The Zine* reports receiving twelve new titles. Other established British "street style" publications such as *The Face* and *i-D* (once fanzines themselves) also list and review on average, six new titles each month. In contrast, *When Saturday Comes,* a British football-orientated fanzine, lists nearly 400 football titles. R. Seth Friedman's revival of Mike Gunderloy's *Fact Sheet Five,* lists 450 new fanzines received internationally in his December 1993 issue alone. The size of these lists suggest that the actual numbers of fanzines is staggering. Most are probably not included because of the nature of underground distribution, the lack of ISSN identification and the fact that they are not catalogued by the British Library or the U.S. Library of Congress.

Even though these publications are considered to be "non-professional" and "non-commercial" in nature, fanzines are not insubstantial or unsophisticated. The graphic element alone is worthy of careful consideration as an important meta-linguistic element of subcultural identity. Subcultural graphic ephemera, its historical context and especially the process of its absorption into mainstream culture also warrants careful academic study. The ephemeral, non-commercial nature of the material though presents problems that challenge conventional concepts of taxonomy and methodology within graphic design history research and writing. Fanzines require a wider scope of study, one which includes cross-disciplinary analysis of the mediation processes that occur between the social, political and economic elements of culture at specific points in time. The visual nature of fanzines cannot be viewed in isolation from these contexts. Studies of "designed objects," particularly in the areas of industrial design, have already successfully employed methods of analysis derived from the areas of anthropology, sociology, feminist critiques, psychoanalysis, social history and structuralism.[2]

2
Walker, John A. 1989. *Design History and the History of Design.* London: Pluto Press. This book provides an excellent account of the variety of approaches and general problems of design history-writing.

The application of similar methods to the study of subcultural printed ephemera is less common and usually employed in relationship to studies of the comic strip and graphic/pulp novels. A recent example is David Kunzler's *History of the Comic Strip* (1990). Here use is made of social art historical and socio-political theory to analyze and position "street" or "low level" texts and images within carefully defined class structures. He provides "readings" of the comic strip in relation to audience class perceptions as well as to the political intents of contributing artists. The focus on visual street language and youth-orientated literature (of which fanzines and comic strips are genres) only recently has gained academic respectability. To date, critical analysis of fanzines is found primarily in sociology and cultural studies, but only as sub-themes within broader examinations of music, youth and popular culture (Lewis, 1992; Frith, 1983; Hebdige, 1979). The visual representation of fanzine content and process of production has largely been ignored, despite the fact that, collectively, fanzines

have a wide audience, and that fanzine authors and editors appropriate elements from vocabularies of past anarchical publications and contemporary popular media sources to advance their ideologies. These acts of *bricolage* require a coherent and systematic method of analysis. The distinctive, coded visual language deserves as much consideration and interpretation as the conventional, textual language of "rebellion" produced by these highly individualistic subcultural groups. One form of analysis that holds promise for analyzing fanzines that respects, and in some measure legitimizes subcultural identity is Umberto Eco's "guerilla semiotics" or what Roland Barthes describes as "signs of signification."[3]

The Ingredients

The term fanzine was first coined by Russ Chauvenet in the United States in 1941[4] to describe a mimeographed publication devoted primarily to science fiction and superhero comic enthusiasts. Many of the early publications grew out of established science clubs such as the Scienceers (1930) and the British-based Science Fiction Association (1937). The first known fanzine, according to the psychologist and author Fredric Wertham, was *The Comet* published in the U.S. in 1930 by members of the Science Correspondence Club. Other fanzines soon followed, including *The Time Traveller* and *The Planet*.[5] By 1936 the idea of fanzines spread to Britain with the production of *Novae Terrae* edited by Maurice Hanson and Dennis Jacques. This was followed by J. Michael Rosenblum's *The Futurian* (1938-40) produced in Leeds.[6]

Fanzines have since come to embrace any subject faithful to the specific interests of "fans." They focus on: personalities such as *I Hate Brenda* spotlighting the television character from *Beverly Hills 90210*; the music scene such as *Ludicrous Line* for the band I, Ludicrous *(figure 2)*; athletics such as *Out of the Blue* for Colchester United F.C. fans; or issue-based topics including *Green Anarchist* which comments on ecological ways to "save the planet." Cari Goldberg Janice in her introduction to *Some Zines: American Alternative and Underground Magazines,*

3
Eco, Umberto. 1986. *Travels in Hyper-reality*. London: Picador. Barthes, Roland. 1964. *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.

