

Trans-modern Consciousness: Mapping Value Systems and Models for Graphic Design Education

Abstract

This paper describes a three-axis model of six design philosophical orientations that map the ranges of traditional or modern approaches to graphic design education as defined by the authorship of the design brief, the tools used for designing, and valued output of design efforts. It argues that through a framework of trans-modern consciousness, institutions and individuals can select among traditional, modern, and post-modern-based design philosophical orientations to construct integrated design praxis for themselves.

Key Words: *trans-modern, design philosophy, design education.*

Introduction

A Mexican design student focuses in her research on the effectiveness of gender and ethnic visual markers in the Women for Obama and Latinos for Obama logos. An African marketing doctoral student explores how African verbal and visual metaphors expressed through Ghanaian Kente cloth could be used in more culturally appropriate ways to market products to the black Diaspora. Gender, logos, and politics; race, culture, and marketing class represent the contemporary consciousness of graphic design education. What would I call this consciousness? I would call it a trans-modern consciousness. Spanish philosopher, Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, defines trans-modernity as “a type of dialectic synthesis of the modern thesis and the post-modern antithesis ... which adopts a interconnected model of self-multiplying overgrowth.”¹ With its emphasis on ecological sustainability, globalism, feminism and family, altruism and self-actualization, and social consciousness and optimism,² trans-modernism provides a theoretical framework for design students and faculty to engage in meaningful design knowledge and making to their integrated senses of personhood, community, and praxis.

Why does this labeling matter? I argue that the trans-modern consciousness contains significant meaning for the value systems and models (i.e. design philosophies) of graphic design education. Six design philosophical orientations map the extreme ranges of traditional or modern approaches to graphic design education as defined by the authorship of the design brief, the tools used for designing, and valued output of design efforts.³ The approaches to authorship are expressed by a bias toward art or business. The approaches to the tools of

designing range between the cultivation of analogue hand skills or high-tech digital competencies. The valued output of designing emphasizes either the process or artifacts. But the focus of my paper is how, in the trans-modern consciousness, institutions and individuals select among traditional, modern, and post-modern-based design philosophical orientations to construct integrated design praxis for themselves.

A Narrative of Education's Evolutionary Consciousness

Jennifer Gidley in her essay, *Educational Imperatives of the Evolution of Consciousness*, maps three socio-cultural and educational macro-phases in children's education:

1. Pre-history to late 18th century characterized by pre-modern socio-cultural discourses and informal educational structures,
2. Late 18th century to 20th century characterized by modern socio-cultural discourses and highly formal educational structures, and
3. The 20th and 21st century characterized by post-modern socio-cultural discourses and post-formal educational structures.⁴

These three macro-phases (pre-modern, modern, and post-modern) have become a common Western segmentation of significant changes in social thought and cultural structure. The value of Gidley's framework to graphic design education is that she links specific educational structures to these wider socio-cultural discourses. Using her framework, I will address the three macro-phases for education in general, then specifically for graphic design education.

As an anthropologist, I am steeped in descriptions of pre-modern socio-cultural discourses and their informal educational structures. Often viewed from the perspective of modernity, pre-modern discourses and structures are branded as "tradition." As described by African scholar Kwame Gyekye, the characteristics of this pre-modern consciousness includes an emphasis on social cohesion to the tribal, ethnic, or religious group; the recognition of the sacred in all things, whether based on a notion of a single supreme god or multiple deities; and the importance of the "ways of the ancestors" in maintaining social and cosmic harmony.⁵ The pre-modern mode of education is through informal enculturation, whereby children learn by first watching and playing, then through guided doing by knowledgeable elders. As Gidley points out, "...only the children of the wealthy—who could afford private tutors—or who wished to become clerics, had any 'formal' education."⁶

Many scholars, including Gidley, describe pre-modern consciousness evolving into a modern consciousness following the Industrial Revolution in Europe during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Rosa María Rodríguez Magda provides a clear synopsis of the project of modernity:

According to Habermas the project of modernity is originally based on the attempt to develop from reason the spheres of science, morality and art, keeping them separate from the metaphysical and religious realm. While the latter may be carried out in theory, its material manifestations include a process of modernization, among them the industrial revolution, scientific progress, population growth, technological advances, the expansion of markets, capitalism etc., i.e., a relentless force characterized by ever greater dynamism and innovation.⁷

