Eating the Image: The Graphic Designer and the Starving Audience

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Printed text and images are still the central artifacts for housing of memory in literate culture. Although storage and retrieval of information is rapidly being transferred to computer memory banks, daily transactions in information, whether statistics, persuasion, or sentiment, are still made on paper. Some printed information is for reference, some is persuasive, and almost all of it is processed into a format determined by technology; for example, the typewriter determines the sizes of paper and envelopes.

In many countries, graphic design is still largely in the hands of printers, and even in countries with many active graphic designers, much of the printed material in daily life is designed by traditional format or with the new software from phototype and digital type companies. With this competition, designers present themselves as having achieved the unique ability to analyze and project images that constitute the symbolic meaning in the public message of their clients. Designers have accomplished this through long and specialized training in a highly theoretical body of knowledge and sophisticated technique, bolstered by a service orientation and a self-regulated social code, that is to say, by the definitions of their profession.

The mantle of skill is evaluated by the paying clients, who focus on economic results either in terms of products sold or interest engaged, or by the graphic designers themselves, who focus on novelty within a changing but restricted range of established conventions. Designers have had to be self-referential inasmuch as the other group concerned with visual images — the coalition of museums, art marketers, painters, and sculptors — contend that they alone generate images worthy of symbolic belief and use their publicity systems to exclude the replicated image of mass culture from public and scholarly attention or assessment.

However, designers' claims to communicative skill necessitate greater understanding of the nature of the real and the posited audiences and of the elements of image with which designers work, than has so far been demonstrated in designer critiques.

Far from understanding the nature of the tools of visual communication, designers tend to elaborate formulae that are evolved

by one or a few designers — Emil Ruder or Armin Hofmann, for example, and to justify the repeated use of these formulae by some verbal persiflage attesting to their legibility. Current fashions among designers, not the study of human communications, have continued to determine graphic design practice. Not only are there no tools for audience evaluation or participation in graphic design, but also designers decry the invasion of academic carpetbaggers who are likely to interest themselves in audience assessment. In so doing, designers are echoing the pain and outrage of older occupational groups that have managed to take onto themselves the somewhat fictive definitions of a profession, and who then claim that *only* the profession has the recognized right to declare "outside evaluation illegitimate and intolerable."[1] However, in cutting off audience evaluation, designers cut themselves off from understanding the extent that their work is accepted and used or seen and ignored.

1) E. Friedson, *Profession of Medicine* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1970), 71-72.

The graphic design trade today responds to overlapping phases of the continuum of audience reaction to print culture. Some of the products of graphic design address the expectations of the remnants of an oral culture; other formats are typical of literate culture. Oral culture, depending only on memory to retain the information considered necessary for social intercourse, tends to remember the typical, to cast into mnemonic forms that which is perceptible in the natural world and to cast out the purely eccentric as not being useful. For example, the genre scenes in advertising are normative, reinforcing stereotypes, although in the past twenty years some groups have managed to break out of their isolated stereotypes and join the general ones. Literate culture on the other hand tends to the abstraction of both verbal information and visual images. It also strives for novelty, if not originality, inasmuch as the maintenance of public memory is assured by the printed text. Thus the printed housing of general social norms is also the vehicle of innovative text and images for an audience that demands and supports novelty. Graphic designers themselves are confused about addressing different audiences, or more accurately, different expectations within the same audience, and to deal with the difference, attempt to divide the trade into two professional groups: graphic design and advertising. However, there does not seem to be any understanding that designers themselves operate on value judgements about the products that are made to engage the attention of the two-part audience.

Walter Ong notes the continuation of aspects of an orally based culture in our primarily literate culture in *Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word.* He has made some general comments about the way persons in an oral culture respond to their world, and that these responses have some relevance to the products of graphic design or the secondarily oral culture of electronic media. Among these notes are considerations of the ephemerality of sound as a record, which necessitates an elaborate procedure to memorize

information. Obviously, the nature of information itself is affected by the need to retain it through memory.[2]

The way things are done in an oral culture is learned by demonstration. The models for house building, marriage rites, or farming are visible before one to be copied, not abstracted as an image in an instructional manual. Story-telling performances require the gathering of the audience into one place, but because sound disappears so quickly, the characters and visual aids used in telling stories are *heavy* with symbolic traits and distinctive outlines. The stories, although complexly interwoven, are about action that involves exaggerated simple presence, absence, or battle. Agonism, or general verbal and physical quarrelsomeness, is typical of most oral stories, and opposition and its subsequent resolution is the basic format of almost all social symbolism.