4
Nicholls, Peter. 1979. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction: An Illustrated A to Z*. Granada, 215.

5
Werthan, Frederic. *The World of Fanzines: A Special Form of Communication*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, 38. See also: Ash, Brian. 1977. *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. London: Pan Books, 274.

6 Nicholls, *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction...*,237.

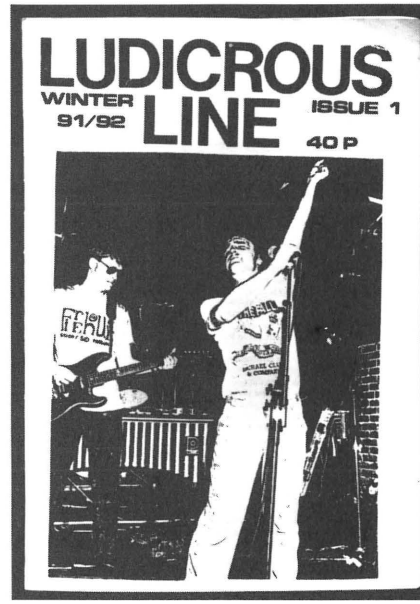


Figure 2
Ludicrous Line. 1991/2. Issue 1 cover, Winter.

Newsletters and APAs (1992) describes what is now recognized formally as a fanzine:

> *Basically, a zine is anything that is published on a non-commercial basis. It can be called underground, or alternative, or independent. It has no limitation and is accomplished purely through individual blood, sweat and tears. Anyone can publish a zine — that's the main attraction.*[7]

As "fandom" grows in popularity, an inevitable communication arises between fans through letters and meetings creating "cultural solidarity" and a "sense of community"— a process that John Fisk (1992) might understand respectively as "textual" and "enunciative productivity."[8] Fanzines provide a focal point and unifying vehicle for establishing and reinforcing shared values, philosophies and opinions. In early science fiction magazines, such as Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (c. 1926), readers contributed letters to "discussion" columns. This provided the original impetus for similar interactive communicative forums. Discussion columns became a fundamental vehicle adopted by many independent publishers. Even today, the editor of *Peter Weller is Back* (1991) — a revived

7
Janice, Cari Goldberg. 1992. *Some Zines: American Alternative and Underground Magazines, Newsletters and APAs.* Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 64.

8
Fiske, John. 1992. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in Lewis, Lisa. 1992. *Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media.* London: Routledge.

British fanzine that accompanied the relaunch of the singer's career — makes a plea for contributions and a continuous dialogue amongst fans: "to keep *WIB* [Weller is Back] going I need the help of the readers through articles or interesting info."[9] Similarly, Chris Wheelchair of *Ruptured Ambitions* (c. late 1980s) asks: "...if you feel you may have anything of interest you'd like to share with others, please write to us, 'cos we'd love to hear from you..."[10] Characteristically, readers' letters and communiques are anonymous as known individual identity often inhibits discourse. The editor of *UK Resist* (1990) once observed that "...the extended letter writing that comes from fanzine culture can fulfil a kind of fantasy role."[11] Readers who communicate with each other through letters can imagine their "correspondents appearance and character" without facing any of the "problems and inhibitions of real social contact." Even the commercial publication *The Zine* maintains an editorial policy that seeks to continue this unihibited discourse. Its informal and conversational narrative style is consistent with the original manifesto of its parent fanzine *Charlotte's Magazine*. The first issue of *The Zine* includes an explicit declaration of policy:

