Sh*t Design
An exploration of the aesthetic in graphic design

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Introduction
From a sociological point of view graphic design is a relatively new language. Theoreticians have long been interested in text and its structural patterns and regularities; at photography and the enigma it presents as a representation of reality; or at fine art and mark-making. Graphic design might include all of these things in its combinational permutations and yet as an activity it has been poorly served by theory to the degree that as a concept, it has been largely ignored and overlooked in the structural sense and so goes largely unrecognized as a major social force in creating a structured reality which is part of both society and the media that links its different groups and aspects.

Contemporary design theory (unlike most other areas of media and cultural studies) runs the risk of seeing itself through post-structural eyes before it is even aware of its structural foundations. Sociological observation, through trying to be objective and explanatory of what it finds, can give a perspective on graphic design that most designers are naively oblivious to.

It is the argument of this paper that design research must first of all be about design and its meaning, not simply about a preferred, usually elite aesthetic, that limits the range of research interests to usually a trendy range of stylistic tropes or to aspects of the individual constituent components of graphic design (the most popular of which is typography) while ignoring the holistic realm of the media, which is the most structured of all. It is important that designers more fully understand the social meaning of their activity and the industrial contexts of the media that are their carriers. Such an approach should liberate design from its stylistic obsessions and give a fuller understanding of its power and potential as an increasingly dominant system of meaning.

Patterns of narrative in graphic design
Graphic design, and the media that contains it, get by, by telling stories. Different sorts of stories. Stories of people; celebrities, ordinary folk, people like us, tragedies, fantasies, sex, fashion, hopes and dreams. There are also bigger stories; money, business, politics, war, disasters and world events. 1

Mostly these things are told to us through writers, journalists, photographers, contributors and editors who supply the textual content of graphic design. The literary text is important because it forms the subject matter of the media around which an audience gathers. Subject matter might be divided by age, gender, special interest, institution, sexuality and social class. Through this subject matter is decided the genre of the story and the publication in which it appears. Readerships, when divided by interest, can be seen to be occupying exclusive enclaves - genres with which they personally identify. 2

So subject matter is the story on one level. But there is another story and another level of meaning. This story concentrates on the look and presentation of things. This story is mostly visual but is attached to the subject matter it is presenting as naturally as a fish is attached to water - we assimilate through our experience of the world of the media, particular styles and types of media presentation along with particular styles and types of subject matter. This association is rarely articulated (usually only in the shared lingo of media professionals) but
even here, they too are often too close to see the immediate significance of the association, especially important in the case of design as a universal phenomenon that operates in all markets and with all audiences.

When we lived in an oral society, we learnt our taste and aesthetic sense only from our family and immediate associates. These days we are all products of advertising and media conditioning. Socialization has broadened. First it has expanded out from the family and embraced the church and the school as primary and secondary socializers. But over the twentieth century, as our lives became colonized by branded products and services, so new media have reached out to us to service special corners of interest and all of our emotional aspects, so that even our private time and relaxation is serviced by media of both general and specialized varieties. All of these contacts are presented to us via a designed interface. The media might change, but the design principles have to remain fairly consistent - humans are creatures of habit and slow to change and media interfaces identify this in their gradualism. That is the role of graphic / communication design.

But let’s get back to story telling.

The That’s Life! story

Michael and Maureen Sullivan have a story. (Mills, 1997: 4-5) Their story is one of hope and heartbreak. Michael was a car-racing nut who spent most of his money and nearly as much time maintaining and racing his car. God knows why Maureen fell for him but she did and after they married wanted to have kids. “We can’t afford kids and cars.” Maureen said. “Just one more race” said Michael “Then I’ll toss in my keys.” The big race came and Michael won it, but after he’d gone past the finishing post his tires hit the gravel and his car spun out of control and hit a tree. Michael had broken his neck and become a quadriplegic. But this is all a preamble. This story is really about the sorrow and frustration of IVF. Both Maureen and Michael badly wanted a baby and preferably one that was their own, but with Michael’s condition it seemed hopeless. Then a new technological breakthrough allowed their dreams to come true and now they have baby Grace. “Having Grace has been my greatest achievement. She has given me more of a rush than car racing ever did,” said Michael. “Grace has shown us the value of never giving up,” says Maureen.