Compared to pre-modern consciousness, the socio-cultural changes of modernity emphasized the individual over social cohesion, divided the profane from the sacred, and a break from the past towards a progressive innovative future. The justification for these changes was the creation of freedom-granting universal principles derived from humanistic rationalism (ex. the language of human rights, worker's rights, and individual rights, including the granting of the corporation the charter of an individual). A "disciplined" population was needed to work in the industrial factories being set up in the mostly urban centers.⁸ Thus, states began to create formal, publicly funded, mass education to create these populations. These educational institutions were often modeled on the factories into which the children and adults would be fed.⁹

Paradigm shifts caused by technological advances in the development of digital technologies (ex. satellites, computers, and especially the Internet) led to the end of the industrial economic system for Europe, the United States, and many parts of East Asia in the 1980s. This heralded the emergence of a post-modern consciousness, where these technologies enabled a critical response to the underlying assumptions of modern consciousness related to the notions of Self, of Time and History, and Progressive Innovation. In contrast to Modernity's Self that subsumed the Other into a homogenous Universality, Magda argues that post-modernity saw "the rise of the Other, i.e., in different types of counter-discourse, margins, in everything that had erroneously been subsumed under a poorly differentiated homogeneity, including ethnic groups, minority cultures, women, homosexuals, etc."¹⁰ Whereas modernity's progressive sense of Time marched optimistically into the future, post-modernity exposes the compression of time and space in which the failures and inequalities of those utopian visions are beamed via satellite globally. The control of scientific and technological innovation that defined modernity finds itself challenged by a post-modern ethos of the knowledge economy in which

“information should be set free” on the Internet.¹¹ As pointed out by Gidley, the post-modern consciousness has significant implications for education:

The 1970s to 1990s saw a flourishing of alternative educational modes, including home-schooling, online learning, holistic education, transformative education, futures education, and a raft of educational reforms within mainstream settings. Some approaches are based on earlier ‘progressive’ theories such as Jean Piaget’s constructivism, John Dewey’s experiential education, Paulo Friere’s critical pedagogy, and more spiritually oriented approaches. All are critical of the formal, modernist ‘factory-model’ of mass education.¹²

Gidley goes on to describe the emergence of a “post-formal integral consciousness” captured in the educational theories of Rudolf Steiner and the integral consciousness theories of Ken Wilber:

My research suggests that an educational integration of love and reverence, with lifegiving conceptual imagination and creative multi-modal methods, transmitted through an authentic human voice, lays a strong foundation for the emergence of post-formal, integral consciousness.¹³

While Gidley situates these educational approaches within the post-modern consciousness, they actually more closely align with Rosa María Magda’s description of trans-modernity. Before turning explicitly to that argument, I want to first address how graphic design historiography recounts a similar narrative about the evolution of graphic design’s consciousness and how it relates to my six design philosophical orientations.

A Narrative of Graphic Design Education’s Evolutionary Consciousness

Gidley’s framework lays out three macro-phases: the pre-modern, the modern, and the post-modern. An examination of two important graphic design history texts—Philip Megg’s *History of Graphic Design*¹⁴ and Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish’s *Graphic Design History*¹⁵—reveals the same narrative framework. Both texts characterize the pre-modern period from the invention of writing circa 35,000 B.C.E. to the standardizations in printing following the Renaissance. From a socio-cultural discourse, the role of graphical representation at the time served the purpose of spiritual transcendence. As Daniel Kantor describes in *Graphic Design and Religion*, “The creators of the illuminated texts didn’t see their works as ends in themselves but as objects subordinated to a divine framework...”¹⁶ The structure of design education followed one of the master-apprentice. Richard Buchanan notes:

Despite immense differences between the East and West, design education in both cultures began as apprenticeship. By whatever method of selection, young people

were apprenticed to masters, who oversaw their development, encouraged the most talented, and were eventually replaced by their students.¹⁷

In characterizing the modern macro-phase, both texts highlight the impact of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of advertising and mass mediated consumption, the old and new Bauhaus, the International Style, information and corporate identity design. The socio-cultural discourse of design shifts from a commercial art (i.e. art in service of secular commerce) to its own unique field. As Richard Thornton explains, “In the 1950s young designers were trying to change their image as commercial artists trained in studio art programs as painters and printmakers.”¹⁸ To fill the demand for advertising agencies and then in-house corporations, graphic design education institutionalizes itself among fine art academies to factory-like technical programs. Its focus also changed where by it moved from “...adding decoration for printing to visual problem-solving that would create industrial and corporate identities based on the look of their publications.”¹⁹