We still carry with us, if not the intellectual configurations of oral culture, at least the nostalgic yearning for its reputed social concomitants — warmth, support, and community. We have been rendered ashamed of these yearnings by the emphasis placed on abstraction and objectivity by virtually every ideology in our culture — the word for religion, logocentris for philosophy, and rationality rather than emotionality as the sign of education. Nevertheless, one of the two rewards offered possible consumers of advertised goods is the fulfillment of these longings with the reward of loving encompassment of our body into one (or more) social bodies. For example, ads for White Horse whiskey promise consumers membership in a prestigious community of discerning drinkers. Conversely, the other reward promised by consumer society is power over the community.

Literate culture on the other hand requires both silence and vision, which when focused, is very narrow in scope. Reading requires separation and mental concentration and, thus, creates isolation both from the social group and from the physical world as well. The separation of knower from the known tends to turn the reader back on himself. Reading is thus profoundly dissective or analytical.

Writing creates an automatic memory, which encourages first linear and then subordinate phrasing of sentences and plots. As nothing is lost, redundancy is no longer considered useful. In fact, ever greater precision of dissection of experience and ever greater ingenuity in definition and naming becomes the supreme value of literate culture. Conceptual images, using E. H. Gombrich's term for simple outline images that picture all known functions on their edge regardless of their point of view,[3] (similar to a child's drawing of a boat or an Egyptian bas-relief figure that moves from front to side view to capture the most distinctive outline for each part of the body) are no longer necessary as mnemonic images. Instead, there is the gradual, erratically recurrent tendency for imagery to become illusionistic. The illusionistic image, to use another term defined by

2) Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

3) E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 87, 293-96, 5-7, and chapter 3.

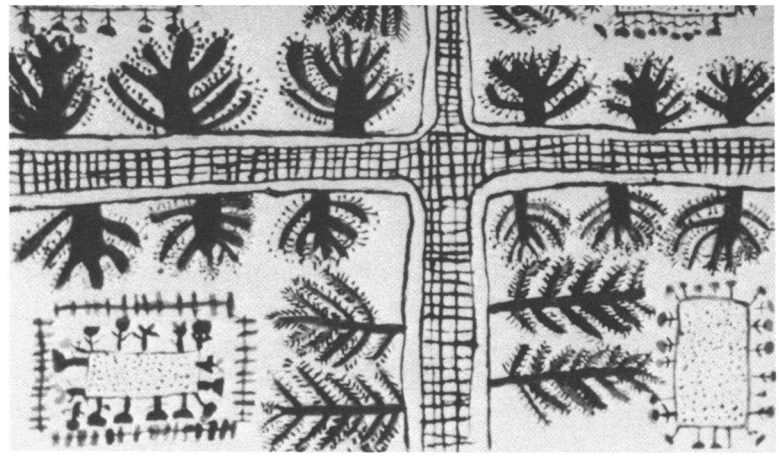

Fig. 1) Conceptual Image by a 10 year old child.

Gombrich, is one in which the viewers must do the work and make the fuzzy blotch of paint and the edge become, as the nineteenth century art critic Henrich Wölfflin phrased it, a boat or a lace collar through their own perceptual synthesis.

There is also among the literati the tendency to find abstract equivalents for visual images and, above all, to arrange these abstract marks in a spatial structure that will parallel their meaning. Both Ong and Frances Yates, for example, have written about the historic development of the shapes of text in space as aid for memory and rapid access.[4]

4) Walter Ong, *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), and Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

The nineteenth century writers about image were preoccupied with the exact relationship of form to the eye. Earlier, Plato had deliberately excluded poets from his *Republic* because they still celebrated the warm and blurry contact of the world with man, an approach that is typical of oral culture. He did not want the new abstract precision of his ideas, the forms based on the abstraction of number and geometry, besmirched by any unseemly, paratactic body-based clutter. Kant and Hegel separated the final reference for vision from the physical world and housed it in the Mind. Hegelian esthetics continued to influence later philosophers of art, such as Henrich Wölfflin, who was in turn very influential in England and America, where indeed traces of his formalist psychology still color design criticism.[5] Wölfflin built his entire psychological esthetic on the expressive meaning of form. He spiritualized visual perception, separating it from iconography and generally from workmanship. His predilections were provided with physiological reality by the late nineteenth century perceptual psychiatrists who developed the theory of genetic compositional preferences called Gestalt psychology. Russian Constructivist graphic designers, of the 1920s and 1930s, who pursued the simple conceptual image in design as a political statement, a testimony to revulsion for the class-ridden historicism of the art of the bourgeoisie, rejoiced in the findings of Gestalt psychology because it by-passed class in assigning esthetic discernment (even the poor have genes). To win the Kulak to the Revolution, they designed a series of propaganda posters that celebrated the demonstration of closure and necessary proportions in Gestalt psychology. El Lissitzky's "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" is a good example. Now the Russian Kulak, as recorded by

5) Heinrich Wolfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (1915; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 194–).