Sue’s story starts differently. (Clarke, 1997: 22-23) It is the story of single motherhood and a life that never really gets a break until - but that’s the story! Sue was married to Robert at 17 and had two children - Sammy and Lee. Robert she describes as immature and a spendthrift and by the time they were 20 she decided life would be better for the three of them without Robert. They moved into a caravan for a few years and later moved into a house with a big yard. Robert re-married. Her Brother Mark, a bikie, was the only father figure the kids had, and they really missed their dad but never saw him. Then Sue answered the phone “I need to talk to you Sue -I’ve got cancer. Nothing can be done- I know I should have done more for Sammy and Lee. I’m asking for another chance Sue. I want to get to know my kids again.” Robert’s second marriage had broken up and no sooner had he reacquainted himself with his kids than he up and died. The kids were sadder than ever. If only Sue could do something to give them happiness. Then by some cruel twist of fate, Uncle Mark, the bikie, hit a tree in a bike accident. “Your Uncle Mark’s had a road accident, darlings. He’s been killed instantly”. “Uncle Mark will be with dad now.” Sammy said. Again another act of fate allowed a small stray dog to find itself in their backyard. “Can we keep him?” said Lee. They called the dog Ozzie and he transformed their home into a happy one until it started to look sick “His heart is failing” the vet said “It would be cruel not to put him out of his pain.” The children were sadder than ever but the resourceful Sue comes to the rescue, she wrote to the “Make my dream come true column” of That’s Life! and as soon as the reporter read the letter contacted the Victorian Animal Aid Trust who had Tammy, a fox terrier whose family had moved interstate. “Our house feels warm again,” says Sue ‘Having Tammy has been like a tonic to us.’

Each of these stories is different but the themes are essentially the same. They are stories of happy endings but they are also stories of resignation, making do and settling for less. Above all they are human stories, stories of
relationships and the possibility of love. If these were our stories we might not have laughed at the misfortune and the resignation. But that is the point. They are not our stories. The stories belong to someone else, people very different to us in terms of class, opportunities and education; just as the publication they appeared in belongs to someone else.

These stories come from *That's Life!* *That's Life!* is a weekly magazine first published in the UK but for nearly 10 years now, published in Australia with the help of its British designer who came to Australia to replicate the British success story. Within two years it had developed a circulation half the size of Woman's Day (then the largest selling magazine in Australian history) which has since declined to a circulation not much larger than *That's Life!* *That's Life!* is not unique. Most developed counties in the world have adopted the *That's Life!* model of publication. It is one of the most popular magazines in Australia and must be considered a most significant media and social phenomena in the national context. It sells nearly five times the number of copies (every week) than *Vogue Australia* (every month) and yet, for many graphic designers, reading about it here may be the first time you have ever heard of it or considered it as significant. I am not saying that it is a publication of any special virtue. I am simply pointing out that it is very common and yet there is something about it that many of us find repulsive. It screams out, as if at the top of its voice ‘I'M SHIT!!! THIS IS NOT FOR ME!!!’ *That's Life!* Speaks graphically with a very loud and distinctive voice and yet most professional graphic designers I have queried about it claim not to know it or to have noticed it. This ignorance is more likely (I would argue) a type of avoidance, and has more to do with the aesthetic compartmentalization of our lives into genres some of which we ignore and others we identify with. But magazines are more than just design.

*That's Life!* offers more than its stories, but they are the feature articles for this magazine, and so they set the themes and the tone for the readership. Nearly all of *That's Life!* is contributed by its readership. There is everything from funny baby photos in *That's our baby* stories of how we met in *True Stories*, myriads of crosswords, quizzes and competitions (at least 12 major competitions every issue with prizes from a small car, but mostly small in scale to the value of only a few hundred dollars) plus a few domestic, fashion and health pages with regular columnists contributing and answering readers questions. This is a magazine built around a demographic. The demographic is definitely working class with an emphasis on the unemployed and the battler. This is the demographic almost totally passed-by by economic development, where lucky breaks comprise a new puppy or winning a set of stainless steel saucepans.

**That’s Life! and the mass market genre of graphic design**

*That’s Life!* represents a particular genre of design, one I call the mass-market style and one, most designers would recognize as shit design. This is a style that was probably born of advertising and the supermarket, (Craig, 1990; Heller, 1997) but in *That’s Life!* it has evolved its own editorial style that is so busy, that advertising within its pages, has to simplify itself in order to be noticed as advertising! You see the same sort of design in the supermarket, in the junkmail that is unaskedfor in your letterbox, some genres of music use it and as a style it was probably born in America (like most of the mass produced parts of popular culture these days!). (You could develop an interesting case for mass market design as the dominant force in international design as part of globalization - but that is another issue to the main one being developed here.)

