Avant-garde Tendencies in Graphic Design and Typography in the 1990s

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Introduction: In order to understand the changes that graphic design was going through in the 1990s better, we have to bear in mind that in those years globalization and global capitalism were rapidly progressing after the end of the Cold War, the dot-com boom and internet founded its place as a powerful media, ‘alternative’ music was ruling the rock scene, techno was shooting out from the clubs of Detroit, cyberpunk was establishing itself as a literary genre. This is the time when the possibilities of contemporary technology and technoculture in society were beginning to be reflected, criticized or celebrated in graphic design. Of course, this new visual wave could not be detached from its preceding 1980s-rooted punk influences, too. Since punk was much more than a music style of the 1980s, it brought back an entire aesthetic that had already been established in the twentieth century avant-garde and was reminiscent of Dada, Constructivism, Bauhaus or Futurism. Designer Jamie Reid developed a style for the Sex Pistols record sleeves and posters that evoked Situationist graphics and the cut-up techniques of William Burroughs.

This study focuses on some extraordinary graphic design and designers from the 1990s, influenced by sources as diverse as the post-punk era of the 1980s, the raised awareness of globalization, and the new social and political situation. These tendencies for change in graphic design entrenched mainly in the mid 1980’s have resulted in an original selection of different graphic expressions and styles in the 1990s.

Background in the 1980s: In the U.S. in 1984, Rudi VanderLans and Zuzana Licko took advantage of the newly launched Apple and started the legendary *Emigre* (Fig.1), a novel graphic design magazine. In particular, it investigated the possibilities of the type design they produced in their digital type foundry in Berkeley. Many associates of Cal Arts from Valencia and Cranbrook from Detroit were first exposed through Emigre, including designers such as Edward Fella, Anne Burdick, Steve Tomastula, Susan LaPorte and Michael Worthington. With merely 7000 copies printed, *Emigre* managed simultaneously to outrage many purist designers and inspire a whole new generation. This happened simply because *Emigre* broke the rules of printed and consumable media at that time. *Emigre*’s experimentation was paralleled by similar developments elsewhere. At the same time, designer Neville Brody of the United Kingdom was applying a new and unconventionally playful design and typography to *The Face* magazine, where he was an art director between 1981-1986. The new energy was also undeniably noticeable in the work of independent graphic designer Johnathan Barnbrook, Why Not Associates and 8VO studios.

Different design developments in the 1990s: If this new design was visually mostly recognizable by its page dislocation and visual noise, then we must not forget to mention David Carson in this context. The pioneer of the so-called deconstructive (or digital) typography took one step further in the deconstructive design, that most likely started with punk designers Neville Brody and Jamie Reid in the eighties, in order to create a unique magazine design. Carson, who lived in the U.S. and was a passionate surfer, first launched *Beach Culture* magazine, using Emigre fonts and bringing them one step closer to illegibility. *Beach Culture* was followed by a much more popular music magazine called *RayGun*, founded by publisher Marvin Jarrett, and Carson became its art director in 1992. RayGun used its specific new design where content was propelled by the visual and was thus competing with *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*. If we look
at Carson’s work, especially in isolation from its predecessors, we will realize that the matter at hand is not merely a personal expression by means of experimentation, but the nineties themselves are characterized by a growing visual chaos and design. This naturally came to be supported by cyberpunk theories and the digital counter-culture environment. In the ‘Out of Control’ RayGun volume (Fig.3), critic Rick Poynor describes RayGun’s kinetic look and feel as “transportation of a televiral atmosphere to the static medium of print” whereas cyberpunk father William Gibson refers to RayGun’s exciting visuals as textures created by TV zapping and sequential degradation of images faxed over and over again until they loose all legibility. Critic Matthew Kirschenbaum too, in his study ‘The other End of Print’, considers the idea that Carson’s use of the term ‘The End of Print’ on some covers of RayGun is a serious statement on the change of graphic design under the influence of other powerful media.

In the later years of Emigre, VanderLans and Lizko still continued their quest for showcasing the work of fresh designers in their magazine, even at the cost of having someone else’s work become more exciting than theirs. While in issue 27 VanderLans and Carson have a long debate about who disrespected whom, as early as in issue 29 Emigre (Fig.2) takes a radical spin and presents an original design group from Sheffield called The Designers Republic. TDR were not interested in moving to mainstream London, they worked mostly for music labels and bands and in a way they too copied the design of their surroundings in their own, idiosyncratic design expression. By that, not only were The Designers Republic’s graphics exciting and novel, they were also an answer to their everyday graphic surroundings, especially by recycling slogans and depicting logotypes of big corporations and using them for purposes of their own. Their awareness of the increasing consumerism is reflected in their work as a constant need for systematic logotyping of the unlogotyped by creating imaginary corporate identities. Rick Poynor is drawing a parallel between Johnatan Barnbrook’s and TDR’s design strategies in his text ‘Preparing for the Meme Wars’. He says: ‘Each of Barnbrooks’ pictograms in the Apocalyptic Series embodies a nightmare scene or seems to represent the ugly activity of some disturbing group or cause. ‘Barnbrooks’ ambivalent symbols suggest that our disposition for placing our faith in the idea of an established brand has reached the point where now just about anything can be pasteurized, logo typed and consumed.’ On the other hand, TDR are creating imaginary corporate identities, sampling already existing corporations graphic elements and therefore creating comprehensive graphic systems that emphasize the programmed, totalitarian and institutionalized nature of the reality of today. Rick Poynor characterizes TDR’s activity as a memetic strategy, which is also used by other visual artists in order to undermine the power of the market.

Conclusion: Even though graphic design has always been entangled to commercialism it does not necessarily mean that graphic designers activity has to be dictated by the commercial marketplace. A generation of designers rebelling in their own way against the neutral look dictated by capitalisms needs to talk to the masses, has proved this to be the case. The designers’ scream for independence, their resolution to avoid working for big corporations, their need to talk to the world about important issues in their independent work or magazines, as well as their continuous exploration of the tools provided by the new technologies, resulted into an amazingly rich and versatile graphic design with attitude in the 1990s.