A. R. Luria in the early 1930s, essentially inhabited an oral landscape.[6]

Self-reflection was transferred to material and social realms. One illiterate worker, when asked if he had any shortcomings, replied, "I have many shortcomings: food, clothing, everything." Self-evaluation was transferred to the group. To the question, "What sort of person are you?" another young man answered, "What can I say about my own heart? How can I talk about my character? Ask others, they can tell you about me." In this oral culture based on primary sensory perception, not abstraction, communication of social idealism through a visual demonstration of the operations of the faculties of perception was ridiculous, and eventually, divorced of its revolutionary intent, the mode of image found a more fitting home in the epitome of bureaucraticized labor, Western corporate business. Graphic designers have continued to trust these Gestalt theses, and the late twentieth century finds them believing that in Rudolf Arnheim's *Visual Thinking*[7] and *Entropy and Art*[8] or Donis A. Dondis's *A Primer of Visual Literacy*,[9] they have found models for composition that will infallibly align with man's genetic cognitive map. Thus, graphic designers have spent much time elaborating a series of abstract linear structures with which they seek to assure the transmission of their intended message to the perception of the audience.

First the structure of the page was reorganized. The medieval manuscript had developed an *incipit* (beginning) in a style called *Diminuendo*, in which the letters of the words at the top of the page were very large and diminished as one moved down the page. After the development of the title page, which followed shortly upon the invention of printing, this *Diminuendo* structure was often transferred to chapter beginnings within the body of the book. The graphic designer in the mid-twentieth century transferred the *Diminuendo* structure to each paragraph, which was then placed at the intersections of variously devised grids, and together they were lined up like a string of beads that could be quickly told through. This linear index of separate entries allowed rapid access to information and assumed a much different relationship to and use of the page as an archive of memory than the traditional dense and relatively undifferentiated page structure.

Then designers continued to emphasize the center of the frame, which had emerged gradually as early Renaissance painters had supplemented the medieval vertical hierarchy with pictures of the human being centered in the visual field, often in a perspectival box of buildings or other man-made structures. The continuing symbolic use of the framed cental figure is often amusingly literal. From the nineteenth century to the 1930s, a filigreed picture frame was often used to convert advertising genre scenes to High Art, but even in the 1970s, a Winston cigarette advertisement enclosed two smokers bounding down a beach in a gold leaf picture frame labeled "Run-

6) A. R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 149.

7) Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

8) Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

9) Donis A. Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1973).

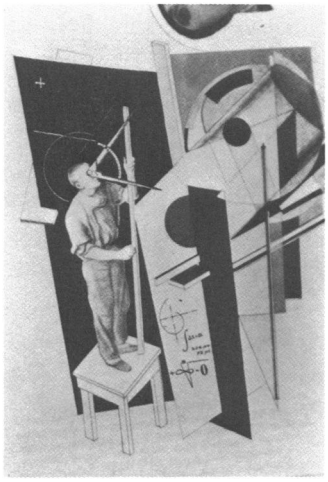

Fig. 2) El Lissitzky, "Tatlin at Work on the Monument to the Third International," 1922.

ning Free."

Nonlinear reading amalgamates these discrete structural formats for legibility emphasizing top, line, center, and frame, with page formats organized to encourage multidirectional pursuit of understanding. This reader-syntaxed page had myriad precedents in the naive or preperspectival art of East and West, but was specifically recalled to the attention of designers through the rediscoveries of Sergei Eisenstein and other early twentieth-century movie makers. Unschooled drawings, and the popular prints available worldwide after about 1500, not yet being preoccupied with the existence of man in space, had assumed that every point on a page was of equal value and arranged the elements of instruction or narrative arbitrarily, determined by the fit of their conceptually defined outlines. This material was then organized by the readers, not much differently than audiences skilled in aural perception pick bits of plot line from the din of repetition, music, and whining babies at a public storytelling, fits these together into a story, and even appreciates details of delivery and the sly interjection of local gossip.