> *Express Yourself! The ZINE is created by its readers. It's for YOUR personal thoughts, photographs, artwork, cartons, opinions, designs, stories, poetry, free ads, your anything! If you're not in...You're not in.*[12]

The Soup's Seasoning

Fanzines belong to subcultures. Therefore, to further our understanding of the context and place of fanzines and to appreciate their origin and evolution, it is important to distinguish between "counter-cultures" and "subcultures." This distinction is explored in depth by John Clarke and others in *Resistance Through Ritual*.[13] Counter-cultures are understood, essentially, as middle-class political alternatives to mainstream culture. Typically, they are issue-based: gay liberation, women's rights, environmentalism, etc. Counter-culture drives the alternative and radical presses. In contrast, subcultures are

9
Wyness, Andy. 1991. *Peter Weller is Back*. Issue 1, October, n.p.

10
Wheelchair, Chris. 1992. *Ruptured Ambitions*. Issue 10, June, n.p.

11
Rutherford, Paul. 1992. *Fanzine Culture*. Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 16.

12
The Zine. 1993. Issue 1, July, 1.

13
Clarke, John, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts. "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in *Resistance Through Ritual*. Hall, Stuart and Tony Jefferson, editors. 1986 reprint. London: Hutchinson, 9-74.

Figure 3
Go Go. 1985. Number 8 cover, November. (From the collection of Lee Young.)

independent groupings exhibiting "...a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their parent culture."[14] Examples include the mods *(figure 3)*, rockers, teds and punks. All operated as distinctive groupings, and in Britain, all emerged from the working-class. If this distinction poses difficulties, so the avant-garde raises further difficulties. In certain respects, the mythic avant-garde was never assimilated into mainstream activity. Instead it developed, as Raymond Williams suggests:

> *....into alternative, more radically innovative groupings, seeking to provide their own facilities of production, distribution and publicity; and finally into oppositional formations, determined not only to promote their own work but to attack its enemies in the cultural establishments and, beyond these, the whole social order in their power.*[15]

The mythic avant-garde is subcultural. It is therefore of great interest that the form, content and graphic sensibilities of fanzines are derived from early twentieth-century avant-garde publications as W. T. Lhamon observed in *Dadapunk* (1980).

14
Hall, Stuart. *Resistance Through Rituals,* 13.

15
Williams, Raymond. 1989. *The Politics of Modernity.* London: Verso, 50-51.

The situationists and punks, much like members of fluxus or the dada movement before them, sought to break down the artificial division of art and life, and thereby the division of art into low and high culture. Like these predecessors, they did so by questioning conventional ideas and practices in a variety of media including poetry, performance, music, painting and film as well as typography and graphics as Tricia Henry shows in her article "Punk and Avant-Garde Art" (1984). A recognizable visual language matured under punk reflecting the underlying aesthetic pioneered by printed publications of the avant-garde, including artist's magazines and mail art such as Man Ray's *Dadazine*, *The Ridgefield Gazook* (1915), Ken Friedman's fluxus-inspired *NYCS Weekly Breeder* (c. 1960) *(figure 4)* or Ben Vautier's *Taut* (1965), to list a few. The situationist's *King Mob Echo* (1968) and Jamie