As with most genres, there are structural characteristics that are remarkably consistent throughout each and every issue of *That’s Life!* The busyness of the cover of *That’s Life!* is a sign of what lies inside. (*That’s Life!* 1997 July 30: Cover) The cover features a large background photo, a pink colour band at the base of the page, a title banner which is reversed out of a red panel, 11 photographic inset panels and 19 headlines reversed out of the background, colour panels and one set in a drop shadowed sunburst. The inset pictures are set at both right angles and leaning at an angle and two are deep etched into the background and keylined in white.
The main criteria of the typography in *That's Life!* appears to be to attract maximum attention at every possible opportunity. The cover is indicative of the typographic values of the inside of the magazine. The cover uses about ten different faces (mostly san-serif) which are each given graphic treatments such as reversal, dropped shadow, outline, inline, condensing, expansion and often up to three of these treatments can be applied to one headline at a time. It is difficult to imagine a greater variety of type, image, colour and insets combined in such a small area! Each title, banner, headline, starburst and inset picture fight each other for attention. The feature of the cover most likely to catch your attention is the *That's Life!* banner reversed out of a red panel in the top left corner. After that the face of the model (female, pretty but unidentified in the magazine) is the only significantly large and centered feature. All other images, headlines, reversals and insets are small in comparison and are generally positioned around the circumference of the page.

It is difficult to try and generalize about the design of the text of *That's Life!* as it is so varied. There is a general rule that tries to maximize the impact of every story, making the best of the pictures and subject matter contributed by the readers. There is a standard four or five column layout for feature articles, but it is usual practice for pictures to be inset breaking the text into irregular column widths.

*That's Life!* is never a magazine of large articles. It is usual for layouts of individual articles to last for only one third to half a page; so one of the major tasks for the design of the magazine is to be constantly differentiating between one article and another. This is done using a number of means. Colour panels often differentiate articles through contrast, but over these, type often changes between serif and medium and bold san-serif copy. At the head of each article is a headline, most often in the same bold face, but usually differentiated in a different way through exotic script, colour modulation, underlining, reversal or a treatment like dropped-shadow; usually to visually dramatize a special quality of the story-line. The text of the longer features in *That's Life!* is always run in a serif. Even though these articles might occupy say one and a half or two pages, a major feature would never constitute one solid page of copy; the space usually carries snapshots from the writer's family photo album as well.

Most of *That's Life!* however, is not articles, but short tit-bits, help-columns, quizzes, competitions, crosswords, fashion and cookery spreads. These short, regular features use the same devices I mentioned for the short features, colour background changes, accompanied by differentiating changes in typeface - between serif and bold and medium san-serif. Occasionally type is reversed out of a dark background colour for maximum contrast or short sections highlighted by contrasting colour framing. The irony is, that with all this busy rivalry, the main casualty seems to be the advertising which is mostly barely distinguishable from the editorial unless it goes simple, which some choose to do, but most are probably happy to merge with the busy editorial style.

*That's Life!* specializes in unpretentious snapshots throughout the publication. The snapshot phenomena is something you notice in all the mass-market media, but in *That's Life!* it is even more appropriate as most of its articles are contributed by readers about themselves, so that their personal snapshots reinforce the documentary, unpretentious feel of the text. Most of the feature articles present a handful of snaps of the main characters in the story, the unfaithful husband, the heroic mum, the before and after shots, the beautiful baby that came from the horrendous birth experience etc. Here, the lack of focus and colour quality is forgiven. Knowing that the photographs were sourced from the public, gives an authenticity and voyeuristic interest that is a special quality of this magazine.

Not all of the photographs in *That's Life!* are sourced from the public however. Some of the remainder are of stars (usually of the Hollywood or local Australian variety) who are presented, in this case, mainly to demonstrate that they too have real life problems and characteristics just like *That's Life!* readers. These stars are presented in tiny, often cropped and cameoed images just like the photographs in the feature articles. The only professional and studio shots taken for *That's Life!*’s regular features - such as the quizzes, cooking pages, fashion and
gardening. These shots too are rather busy, abundant and colourful - bountiful, rather than simply presented and perfectly framed. The unpretentious crockery and rustic kitchen benches no doubt reflect the unpretentious interiors of the That's Life! reader.

That's Life! has to be one of the least inhibited magazines in its use of colour. That's Life! is very colourful and it uses colour always to attract attention. Throughout the magazine there is no colour scheme that is held constant, however, over each double page spread there is certainly an awareness that colour discipline creates harmony over the spread. It is unusual for there to be more than three flat colours used (as well as black) in background panels, text, headlines and photo-borders. If you compare the colour choice between spreads, even on consecutive pages, there is no great consistency of colour scheme. Bright contrast appears to be the only rule. If you compare That's Life! to other mass-market publications in Australia it tends to stand out. Take 5 (a copy) is the only identical market competitor that is produced in Australia. NW (New Woman), New Idea and Woman's Day are probably the next closest in terms of design. They are certainly part of the same genre of design, but slightly more simplified and more co-ordinated in their elements.