Early movie makers such as Eisenstein found that the audience could make the same connections, picking out a sequence through the showing of conflict within a frame, actions connected at the edge of successive frames, transparency, collage, scale change, direction change, and time change. Graphic designers such as El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, Piet Zwart, and Ladislav Sutnar incorporated this understanding of the possible feats of human memory into print graphics, trying as far as possible to make the page sequence "unroll like a film," as El Lissitzky said of his book *Of Two Squares.*

Another area of visual convention is the shape of type. The history of the structure of reading material and the history of type design have long been the locus of essentially political controversy. Type design has often been aligned with power, either directly as when Grandjean designed the *romain du roi* for Louis XIV's exclusive use, or indirectly through a long history of utopian philosophers who devised new or modified letter forms to correlate their ideas of truth of language to truth of perception through "real" writing.[10] The tradition of seeking an appropriate letterform for the posited *zeitgeist,* or spirit of the age, continues to the present day and formed the basis of the attempts of Herbert Bayer or later Paul Renner to devise a "more legible" sans serif type face, or the Bauhaus policy of only using lower case letters for its Bauhaus Bücher.

Moving to a smaller scale range of formal components, type usage is the most obvious area where conceptions of placement and the texture of the interplay of mark and support are subject to changing fashions in legibility.[11] The amount of paper visible between letters and whether those letters are static and self-contained (Bodoni or Helvetica) or are open and allow a lot of interaction with the paper (Centaur or Syntax) is not just an isolated phenomenon. When the

10) James Knowlson, *Universal Language Schemes in England and France, 1600-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

11) The mark is determined by both medium and style. Support receives the mark differently, depending on its material nature, for example, paper, canvas, or ceramic.

range of visual information is reduced to edge-dominated conceptual imagery, as was certainly the case in the 1960s when geometric abstraction was paramount in graphic design, closed letters that reduce the interaction of paper and type, and tight spacing that emphasizes the glitter of white paper, were also popular. When the hard-edged conceptual image begins to give way to the illusionary or impressionistic image, the tension between the paper and the type is also reduced and the decline of the glittering edge can be seen in the increasing popularity of the impressionistic stroke in illustration (see the work of Vivienne Fletcher or Fred Chalmers for example), in the wider letter spacing in type, and in nongloss papers, all of which are current.

Fig. 3) Static and dynamic type faces.

The association of the shape and spacing of type with speed or thoroughness of comprehension is generally unfounded in perceptual research, but the assignment of moral value to style of mark is by no means restricted to persons calling themselves functionalists. William Blake was equally condemnatory about the moral qualities of some marks when he divided them into "the hard and wiry line of rectitude or broken lines, broken masses, and broken colors." Conversely, some mid-century photographers and graphic designers believed that the richly broken values of the photograph were both more truthful to reality and more appropriate to a machine age than the hand-drawn line. The scale of marks used, the scale of contrast in value, indeed the scale of compositional elements are all conventions that have changed through time. Nineteenth century graphic imagery had a full range of visual texture available for the audience, from the visible dots of chromo-lithographic printing through many middle-sized elements to large general compositions. By the mid-twentieth century, the range of the scale of information had contracted. Constructivism and, later, the corporate design style presented very large scale elements of plane or edge, with imagery often reduced to the conceptual outline. These examples were interesting primarily in their relationships to each other, not for their narrative content or their techniques of illusion, after which there was not much to contemplate until one came to the very small type and the details of ink or paper surface. The

material components, the ink and the processing of the paper through glazing, embossing, foil stamping, laminating, and coating for a gloss or a matt surface have been of great interest to designers and have led to an amazing elaboration of graphic arts technology in the past fifty years. Interest has shifted from high gloss to matte finish and from thin ink to thicker coverings. The changing material quality of ink has gone hand in hand with changing fashions in hue and value contrast and chromatic saturation, all of which have affected the way the intention of the image is perceived. This change of the pictured color of reality has had a strong influence on the color of other consumer goods, fabric, clothing, and paint.