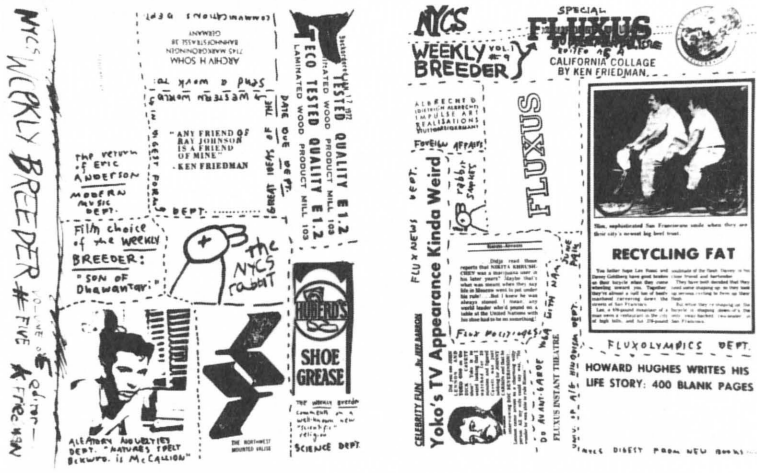


Figure 4
NYCS Weekly Breeder covers. (From the collection of Ken Friedman.)

Reid's *Suburban Press* (1970) are examples defining this language, both visually and textually, and gave good indication of what was to come. When examining the visual language of the fanzine, due consideration must be given to artists of the avant-garde whose work offered both "newness and confrontation" and established precedents for the production of contemporary British fanzines.

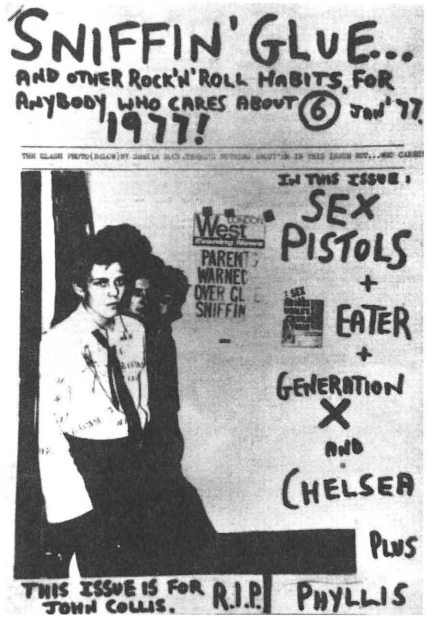


Figure 5
Sniffin' Glue. 1977. Cover.

Though subcultural, British fanzines' graphics also received decisive impetus from the counter-cultural alternative and underground publications of the 1960s. Underground publications such as the *International Times* (*IT*, 1966) and *Oz* (1967) presented literary, journalistic and visual documents of the counter-cultural avant-garde reflecting the inherent and often explicit political nature of their message. David Widgery, a frequent contributor to *Oz*, wrote in 1972 that "*Oz* dazzled with its eclecticism....[and] *IT* became political in a most formal and unhelpful way..."[16] In contrast,"Punkzines" of the late-1970s, despite appropriating elements of visual language from counter-cultural publications, were usually devoted entirely to music and included record reviews, band profiles and interviews.[17] In music, punk was a deliberate attempt to "undercut the intellectual posturing of the previous generation of rock musicians."[18] Accompanying fanzines for bands such as the Damned, Sex Pistols and The Clash, embraced a "do-it-youself" approach to typography and layout reflecting visually feelings emerging from somewhere in between anger and ambivalence *(figure 5)*. The eventual politicized nature of punk

16
Widgery, David. 1972. "Underground Press." *International Socialism, 51,3.*

17
Savage, Jon. 1991. *England's Dreaming.* London: Faber and Faber, 201. Savage credits Brian Hogg with producing the first fanzine in Britain, Bam Balam, focusing on the late-1960s music scene.

18
Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* London: Methuen, 63.

emerged in a calculated response to the disintegration of post-war politics, economy and social life in Britain. It may have accompanied the commercial assimilation of punk into the counter-cultural mainstream.

Despite the rapid assimilation of Punk stylization into mainstream areas of music and fashion — encouraged primarily by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood — commercialization of punk fanzines themselves, was not immediate. Nevertheless, like the punk fanzines themselves, the visual language created by Jamie Reid — a graphic designer for album covers and posters promoting punk bands such as the McLaren-managed Sex Pistols — was situationist based. Reid attacked "notions of originality, genius, and talent" by appropriating "found typography," primarily from cut-up newspapers. Coupled with the use of typewritter and grafitti letterforms, a recognizable "punk typography" emerged and was soon sanctioned by commercially oriented graphic designers Terry Jones (*i-D*) and Neville Brody (*The Face*).