Probably the mass market Great Granddaddy of them all is America's National Enquirer, America's Hottest Weekly. The National Enquirer is a mini-tabloid, colour printed on newsprint and available at every checkout in America. The National Enquirer is celebrity loving, pack-it-in, overlap it, superimpose it if it doesn't fit style of layout has never done any harm to its circulation figures - and it claims to be America's top selling weekly. England, the home of the original That's Life! has many more clones however and a generally more trashy women's weekly style than Australia and America. Chat is a similar format competitor from England while Welt der Frau is typical of a similar market in Germany.

One could easily put together an argument that says the mass-market style has become the first globalized international style but they would be wrong - wrong because the mass market style is part of a bigger more socially encompassing design system - one I will call The Graphic Design Code.

The elite market
The mass market has an elite companion. In nearly every way, it is the polar opposite of the mass market and it has another story to tell. The word ‘design’ is never mentioned in the mass-market magazines, but it is mentioned all the time in Vogue. Vogue has been published for most of the twentieth century. It was founded in America, but now has editions in many countries including Australia. Vogue is anything but Shit Design. Vogue always tries to be modern and in good taste. Although there are some references made to the avant-guard in the design of Vogue (especially in the Italian and French editions) such daring is rarely expressed in Vogue Australia. Vogue Australia publish a women's fashion edition; Vogue Living dedicated to home interiors, domestic architecture, furnishing and accessories; and Vogue Entertaining and Travel dedicated to food, cooking, table settings, cuisine, exclusive accommodation and travel stories. Vogue tells a different story...

The Vogue story...
Most Vogue stories are not about people but about things. Things we might own or wear or surround ourselves with if we had lots of money. These things nearly always have a price, name and retail outlet attached to them via the caption.

The introductory paragraph of Still Life discusses Italian painter, Giorgio Morandi's penchant for collecting anonymous bottles, vases, bowls and containers from around the flea markets of Bologna as inspiration for the simple still-life compositions of his paintings. Vogue Living takes this knowledge as inspiration for its six page still-life photo-essay. (Munda, 2002: 162-167) The photo-essay is not of Morandi's original arrangements or collected artifacts, but of jugs, jars and vases sourced from Australian department stores like David Jones, Ikea,
Country Road and various potters and wholesalers in Australia. The short introduction describes that rare moment of aesthetic transcendence as if orchestrated by Morandi “…when the light from the window struck them just so and the ordinary became sublime.” And then goes on to describe their still life as continuing Morandi’s same artistic vision. “We seek contemporary versions in the same muted, neutral palette to celebrate the generosity of ordinary life, the sharing of food and wine - distilling the archetypical into everyday art.” Such a modern aesthetic transforms the inexpensive mundane vessel into an artform, feeding the myth the middle class wants to believe when looking at the expensive domestic interiors of Vogue Living (but cannot usually afford) that they too appreciate and can surround themselves with a refined environment which is itself -art - thanks to David Jones, Ike and Country Road.

When Vogue Living’s stories are about people, the people are invariably not there - not photographically anyway. Danish artist Mette Retri returned to Denmark with her photographer boyfriend Alexander Mirski and lucky her - a friend offered her the uninhabited and undecorated wing of an old farmhouse only 1 and a half kilometers out of Copenhagen (surely that is in the inner suburbs!). (Christiansen, 2002: 168-173) Petri stripped the walls and the floors to their original surfaces or coated them a simple white, hung her large, simple and elegantly proportioned artworks on the walls and furnished the rooms eclectically from antique shops, flea markets and contemporary furniture stores. Using her artists sensibility she often fuses the impossible together to make an aesthetically pleasing whole. “It's necessary for me to feel energized and inspired when I come home. Found and recycled objects are what I like most, which I usually adapt and turn into something else.” says Mette. Marcel Duchamp has been reborn with a credit card.

When the Vogue story is about people, people are important only if they have done something important, something that Vogue regards as significant - like star in, write or direct a play or film - have enough good taste and money to be able to choose an architect and interior decorator to build, design and fill with artifacts a house or apartment for you - or to be a super model. This sort of notoriety doesn’t guarantee that Vogue will publish your photograph (unless you are a supermodel) more likely it will publish the artifacts that you are associated with. Vogue is more concerned with things than people. Even when it photographs the model it is doing so because of what she is wearing rather than who she is.

Vogue Living Australia (VLA) moves the concept of fashion consumerism from clothing to architecture and interior decoration, precisely incorporating those other main areas of personal consumption immediately beyond but complimentary to our personal appearance. The general tone of VLA is definitely up market; the advertisers who include Bang & Olufsen, Antique Merchants and Australia’s leading ceramic wares, white goods and tiling manufacturers confirm this fact. The general tone, even for those more mundane and domestic products, is sophistication. VLA is a style bible where imagination is the limit rather than the cost.