The preoccupation with formal and material elements of the image continues to typify graphic design, even in periods like the present one where there is much apparent change in composition and style of mark. Essentially, the recent shift has been from vertical or horizontal geometric structure with clearly marked rhythmic intervals of space to a reader-syntaxed centrifugal structure. However, the balance of the elements is essentially the same, now being merely shifted away from the upright to the diagonal, so that the block of type slanting up the page from bottom left to upper right has become a cliché. The components are also the same, very large and very small type and many images about how we see or record vision, such as a photograph of a hand holding a photograph. Recent designs for posters or pamphlets, however, have shown many more items at a middle scale, with both less space and less tension between the elements, so that the overall effect is more like an ornamental fabric than the tense balance that typified graphic composition for fifty years. In this use of the repeat ornamental pattern, graphic designers parallel other composers of sensory stimulation — painters, authors, filmmakers, and musicians — all of whom have experimented with the return to unfigured or minimally ploted structure in composition. This mesh of marks style, whether rigidly gridded or freely distributed on the surface, is closely associ-

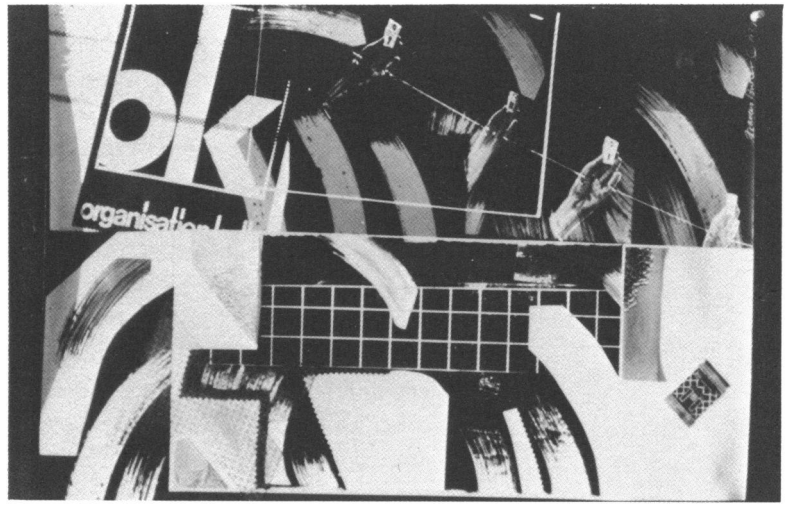

Fig. 4) Frances Butler, "Ornamental OK," 1979.

ated with expressionism, which uses the convention of the gestural mark to suggest the presence and the energy of the artist in the artwork. This convention of gestural mark was closely associated with Abstract Expressionist painting of the 1950s and both then and now is a highly self-conscious abstract symbol for primal unstructured matter.

Constant stress on originality and change in literate culture has resulted in a new version of a real writing that will express the *zeitgeist,* this time, however, as a concrete manifestation of primal-experiential matter.

One further notes a tendency toward closure of thought patterns in a print culture, for example, the convergence of such fields as philosophy, religion, perception, and visual style, all parts of the contemporary world view. Therefore, it may be consoling to think that the closure of the fragmentary model can even be seen in the currently fashionable schemata for the operation of perception and cognition, which posits a constant dissection and qualification of sensory stimulation. Karl Popper[12] and J. J. Gibson, as outlined by Gombrich in *The Sense of Order*[13] and *The Image and the Eye,*[14] have provided the philosophy and the laboratory testing for the idea that humans perceive by noting differences, are intrigued by novelty and learn from it, and eventually ignore redundancy. Thus, the process of perception and cognitive pattern making is one of constant interaction of experimental stimuli filtered through shifting mental schemata. The model stresses all levels of sensory perception, but graphic designers tend to elevate visual stimulation to primacy. He continues the tradition of valuing abstraction above pictured realism by elevating the abstract symbol or the logo, especially those that have been smoothed off for efficient reading. This is done despite demonstrations that it is the precise, unusual, and personally engaging phrase and image that is remembered, whereas the abstract is either paraphrased or forgotten.[15] One San Francisco designer aptly demonstrated continued designer belief in the reductivist symbol by presenting an undifferentiated silhouette of a head with a rainbow colored seismic zig-zag lurching across its brain-pan as an appropriate symbol for an educational institution.

While designers devise abstract logos, patterned surfaces, and abstruse gestural symbolism and play about with variations on the geometries of the grid or indulge in quasi-sadomasochistic punk complete with flying pieces of cooked meat and chained women, the graphic design audience looks to this, which is, in both its print and its video forms, its only really public imagery, for information on the components of personal identity and social life in the late twentieth century.