Meggs and Drucker and McVarish locate the shift to a post-modern macro-phase in the 1970s, which is then accelerated by the digital technology. Desktop computers and GUI software on the one hand gave an unprecedented number of untrained people access to sophisticated tools of design.²⁰ This directly threatened the expertise of design skill in form making and causes a shift in emphasis towards design process and methods.²¹ Interaction design emerged as a dominant area of graphic design praxis that generated concerns about the teaching of software programs versus designerly skills. Master /apprentice structures were ruptured by the student’s superior knowledge of the technology over that of the teacher.²² Complexity in problems required the introduction of interdisciplinary teams to design studios, human-centered design methodologies, and blended learning environments.²³

From pre-modern, to modern, to post-modern, this narrative of graphic design history and education is unsatisfactory. First, it does not address “non-Western” challenges to this evolution from pre-modern, to modern, and post-modern consciousness. Indian scholar, Singanapalli Balaram, confronts the distinctions among craft/art/design that underlies the narrative of modernism in design:

To start, the complexity of Indian design education and design practice must be clearly and appropriately recognized. This complexity is not just unity in diversity, but also the simultaneous telescopic existence of the past traditions with the contemporary: the bullock cart beside the spacecraft, the burkha1 beside Miss Universe, and illiteracy beside software supremacy.²⁴

Ian Sutherland confronts the failure of design's universalizing neutrality in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. He asks from what cultural resources do the mostly white South African designers construct an "African" design aesthetic distinct from that of Europe and the United States.²⁵ Secondly, and more important to my argument, the narrative does not account of the contemporaneous existence of designers as diverse as Stefan Sagmeister, John Maeda, Jessica Helfand, Ellen Lupton, Michael Beirut, and Sylvia Harris. While representing a cohort of design luminaries, they also represent very different design philosophies, which I argue is symptomatic of a trans-modern consciousness in which people create integrated identities from various design philosophical orientations.

The Six Design Philosophies and Models of Design Education

My dissatisfaction with the linear modernity narrative found an outlet in a assignment to co-lead the rewrite of the University of Illinois at Chicago's MFA programs across graphic design, industrial design, and electronic visualization programs. I observed the student candidate evaluation meetings for all programs. I interviewed all faculty members and the majority of MFA students. I analyzed the mission and structure on all the design institutions considered within the University's competitive set as well as a few benchmark institutions. Seven hundred Post-It notes later, a clear picture emerged of three sets of distinct design philosophical orientations for a total of six.²⁶ The first set concerned the authorship of the design brief:

1. An Art Orientation reflects a bias towards having the student's own personal expression and artistic authorship determine the majority of studio courses' design briefs.
2. A Business Orientation reflects a bias towards having external business clients, whether for-profit, non-profit, NGO, or governmental, determine the majority of studio courses' design briefs.

The second set addressed the tools used for designing:

3. A Hand Skill Orientation favors instruction in the use of paper, pen, ink, letterpress, plaka paint, and other analogue tools for designing.
4. A High Tech Orientation favors instruction in the use of mostly software, programming, and other digital tools for designing.

And the third set described the valued output of design effort:

5. An Artifact Orientation marks a focus on making designed artifacts as the primary course or program’s evaluated output. A curriculum would not require students to take courses in design processes or methodologies.
6. A Process Orientation marks a focus on process documentations, as the primary course or program’s evaluated output, even in lieu of designed artifacts. A curriculum would require students to take structured courses in various interdisciplinary design processes (ex. human-centered design).

The three sets of design philosophical orientations were mapped on to a 3-D matrix to visually display the multiple permutations an institution or individual can be placed: See figure 1.

Figure 1: Three-axis model of design philosophical orientations.

Created by designer Leilah Rampa.