For the middle class consumer VLA must engender fantasy and desire rather than be genuinely affordable as a lifestyle. VLA comes out bi-monthly and sells for A$6.80. It is a beautifully printed magazine, on glossy art paper in full colour throughout.

Vogue Living Australia and the elite style of graphic design

The VLA has a generous format - slightly larger than A4. The front cover nearly always features a full-page bleed photograph (usually from the interior of a home in a feature article) with type super-imposed around the perimeter of the page - the general impression is uncluttered, co-ordinated and thoughtfully chosen spatial elements.

VLA cover typography sets the tone of restraint and good taste for the rest of the publication. (Vogue Living Australia, 2002 No5: Cover) The VLA masthead is, in a sense, a summary of the VLA code in itself. VOGUE
AUSTRALIA are set in the traditional VOGUE international masthead in the modern style serif face, itself called Modern; chosen no doubt, because of its elegant shifts between very bold down strokes and extremely light cross strokes, giving an overall lightness and elegance. As its style / name implies, it is modern, but in thoroughly established good taste. LIVING on the other hand, is set in bold, san-serif italic capital letters and is superimposed over the much larger VOGUE suggesting a more modern period of design (good old International Style functionalism) but superimposed in this case because of the new layered postmodern style adopted in the 1980’s, from Dada and so suggests a later period of style than the typeface alone would suggest. The remainder of the cover copy is set in two complimentary faces (a serif and san-serif), in a dada inspired range of point sizes in asymmetric composition. Use of colour in typography is tightly restricted to three tones (white, black and gray) which gives an encapsulating balance and harmony to the cover and of course, harmony with the tones and composition of the background photograph.

The interior grid has a built in asymmetry to it, subtly presented, reflecting the mathematical austerity of modern design with a touch of traditional good taste through the suggestion of the golden mean in the carefully selected marginal variations incorporating generous white space, especially at the top and often at the opening margin of the grid. VLA uses what can only be described as an unstructured grid incorporating a new freedom in layout grids won for popular designers by once avant guard designers like Neville Brody in The Face in the 1980’s. Most of the main editorial articles are set in an asymmetric two column grid, but that general rule is there only to be broken if the designer feels it necessary - probably the ruling principal is to maximize picture impact and presentation and let text column width conform to those dictates.

VLA is not a copy dominant magazine. One gets the impression that it can be absorbed primarily as a visual experience with captions encapsulating most of the necessary descriptive information. Text is largely congratulatory or listing stockists to be read only if you swallowed the visual hook. There is a heavy emphasis on the full-page bleed photograph or composite full pages of photographs in feature articles with double page spreads nearly always presenting an asymmetrical balance. Articles in the main compartments of the magazine (called Decoration and Design and Features in VLA) are all heavily illustrated with lots of small photographs and deep etched (cut out) details encouraging a scattered, informal affect incorporating lots of generous white space. Backgrounds are nearly always white, which in this case is the ultimate colour of restraint and understatement. White backgrounds acknowledge the ‘good taste’ that says any more is unnecessary.

The typography of body copy in the text of VLA is nearly all-uniform light serif, with bold san-serif captions. Feature article text is always justified and captions and intros set ragged. Headings for regular features are set in serif caps with titles of sections set in a bold san-serif often merged with a coloured text box (making a tasteful reference to postmodern liberties taken with the modern tradition). A clever combination, because it gets the proportions of the magazines values just right 99% good taste and 1% slow change. The typography of the editorial pages is still highly disciplined in respect of variety of faces, but in most of the important feature articles, type size is treated playfully, blocked or juxtapositioned in order to maximize formal typographic discipline.

VLA has a total reliance on photography. The editorial pages of this sort of lifestyle magazine form an extended advertisement so photographs of the product are the most validating representation of the products existence. Of course this does not mean that products are shown as purely material objects but always products in settings and therefore shown to advantage - by controlled use of colour, professional lighting, studio - lit sets, by luxurious or austere or natural backgrounds (whatever is deemed most advantageous to the product). House / building interiors are always taken by name photographers and one gets the impression that reputations and careers are on the line here with the superlative lighting and carefully art directed and captioned extras and general lack of clutter or chaotic domestic details. These are fantasy houses designed for style not people.