There is a long social tradition of defining one's life through images. In the Middle Ages there were already stages-of-life prints, and this type of image is still being produced. The simplification of the print is now considered humorous, but the recent success of the

12) Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

13) E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), introduction and passim.

14) E. H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 162-71.

15) Janice Keenan, Brian MacWhinney, and Deborah Mayhew, "Pragmatics of Memory: A Study of Natural Conversation," in Ulric Neisser, editor, *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1982), 315-24.

book *Passages* attests to the continued yearning for such social patterns. There were also many prints, books, and funerary displays to explain *L'Ars Moriendi,* how to die so as to be saved. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there began to be produced texts and popular prints that defined humans being gradually separated from God, with many images of the boundaries of the body, including images of the body as permeable, especially decaying in death. There were also many images of the body in life, its stance, its relationship to objects and to space, how to expand its presence with dress or movement. There were also images of instruction on social role, but the nineteenth century saw the height of the flood of images of how to be a useful member of society. Images of children began to emphasize helpful interactions, usually with the female child serving the male child, but sometimes just emphasizing team play. The definition of social role through popular imagery has certainly continued and defines how one behaves, that is, whether as a servant or as someone with power, how one looks if male or female. Men have generally been so ill served as to have a very narrow repertoire of faces or stances allowed them, although they are allowed wrinkles, and to be largely defined by props: hats, glasses, chairs, or other bits of space-defining structure. They are usually shown grasping objects firmly, sitting in chairs with their bodies arranged in positions of alert attention, not contorted for show, that is, physically present. Women have been generally shown with more attention to line than to their possibilities for action: head tilted, body twisted into chairs, hands curved and flapping, never grasping, and like most subjects about which there is acute unease, with frequent laughter (you've come a long way, baby).

Fig. 5) Tomb of Rene of Chalons, 1544. "And though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God." Inscription.

These scenarios are pale reflections of some of the visual icons used for oral storytelling. The characters and the scenes of advertisements are similarly made into icons, with a lot of exaggerated peculiarity to distinguish them as types. Seductive women, for example, are very thin, with elongated fingers and, at present, padded shoulders and hips.

TV culture continues the agonistic behavior that was used to describe life in oral cultures, now with a profusion and perfection born of a rich repertory of high-tech special effects for showing dismemberment and death. Designed print graphics, as opposed to newspapers or television, remove all trace of antagonism and violence between individuals and transfer the locus of warfare to that between individuals and objects. This is not surprising as most print graphics are financed by mass production seeking mass consumption.

Rosalind Williams in her recent book *Dream Worlds, Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France* (unfortunately ignoring the continued use of consumption as an instrument of intimidation and power, which has prevailed from the Egyptians onward) outlines contemporary consumerism and its social and per-

sonal impact effectively.[16] She places the genesis of the twentieth century ideology of consumerism in Louis XIV's use of consumption to define power and to ensnare his nobles in an endlessly escalating warfare of frustrated elitism in which goods and their appreciation were the weapons. Eventually, mass production allowed many persons at least the imitation of luxury. However, along with this "democracy of luxury" came the continued quest for originality typical of print culture, which does not need repetition as an aid to memory and turns toward constant discovery as its model of intelligence. Thus, the bourgeoisie too were sucked into a continual striving for the authentic, or the rare, or that which had a high labor value, the unique, handmade object. Authentication became a profitable career for art historians, and the entire drive of art making and art marketing since the mid-nineteenth century has turned on hand work, rarity, and authentication. The association of the replicated product with lack of authenticity has continually plagued graphic design, which of course does not exist except as a mechanical, until it has been reproduced. Popular economic myth cannot assess the labor value of an object if it is the product of a team of workers. It thus cannot assess the pin or the medical center, the information system, or graphic design.

The ideology of consumer warfare dictates that those who amass money and wish to authenticate themselves must know how to use, hold, and stand next to their consumer goods, so that they will present the image of power, this being the second major reward promised. Most consumers check the mirror of print graphics, whether looking for the imagery of the dandy collector Huysmans, in *Architectural Digest* or the correct body shape for tennis in *Sports Illustrated,* because each nuance of the object becomes a critical demarcation of the Principle of Consumer Originality (being exactly like everyone else while being completely original). The corollary to this ideology already discovered by its first practitioners, the Roman emperor Hadrian or Louis XIV himself, is that the use of the object for self-definition and power soon reduces the options for behavior to a catalog of correct responses, leading to *ennui,* a profound and futile boredom.

