



## *Signal Detected – Recontextualising Typography* prof. ian noble

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The subject of my talk today is concerned not only with the theme of this conference – innovation, but with an equal emphasis on the repositioning or rethinking of graphic design education.

As an educator, practitioner and writer in the area of graphic design I am interested in how we might advance and develop our approaches to the production of visual communication. This interest shared by many others is influenced by two key factors – which at times in the recent past have appeared to be at odds with each other, or at least offering a degree of opposition.

What I will call Factor One is the somewhat uneasy relationship between design education and the design industry. Speaking solely from a UK perspective, although I am sure there are parallels to be found here in Canada, for quite some time a peculiar situation has existed whereby both sets of introduced parties have found it difficult to articulate what each expects from the other.

Design educators have claimed a kind of moral high ground – arguing that they have the sole rights to the intellectual debates surrounding the subject, and in particular the promotion of ‘so called’ new and experimental approaches to graphic design. On the other hand the industry – the intended receiver of design graduates – has maintained a somewhat limited interest and role within education. This has manifested itself, for example, in the articulation that many of the current design programmes are responsible for producing graduates who lack the necessary skills to survive in ‘the real world’ - a phrase I have come to hate.

Factor Two is the fairly recent phenomenon of the dramatic increase, I guess over the last fifteen years, of what has been called a ‘discourse’ from within graphic design. This is best exemplified by the design journals such as Eye Magazine (UK), Émigré (US), Visible Language (US) and most recently Dot, Dot, Dot (NL) – all of which have emerged to either report on or act as a catalyst for debate on the subject of graphic design.

We have also witnessed an avalanche of graphic design publications, ranging from designer monographs and manifestos to critical essays and overviews in collected form – all with varying degrees of insight and influence. What these publications have done is to contribute to the improvement of design’s self image – a rather introverted one in the past – it could be argued closer to a trade than a profession. They have also allowed us greater opportunities than existed in the past to debate the range of issues that make up our practice today.

These debates of authorship, of technology and more recently, fuelled by wider global concerns, social and ethical responsibilities for example have also created a dilemma.

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Certainly for me as an educator there now exists an ever increasing ‘portfolio’ of activities and concerns to attempt to emphasise within any design education programme. A proportion of these appear on the surface to have little to do with preparing designers for future employment. At least as described in many job advertisements I read in the UK trade journals, which more often read like a list of technical competencies than a call for creative design thinkers.

Whilst I have begun with a somewhat negative observation on our activities in design what I would like to do is to suggest that things are not that bad. Like any longstanding relationship partners develop and change - these changes need to be discussed if the relationship is to continue and grow. It is forums such as today that this opportunity exists.

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It is clear that the designer’s ‘field of operation’ (a phrase I have borrowed from the Dutch graphic designer and educator Jan Van Toorn) has changed considerably in recent years. A major influence on this has been, and continues to be, technology. It could be argued that graphic design has always been subject to the effects of advances in technology – from movable type to phototypesetting and more recently the Macintosh computer – and that a large part of it’s identity can also be defined by issues of technology and craft. But recent advances have been dramatic not only has the computer brought with it a range of issues related to designing for the screen, the internet etc, it has also democratised the graphic design – increasing it’s appeal and opening up the activity to many without a formal training in the subject

This much debated revolution has also been significant in allowing what I will call ‘new spaces’ to emerge in which to consider what graphic design could be beyond it’s already established role and ‘field of operation’. It is these spaces which occupy much of my interest as an educator and have begun to influence my thinking in recent years. Charged with the task of serving two clients – the student designer and their potential employer – together with my colleagues at the London College of Printing we have begun to attempt to address the key issues and skills necessary in the training and development of future graphic designers.

I am fortunate in working in a unique environment at the London College of Printing in that I am employed in a School of Graphic Design. This single subject school has a long history in the teaching of graphic design and a longstanding close working relationship with industry. It is from this vantagepoint that I make my observations today.

It is important at this point to make reference to the many ideas that have become influential in this ‘new graphic design discourse’. A significant number of these ideas have not been generated from within but have been drawn from other disciplines outside of graphic design. Ideas from areas such as language theory, semiotics and communication theory – ideas about audience,

meaning and interpretation. These ideas are often in direct conflict with the more established approaches to the subject.

Traditionally graphic design has been concerned with areas such as craft and technology and the communication of messages for others, which to a large extent have shaped its function and existence. Much of this thinking has encouraged the perception of graphic design as a facilitating process - a means of communicating a message or creating understanding based on a monologue between the designer and their audience. Ideas such as deconstruction or to be more precise post structuralism – drawn from French literary figures such as Jacques Derrida and famously explored by the McCoys and their students at Cranbrook Academy in Detroit twenty years ago – encourage the idea of visual communication as dialogue. That messages are based upon interpretation and are constructed equally by their audience – the users of design – promoting the idea of the designer as a mediator.

Initial enthusiasms from graphic designers for this type of ‘heady’ debate polarised opinion within the profession and in the process did not allow us to advance as significantly as was claimed at the time. The relationship between avant- or experimental approaches to graphic design and the mainstream activities of the profession is also a changing one. It is possible to identify a number of celebrated designers such as Stefan Sagmeister in the US and Jon Barnbrook in the UK who appear to co-exist both at the margins of the discipline and who are able to function successfully within the constraints of commercial practice.

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Much of the discussion of graphic design is usually centred upon ‘outcomes’ – the finished product or artefact we produce as designers. Too rarely does the discussion feature the process or methods at work – the intentions of the designer. Where this discussion has taken place it has been concerned, for example, with the notion of ‘design authorship’ – a notion that has been characterised as a change in design activity – equally concerned with the origination of a message as well as its means of communication. The designer and author Jorge Frascara has advanced this idea making the claim that “... the design of the research method and the design of the design method are tasks of higher order than the design of the communications”. This analysis and approach to how design might operate has been mirrored by a growing acceptance, at least from some quarters of graphic design of its cultural and social function and responsibilities within the wider community.

The writer, commentator and founding editor of Eye magazine Rick Poynor has proposed the idea of graphic design as a form of visual journalism and has also been responsible for the updating and reissuing of Ken Garland’s original “first things first’ manifesto for design. This call

for a wider, more inclusive and responsible approach from designers has to a large extent created a situation where current design discourse at least now includes reference to the value of this form of design practice.

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Whilst my comments today have focused upon encouraging new approaches to the teaching of design and the relationship between education and the industry of design I would like to suggest that the biggest challenge lies elsewhere. The issue for all of us remains, as it always has, in becoming more noticeable. Not for its own sake and certainly not for the benefit of other designers or for winning awards but so that those who consume and use design – the public at large become more aware of the value or otherwise of what we do.

The work I would like to show today from students of the Masters programme in Typo/graphic Studies is, I hope, a demonstration of how some of the ideas I have discussed today have influenced our approach to the teaching of graphic design and typography. A significant aspect of this has been to attempt to balance the longstanding concerns of design activity such as craft and technological possibilities with recent ideas about language, communication or social responsibility for example. Participants in the course are encouraged to explore an area of personal interest – establishing the context and validity of their project through the ‘testing’ of their ideas and materials. The course places an emphasis on the methods employed and the individual intentions of each designer either in an applied industrial context or a speculative or experimental area. Each participant is required to formally document the manner in which his or her ideas are progressed – turning the process into a product.

It is my hope that what we are encouraging is the development of sustainable methods of working, which will enable each designer to function successfully in the future