Colour is an important component of lifestyle magazines. In combination with the high quality art paper it presents its contents with a gloss and finish that can only enhance the contents. Full colour throughout allows
maximum freedom for the VLA designers and yet colour is always used with restraint. White space is the dominant colour of VLA and harmonious colour would describe the use of colour in the next most dominant element - the typography. In VLA's typography, the colour key is consistent throughout the magazine, taken from the photographs or subjects being portrayed in the spread. Typography usually mimics or harmoniously contrasts the colour schemes of the interiors on display. So colour is used here to compliment the real contents - the photographs - rather than attract attention in their own right.

Design and the aesthetic code
I have systematically described these two polar opposite forms of design in detail with an emphasis on their use of the same design elements - space, typography, image, colour and materials. Designers should be familiar with some of the aesthetic values and basic principles of construction described here, but it is most likely that you found yourself unable to like both. What you are feeling is a real push/pull of attraction/repulsion, expressed as me/not for me, beauty/or shit.

Graphic design (like all forms of design) can be described as a coded system of communication. The elements of graphic design each express a myriad of values; values that can be read into every sign formation made in every placement, juxtaposition and layout decision made by the designer. When I show you the following table see how systematic is the binary nature of oppositions expressed in the graphic design code. What you are seeing is only a sample of coded features, but it should give you a strong impression of how consistently polarized the graphic design code is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro-aesthetic design</th>
<th>Anti-aesthetic design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High cover price</td>
<td>Low cover price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The form of presentation is more important than the textual subject</td>
<td>The subject is always of primary importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designer's voice dominant</td>
<td>Designer's voice suppressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Layout grids**     |                       |
| Changing grids       | Consistent grids      |
| White space maximized| White space minimized |
| Spacious grids       | Tight grids           |
| Wide margins         | Narrow margins        |
| Layouts simple       | Layouts busy, complex and crowded |

| Covers rarely use inset photographs | Covers nearly always use multiple inset photographs |
| Interior grids loosely based on the | Interior grids usually mathematically golden mean divided |
| Interior layout maximize full page | Interior layouts use minimal full page bleeds |
| Freedom to use unstructured grids | Unstructured grids very rare |
| Multiple column widths incorporated | Usually only one or two column into a single page grid / layout widths incorporated into single page layouts |
| Slipping, fusing and overlapping of body copy | Conventional ‘grid bound’ presentation of body copy |
| Small images are often deep-etched against columns of copy or white backgrounds | Small photographs are often scattered over each other to randomly fill a page - a jumble of images |

**Type design**
- Disciplined range of typefaces
- Disciplined range of type sizes - tending to be smaller in scale
- Disciplined application of colour in typography
- Cover typography harmoniously colour co-ordinated
- Text often subservient to image is always subservient to the text
- Type is thoughtfully placed and typographic and design treatment
- Headings are carefully kerned and spaced
- Postmodern, digitally generated faces popular
- ‘Layered’ headings and copy straightforward manner
- Body / text copy often set with a wide leading
- Typography achieves contrast through background and colour inlines, dropped shadows either

**Illustration/photography**
- Strong, simple images
- Photography - high quality studio lit
- Full page bleed photography maximized

- Undisciplined range of typefaces
- Undisciplined range of type sizes - tending to be larger in scale
- Undisciplined application of colour in typography
- Cover typography coloured to maximize contrast
- While image predominates, its subject
- All subjects get basically the same designed to compliment subject
- Headings conventionally kerned and spaced
- Mostly conventional / modern faces used
- Heading presented in a consecutive,
- Body / text copy set with normal leading (tight) leading
- Typography is contrasted by its modification using keylines, outlines, singly or in combination

- Busy, uncoordinated snapshots
- Photography - snapshot quality ‘paparazzi’ style
- Full page bleed photography minimized
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full page bleed cover images nearly universal</th>
<th>Full page bleed cover images but heavily interrupted by inserts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing picture / image quality is a primary goal in the layout</td>
<td>Maximizing variety, celebrity and curiosity is a primary layout goal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Colour**

- Colour range restricted
- Colour co-ordination harmonious
- Colour used to maximize contrast and catch attention
- Type, line-work and photographs use colour to compete independently for attention

**Materials of presentation**

- Generous formats - wider and often taller than A4 - closer to A3
- Top quality printing - often sheet fed
- Paper stock - quality art papers of relatively heavy gsm. Inserts of different papers usually chosen for particular finishes e.g. to look environmental / recycled.
- Binding - more often perfect bound
- Covers glossy using special varnishes, coatings and finishes

- Economical formats - smaller than A4 determined by plate / press size
- Good, but mass-produced Web offset quality
- Binding - mostly saddle stitched
- Covers often of glossier stock but lack additional finishes

Two things stand out in these tables. One is the extreme polarization of all the values expressed by the Graphic Design Code and two, is the extremely systematic structure of a code based on sets of binary values. These are all binary opposites. We all use them when making aesthetic judgement. You especially notice it if you are choosing between a very similar series of objects like CD Players or refrigerators.