This commercial assimilation of punk typography came partly in response to increased competition for an "institutionalized" youth culture promoted by magazines such as *Time Out, i-D* and *The Face*. Stewart Home observed that while the underground youth press of the 1960s had little or no competition, the next decade proved difficult. Commercial publications took "...away a general youth audience for [punk] 'zines such as *Sniffin' Glue* and *Ripped & Torn*."[19] Despite these forces and a growing political consciousness, fanzine editors responded by providing their readers with ever more specialized music coverage mirroring more closely, the tastes of the "small coteries of cultists."[20] This alone distinguished fanzines from the youth culture publications of the last decade and gives force to Simon Frith's assertion that "...the essence of fan mags is that they *respond* to tastes."[21]

The overabundance of eighties youth culture magazines generated a backlash. Many fans rebelled increasingly against magazines which imposed particular sets of values, ideas and tastes. Magazine "zines," such as Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* (c. late 1980s) and the Beastie Boys' *Grand Royal* (1993),

19
Home, Stewart. 1991. *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents From Lettrisme to Class War.* Stirling, UK: AK Press, 84.

20
Frith, Simon. 1983. *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock.* London: Constable, 177.

21
Frith, Simon, *Sound Effects,* 175.

represent "official" mouthpieces of the singers' organizations and are used primarily as promotion. They are less interactive than fanzines, opting instead to encourage and foster fan loyalty as dictated through carefully directed messages. The magazine "zines" are also commercial by nature seeking to sell and establish "fan-identity" through advertisements for sweat shirts, coffee mugs, posters, etc. For example, *StarTrek: The Next Generation* (Paramount Pictures official magazine of the television series) promotes a number of "officially authorized" products including models of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, silver coins, posters, collector's photos, soundtracks and so forth. More recently, British football clubs are seeking to restrict the use of club icons by fanzines, recognizing their potential as a means of promoting the sale of club souvenirs. Interestingly new "official" publications have been criticized by fans who cite a lack of depth and sophistication as compared to the informal fanzines.

22
Barthes, *The Elements of Semiology*, 14.

Stirring the Soup

Fanzines represent and communicate specific interests of both the fanzine producer and audience as expressed through an assemblage of images, typeforms and commentary. Considered collectively such assemblages constitute a "system of values" comprised of discrete interrelated elements that Roland Barthes would describe as an independent language.[22] The vocabulary is coded, both verbally and visually. Indeed well-known imagery appropriated from popular media is often subverted and assigned new meanings that are understood readily by their fanzine readers. In Britain, the simplest example is media imagery depicting members of the royal family. Such images are appropriated (often plagiarized) and juxtaposed with other incongruous images and texts. In *H.A.G.L. 19*, the Queen Mum *(figure 6)* is recoded from a revered symbol of Britishness into an instrument of elitist privilege and class oppression: "God bless Queen Mum!- but spare a thought for daughter Liz! While we work for 3 grand a year, poor Liz has to get by on a mere 7 million!![sic]." Images are but one element of a large constructed vocabulary of manipu-

Figure 6
H.A.G.L. 19. c early-1990s. Number 20, cover.

lated meanings drawn from such well-recognized imagery. The lexicon of type, especially in association with imagery, provides an additional element of the shared language. Cut-up ransom note lettering, graffiti handwriting and typewritten texts are juxtaposed with newspaper photographs and "child-like" drawings to evoke an air of rebellion and exclusivity within the language *(figure 7)*. These simple tools may be employed with sophistication and may be accessible only to those who know and understand the iconography and codes. Fanzine editors often publish subversive ideas and images without fear of censorship by a non-comprehending status quo.