So far there have not been any significant alternatives to mass production/mass consumption, and in the service of various aspects of consumer society, graphic designers have responded with either the pride of the literati, producing the abstracted logos and grids and pictures about picture making, which have received the approval of the lettered since Plato's *Republic,* or they have with embarassment masked by the constant humor that characterizes American advertising, produced designs that glorify the consumption of the image.

Rousseau once tricked his adored Maman into putting down a piece of meat she was chewing, whereupon he snatched it up and ate it, gaining, he tells us, a real sense of unification with his beloved.

16) Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late 19th Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

As graphic designers have understood that human mimicking abilities allowed the interpretation of images in terms of real experience, they have depicted the consumption of the image quite literally. Open mouthed actors selling deodorants, refrigerators, stereophonic recorders, or automobiles are joined by large tooth-marked chocolate covered transparent jellies to efface the boundary between the object and the viewer entirely.

The emphasis on the consumption of image is perhaps an effective way to activate the memory of past experience. Certainly Marcel Proust thought taste was the most accurate mnemonic, and the closest graphic design can come is to show the image of the circumstances of taste. Although the body mechanics of stimulus and response are obviously different, the activation of individual memory by an image is parallel to the process of the retrieval of experience through a proverb or folk metaphor. The index through which the individual rummages to assign meaning to a situation and to encapsulate that meaning is the context of his personal past action. Personal experience makes the proverb or the image an effective mnemonic. When the image is too general, it cannot activate memory because it cannot be assimilated into any personal experience, and thus can only substitute itself for any past memory. Then it is like the proverb learned from a book rather than from life. It can indeed be quoted, though not as a primary definition of life experience but as an illustration to a definition that has no doubt been tried in other and stumbling phrases first and then wrapped up with the phrase "as the old proverb says...."[17]

17) Amin Sweeny, *Authors and Audiences in Traditional Malay Literature* (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1980).

Linguists and rhetoricians have spent the past fifty or sixty years describing the relativistic nature of language, the definition of each word in terms of another, and the trail of punning sleight-of-hand partial substitutions through which metaphor is used to define the world. Graphic designers, too, find they are trapped in an ever-returning *Prison House of Language*, as Fredric Jameson terms it, with no final definitions.[18] Images can demonstrate visibly and triumphantly that the abstract combinations of metaphor can exist (there *are pictures* of winged elephants) when suddenly a painted leaf will turn into the leg of a faun or the pictured gesture that meant one thing to one person means something entirely different to a neighbor and the image itself cannot mediate between its multiple interpretations. One can perhaps pin down the image by internalizing it and eating it; perhaps the obsessive adolescents who gobble up the electric images of Pac Man® will eventually gain some of the sense of authenticity that Rousseau gained when he gobbled his Maman's partially chewed food. But most attempts at definition simply try to fill the empty center of the verbal or visual metaphor by turning the figure of speech pictorially upon itself to show its origins in consumption, as in a recent whiskey advertisement that shows the modern composer Philip Glass holding a clump of large music notes in one hand and a glass of the client's beverage in the

18) Fred Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

other, implying apparently two liquid transfers of musical ability, one to Mr. Glass and one to the random reader. A few print designers approach the problem by attempting to fill the void with a tangible object, as does a religious huckster from Fresno, California who unites the Biblical phrase "There is peace in the shadow of his wings" with an actual orange feather that can be pressed to the forehead while praying. A more symbolic level of consummation is involved in the old folk practice of decorating the car of a newly wedded couple with tin cans and old shoes to celebrate the first sexual union of the bride and groom through the ancient symbol of the shoe into which the foot fits. A recent printed version of this scenario did not even picture any shoes. Here the variation was probably introduced because the client was making explicit the operation of folk symbols, which are deliberately not understood by their users as they are the only release available from the anxiety or embarrassment of speaking of taboo subjects.

But the removal of the specifics of symbolism undercuts the remnants of shared symbolic action, typical of oral culture, which can sometimes still exist and which provides a social memory. The anthropologist Mary Douglas calls it *implicit meaning*.[19] The diffuse nature of implicit meanings, the fact that a social symbolic act, such as not eating meat on Friday, can have significance ranging from the simple maintenance of a family tradition to a full spiritual understanding of the transubstantiation of the body of Christ, allows the perpetuation of a comforting web of assumptions that is free in that it need not be closely questioned, but which allows the members of a community to move with some assurance.

19) See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), and *Natural Symbols* (New York: Random House, 1973), chapters 9 and 10.