We all call on an even more complex range of value judgements when we address graphic design. The ‘reading’ of design is quite different to the ‘reading’ of text. We read design with a more cursory glance, subliminally processing the sign formations we are witnessing. An aesthetic code is the one we first call on in making our assessment.
The postmodern reader
There has never been an age before so dominated by information - and most of it is visual. This generation of consumers and media users need basic codes of acceptance and rejection to almost instantly assess whether this genre of information is for me or not for me. This selection is the primary role of aesthetic codes like the Graphic Design Code. It is more powerful now because this postmodern period is distinguished by a heightened and more mobilised aesthetic sense. Throughout the modern era, branding of goods and services demanded that people make choices where once there was only one. Electronic media like television and the internet have been welcomed into our private lives and leisure time bringing with them messages designed to appeal to commonly held values and in the process reinforce preferences and behaviour. The media have become the most pervasive and powerful tools of socialization of values - and graphic design is the organizational code of values of the new media.

Why should we care about this shift of influence? We should care because the media is not neutral. What is demonstrated by the Graphic Design Code is a set of values that basically reinforces the status quo - one reinforcing trends shown by recent surveys of wealth distribution that demonstrate that in the West, the gap between rich and poor is at the widest point ever and all of this while the myth of classlessness is accepted as postmodern orthodoxy.

The success of capital has been to teach the whole population to be happy/identify with their market sector. Show a That's Life! reader a Vogue publication and they’ll tell you it’s a waste of time: no content worth reading, a waste of space and paper, boring design and nothing to relate to. The Vogue reader on the other hand, despises the crass sentimentality of That's Life! along with its ugly design values and puerile activities. We cope with its presence largely through refusing to acknowledge its existence. You might think this an interesting phenomena but a harmless one. I disagree. To ignore the existence of a universal Graphic Design Code, one that is applicable throughout our culture, is to ignore one of the major social functions of design in communication and effectively capitulating influence of the greater mass of our society to commercial manipulation and the ever increasing cultivation of ‘the market’.

The meaning and function of shit design
So what are we to make of this? What has been identified in the Graphic Design Code is a highly stratified code where all the positive values seem to be loaded at one end of the market - what I have described as a pro and anti-aesthetic.

There are many ways that communication and social theorists might try and explain phenomena like this. Marx and Engels were among the first to link economic power to the control of ideas:

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” (Marx and Engels, 1965: 61)

This proposition, despite the current unpopularity of Marx and meta-theory, lies at the base of a lot of modern and even postmodern theory. (e.g. Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1976; Baudrillard, 1996; Barthes, 1973)

In the 1960's, French theorist Roland Barthes described the relationship between class and power in this way:

“...in a bourgeois culture, there is neither proletarian culture nor proletarian morality, there is no proletarian art; ideologically, all that is not bourgeois is obliged to borrow from the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois ideology can therefore spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk: no one here will throw this name of bourgeois back at it. It can without resistance subsume bourgeois theatre, art and humanity under their eternal analogues; in a
word, it can ex-nominate itself without restraint when there is only one single human nature left: the defection from the name ‘bourgeois’ is here complete.” (Barthes, 1973: 151)

This statement, while obviously in the spirit of the Marxist Dominant Ideology Thesis, takes the explanation further by describing the naturalization of bourgeois values as the only valid/positive values worth adopting to the extent that the enforcing class effectively vanishes behind universal acceptance.

Aesthetics have effectively become the new battleground of social dominance. The binary oppositions of The Graphic Design Code are suggested in this quote from foremost contemporary French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, here discussing the role of aesthetics and acquisition of taste in Distinction, his famous book on aesthetics in French society in the 1980’s:

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their own classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.” (Bourdieu, 1984: 5-6)

Bourdieu’s description was a major inspiration for me in adopting the binary model in the ascription of taste. He also describes taste as something learnt from our general socialization, a sort of cultural immersion he believes more important than education and something we apply instinctively and subconsciously.

Australian academic, Michael Halliday (the original inspiration behind the Australian movement called Social Semiotics) invented the categories of language and anti-language. This is explained in the following quote by Hodge and Kress:

“Antilanguages as studied by Halliday seem to be associated with subordinate oppositional groups - prisoners, thieves and so on. But a related phenomenon is very general in languages in stratified societies. Many language communities have two distinct languages, one which is labelled ‘high’, and is identified with high-status speakers on public occasions, the other ‘low’, for the converse. Corresponding to ‘high’ languages...there is normally high culture, with the same social meaning and function as the high language, and usually mediated through the relevant ‘high’ language (cf. Bourdieu 1984).... The metasigns of the elite who control high culture incorporate meanings of hostility towards the majority just as much as do the metasigns of punks, bikies and mafiosi.” (Hodge and Cress, 1988: 87-88)

Notice the distinction here that actively highlights the antagonistic hatred of the other side! We define ourselves by what we are but we also underline the difference by demonstrating that we are better than them.