The latent rebellion of fanzine followings developed rapidly with the "awakening of political consciousness" that accompanied punk and its response to the world *outside* of fanzines.[23] Recent examples include *Birth of A Hooligan* (c. 1992), a fanzine for politically correct skinheads. On the back cover issue two "Rights on Arrest Advice" may be found a short piece describing official procedure and individual rights when stopped by the police. *Drop Babies* (1993) — a fanzine for girls

23
Henry, Tricia. 1989. *Break All Rules! Punk Rock and the Making of a Style.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 96.

Figure 7
Dipper. c. 1993. Number 1, interior page.

Figure 8
Drop Babies. 1993. Number 1, interior spread, April.

only — adopts a radical feminist position supported by articles such as "The Revolution is Female" refuting stereotypical media-constructed images of women *(figure 8)*. As one contributor observes "...all 'girlie' toys like barbie have big tits and a small waist. Is this men's dream girl image, thrust upon us at such an early age?"[24]

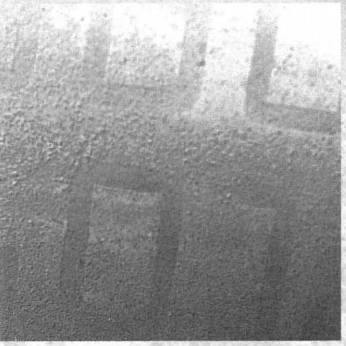
As mouthpieces of rebellion, fanzines seek increasingly to break conventional rules of typographic and visual communication.

24
Layla. 1993. *Drop Babies*. Brentford, Middlesex, n.p.

In so doing they have created their own unique aesthetic which has been appropriated by mainstream graphic designers. Printing techniques have always depended on available technology, but usually reveal an "anyone can do it" ethos — or what might be described as a "technofolkgrafik." Early science fiction fanzines were produced as handwritten texts; duplication via carbon paper. Later, hectograph and mimeograph machines provided simple and accessible forms of duplication. The advent of the photocopy machine (1938) raised new possibilities and facilitated the use of media imagery and cut-up letterforms. Each new duplication process added new qualities to the overall aesthetic. Fanzines soon developed their familiar aesthetic — low quality, distorted, rough, grainy, "degenerated" reproductions reflecting the "noise" of the machine.[25] Despite this crudeness, fanzines achieve maximum visual impact by numerous graphic techniques. They employ multilayered texts with numerous varieties of type sizes, faces and weights. The seemingly random chaotic placement of text and image creates an odd dynamic where readers are forced to engage themselves more actively than in conventional texts so as to decipher the message. The narrative is often discontinuous and disagreeable, and style is employed intentionally to "decenter" what might be understood as a "totalizing cultural hegemony."[26]

Despite the diversity of material and editorial approaches, fanzines still retain a unified stylistic vocabulary, so much so that the coding system of the "zine" is now generally accepted and understood by a wider audience. Publications such as *The Zine,* demonstrates clearly that visual and verbal codes formulated within street-level communication networks, may be identified, appropriated, stylized further and absorbed into mainstream culture. Though appropriated and turned to the use of the commercial market, the original graphic elements of fanzines remain intact. Images and ideas will continue to be taken from mainstream media, appropriated, subverted and recoded in an endless cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation. And as this cycle unfolds, new and innovative elements of visual languages will continue to arise.

25
Perneczky, Geza. 1991. *The Magazine Network: The trends of alternative art in the light of their Periodicals 1968-1988.* Köln: Soft Geometry, 86. With rapidly changing forms of technology, however, fanzines are moving from printed production to that of electronic dissemination. Postal services are substituted by electronic mail (e-mail); handwriting by voice recognition and photocopied materials by laser printer output and computer discs.

26
Viegener, Matias. 1991. "Gay Fanzines: There's trouble in that body: Cool Politics, Revolting Style." *Afterimage,* January, 12.

"Alphabet Soup: Reading British Fanzines" is an expanded version of an essay which appears in a forthcoming book entitled *Communicating Design* (B.T. Batsford Limited, London). This paper is also the subject of current post-graduate research in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, England.