How does the model work? In a city like Chicago Illinois, there might exist graphic design programs in three different institutions. The University of Illinois at Chicago might be plotted in a quadrant reflecting a slight emphasis on an Art Orientation, a strong Hand Skill Orientation, and a strong Artifact Orientation. The Institute of Design at IIT might be plotted in a different quadrant reflecting a strong Business Orientation, a slight High Tech Orientation, and a strong Process Orientation. The Art Institute of Chicago might be plotted in yet another quadrant reflecting a strong Art Orientation, balanced Hand Skill and High Tech Orientation, and a strong Artifact Orientation. At the micro-level of educational structures, the model allows design institutions and individuals to identify unique areas of focus and expand the selection criteria beyond location, ranking, and price. At the macro-level of socio-cultural discourses, the model links design philosophies to particular pre-modern to early modern and late modern to post-modern consciousnesses. Art, Hand Skill, and Artifact Orientations link to pre-modern and early modern consciousness. Business, High Tech, and Process Orientations link to late modern and post-modern consciousness: See table 1.

	Pre-modern to early modern consciousness	Late modern to post-modern consciousness
Authorship of Design Brief	Art	Business
Tools of Designing	Hand Skill	High Tech
Valued Output of Designing	Artifact	Process

Table 1: “Modern” Consciousness related to Design Philosophical Orientation

Conclusion: Trans-modernity and Graphic Design Education

By framing the design orientations within a trans-modern consciousness, instead of a post-modern one, two things are achieved. First, institutions and individuals have a theoretical discourse by which to describe their identities from places of authentic complexity and integration. Rosa Maria Madga writes, “So, with the crisis of Modernity, we are using as a strength what constituted our weakness in Modernity, namely our lack of identity.” The International Council of Graphic Design Associations’s INDIGO project to create a space for indigenous design reflects the institutional necessity of having this theoretical language. Second, with identity accepted, graphic design education institutions can come closer to Gidley’s idea of an “...educational integration of love and reverence, with lifegiving conceptual imagination and creative multi-modal methods, transmitted through an authentic human voice.”²⁷

References and Citations

-
- ¹ Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, *Trans-modernidad* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2004) via <http://trans-modern-theory.blogspot.com/>. Accessed: 8 May 2009.
- ² Paul Ray, “The Rise of Integral Culture,” *Noetic Sciences Review* 37 (Spring 1996) via http://www.noetic.org/publications/review/issue37/r37_Ray.html. Accessed: 8 May 2009.
- ³ Author and co-author, “Industrial Design Graduate Education: Identity Finding,” *2006 IDSA Education Symposium Conference Proceedings in Austin, TX*. (Arlington, VA: IDSA, 2006): 181–191.
- ⁴ Jennifer Gidley, “Educational Imperatives of the Evolution of Consciousness,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, Vol. 12:2, (August 2007): 119.
- ⁵ Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ⁶ Gidley, 119.
- ⁷ Magda, 1.
- ⁸ James Ryan, “Observing and Normalizing: Foucault, Discipline, and Inequality in School,” *Journal of Educational Thought/Revue de la Pensee Educative*, Vol. 25:2 (August 1991): 104–19.
- ⁹ Gidley, 119.
- ¹⁰ Madga., 1.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Gidley, 120.
- ¹³ Gidley, 130.
- ¹⁴ Philip Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998)
- ¹⁵ Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarnish, *Graphic Design History: a Critical Guide* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009).
- ¹⁶ Daniel Kantor, *Graphic Design and Religion* (Chicago: Gia Publishing, 2008): 26.

-
- ¹⁷ Richard Buchanan, “Human-centered Design: Changing Perspectives on Design Education in the East and West,” *Design Issues: Volume 20* (Number 1 Winter 2004): 33.
- ¹⁸ Richard Thornton, “Graphic Design in a Box,” *National Forum Vol. 76 Issue 2* (Spring 1996): 30.
- ¹⁹ Thornton, 30.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Buchanan, 36.
- ²² Lindsey Marshall and Lester Meachem, “Direct or directed: orchestrating a more harmonious approach to teaching technology within an Art & Design Higher Education curriculum with special reference to visual communications courses,” *Learning, Media and Technology, Vol. 32, No. 1, (March 2007): 41–52.*
- ²³ Buchanan, 37.
- ²⁴ Singanapalli Balaram, “Design Pedagogy in India: A Perspective,” *Design Issues: Volume 21, Number 4* (Autumn 2005): 12.
- ²⁵ Ian Sutherland, “Paradigm Shift: The Challenge to Graphic Design Education and Professional Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Design Issues: Volume 20, Number 2* (Spring 2004): 55.
- ²⁶ Author, 183.
- ²⁷ Gidley, 130.