The Graphic Design Code, describing commercially generated visual languages, has simply identified visual expressive codes that service a marketplace divided according to class and interest groups. The fact that we fine designers identify mass-market design as shit, is evidence of our hostility towards these inferior values.

The near total success of capital in the contemporary marketplace has been to create markets, which, through habit and serial indoctrination (in the media) have replaced a traditional aesthetic with a commercial one to which we all passionately adhere. But those who love shit (and make no bones about it, probably the majority of western society does) did not create it. There is a whole, vast commercial industry out there that includes writers, journalists, advertisers, industrial and communication designers in all sorts of industries and media which pay for the media in order to reach the markets for the goods they produce. It is in their interests to maintain a predictable marketplace and the more highly defined it is the more predictable will be the response. This is social engineering and we are part of it through our participation and our unconscious perpetuation of a design code that maintains the social status quo.
In conclusion

There are many examples of media where values other than those defined by the market have dominated production. Movies, for instance, often provide examples through strong narratives, that appeal across class groups. The Graphic Design Code on the other hand, seems to have had its values defined totally by the marketplace, so that it has lost its ability to communicate across class boundaries. There are however some changes we might make to the way that we understand graphic design that might change the way the design we produce might act on the world.

Graphic design (as described in The Graphic Design Code) must be re-conceived to incorporate ALL graphic design produced for ALL of the society. What effectively happens in graphic/communication design teaching in universities at the moment is a study of only the nice bits; abandoning the ‘shit’ for endless, uninterrupted, totally commercial exploitation. I could say that ‘professional designers’ turned a blind eye to shit design, but the truth is most of us don’t even know its there. We don’t even see it as part of the same language because of our aesthetic preference. This is not helped by the paucity (and postmodern unpopularity of) structural analysis of graphic design. Most post-structuralism exists in fields after structural analysis has been carried out. Graphic designers have to read the structure of say, language and then transfer these explanations to graphic design.

There is a lot of talk these days about universities becoming increasingly egalitarian institutions. The failure of this policy has no better example than in the visual arts. Universities teach only fine art and fine design. (There is exactly the same aesthetic division demonstrated in Australia between pro-aesthetic fine art [fine = good] and anti-aesthetic bad [realistic and reproductive = bad] gumtree painting - which is statistically probably more popular and yet universally overlooked as fine art.) I estimate that the whole university trained design market [in Australia] services only about 20 - 30% of the market (admittedly the affluent upper 30% that own at least 80% of the wealth). Except for some advertising, the university system ignores the design for the rest. The prestige and exclusivity of the pro-aesthetic is maintained by the absolute statistical dominance (in terms of output) of the anti-aesthetic. The focus of university design and art courses on the upper end only increases this elitism and social division.
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Notes

1 There is an interesting emergence in this paper that links types of narrative with styles/genres of design that is left largely underdeveloped in this paper. I believe I have adequately explained the link between interest group and genre but there are obviously other social divisions whose narratives might be represented by other design genres. The most obvious social division in the media, for instance is gender, and yet my material would probably suggest that social class is a more important category of differentiation than gender in terms of graphic design.

3 Genre is a useful word for the description of graphic design as it implies a broader view - a sense of code - often missing from design analysis. We are much more used to genre in relation to film where it relates more to a style of telling or presentation than it does to specific markets or subject matters.

4 Socialization is another sociological word useful to graphic design and media theory. There must be a socialization of reception that implies an assimilation process that not not only deals with the adoption of design values but also implies the normative taking on of values across designs and across media forms. Socialization also allows value adoption to be integrated with the rest of our lives - in much the same way as Bourdieu understands value adoption through *habitus*.

5 Space, typography, image, colour and materials are the constant elements of Graphic Design that I identify in my Phd. thesis *The Sign in Graphic Design* LaTrobe University Library Bundoora Australia 2001. These design elements form the structural elements of graphic design that are significant either in their presence or absence.

6 Media neutrality has been a popular subject in media studies - a critique probably most eloquently argued by Stuart Hall et al. At the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. There has been much less published on the political neutrality of graphic design. Robin Kinross’s *The Rhetoric of Neutrality* in Margolin, V. ed. *Design Discourse* University of Chicago Press 1989 is probably the best discussion on the ‘politics’ of graphic design to date.