Graphic design is about sight, but it is also the principal compendium of public imagery and, as such, could attempt to show the visible traces of heightened sensory awareness, with attention and validity given to the real body, real social space, real touch, gesture, and to group specific symbolic acts. Imagery to evoke full sensory awareness is perhaps a contradiction in terms, but more attention to visual realism and perceptual acuity could at least remind viewers of the social configurations of a life wherein the individual is not so physically and intellectually isolated by the abstractions and conceits of the graphic designers' imaginations. The language of most graphic design is either abstraction or pun, wherein what is visible is not what is real. That aspect of culture that could be called oral culture longs to make a connection with imagery wherein what is seen is what is real, or as Touchstone put it in Shakespeare's *As You Like It:* "Then learn this of me: to have is to have, for it is a figure in rhetoric that drink, being poured out of a cup into a glass, by filling one doth empty the other. . . ."[20] The pun, either in words, image, or both is a form of verbal usury, where the reality presented by the pun borrows from its component parts to present an inflated and intangible spectacle of presumed meaning. But the interest rate on the loan is usurious, and when the audience comes to claim the sub-

20) Craig Hardin, editor, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1951), 611.

stance of the pun, which is the metaphor, they find only the figure of rhetoric, the empty cup.

When demands are made on the abstracted image, either logo or the typographic gymnastics of original Swiss style or the Swiss Style Nouveau of Wolfgang Weingart, there is the same return, a figural repast. As yet, graphic designers do not understand that the ever-increasing originality of abstract symbols is not the only diet needed by the audience. In the face of a growing demand by the American public for some other sustenance than the consumed object, perhaps some designers will turn their attention to providing a more attentive and more respectful visual picture of both the body and the social symbol. The most recent imagery stressing body awareness and its place in vision and spatial perception has been pornography. The principal example of social symbolic action seems to be the lighting of cigarettes. Even the ethnically and culturally stereotyped and sentimentalized social symbolism of Norman Rockwell has been replaced, not by more attention to the specific details of the daily life of a wide range of the multiple ethnic groups in the United States, but by computer imagery of fast space travel or dance movements. But the respectful and interesting scenario or the social symbol that invokes memory can be reactivated if more attention is given both to understanding the value judgements that graphic designers assign to various image styles and to the ways in which symbolic imagery is used by those groups who have managed to maintain their own visual iconography.

21) Alan Dundes, lecture, University of California, Berkeley, Fall, 1983.

Graphic designers should try to understand that their visual ideologies are determined by a very limited range of experience, training, and values, and the abstracted image is no more valuable than that which shows the details of belief. The literalization of the metaphor, which Alan Dundes cites as typical of much folk symbolism,[21] is not laughable when it is used by the artist for the Jehovah's Witnesses magazine *Awake*, who shows a very carefully rendered pointillist seven-headed Monster. It is laughable when Christian Piper or Antonio Lopez draws a snarling tiger-headed woman. The critical difference is that the Jehovah's Witness images are specific in form and symbol to their audience and they engender belief, whereas graphic designers seek to symbolize human psychology with shop-worn reruns of surrealist imagery that are not specific to any audience and thus do not elicit anyone's belief. Now this is all very good and well if the designers present themselves as unconscious generators of images for a small trade group, but certainly does not justify them calling themselves professionals in communication. Designers need a much wider training than that given by the commercial art schools. They need to look at something besides each other so that they can begin to note and present the precise detail of human life that will charge the focus of body, eye, and mind called attention and which has been cited as the point and pleasure of life from Michel de Montaigne to William James.

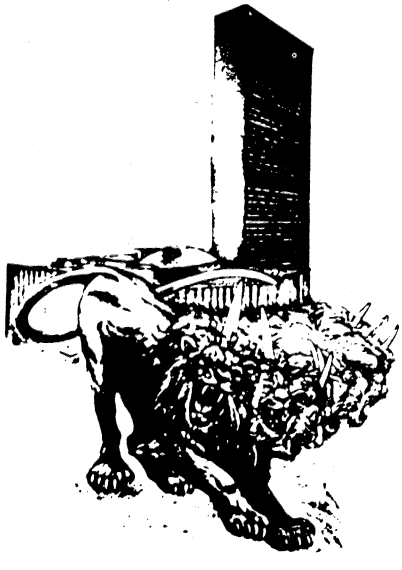

Fig. 6) *Awake* magazine, "The Scarlet colored Wild Beast," c. 1965.