

The Inversion of Originality through Design

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Article abstract

Si la nouveauté et l'originalité sont au centre de l'autodéfinition de la modernité et des discussions sur son avant-garde critique, nous examinons l'idée de la criticalité pour voir comment, dans le graphisme, c'est au contraire la reproduction, la mimesis, et même la copie fidèle qui ont donné lieu à des pratiques et à des transformations critiques percutantes. Notre discussion d'une nouvelle criticalité (malgré la perte d'originalité) repose entre autres sur la théorie cybernétique, sur la philosophie poststructuraliste et sur des exemples tirés de la première histoire du design : l'origine de l'alphabet abstrait occidental et la production européenne de masse de lettres et d'imprimerie. Concluant avec une lecture de la théorie critique, notamment autour de problématiques posées par Adorno, nous suggérons que la mimesis du design professionnel donne lieu à une transformation sociale critique malgré sa position en dehors de l'avant-garde autonome et grâce à ses racines dans le besoin quotidien.

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1. Sam Kriss, "The Language of God," *Idiot Joy Showland* (blog), 15 January 2015, <https://samkriss.wordpress.com/2015/01/15/the-language-of-god/>.

2. T.J. Clark, "The Experience of Defeat," in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (London, 2012), 255.

3. The literature on "creative destruction" is extensive in business writing and popular magazines such as *Wired* and *Fast Company*. It is

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In fact, almost all of the dreams of the early 20th century avant-garde have come horribly true, as if there's some wrinkled three-fingered monkey's paw buried somewhere in the catacombs under Montmartre. The Italian Futurists wanted to abolish the past and live in a state of pure speed that would kill them young and never let them be remembered.¹

What would it be like for Left politics not to look forward—to be truly present-centred, non-prophetic, disenchanted, continually "mocking its own presage"? Leaving behind, that is, in the whole grain and frame of its self-conception, the last afterthoughts and images of the avant-garde.²

As the above epigraphs suggest, to abolish the past, to never repeat yourself or copy anything, to take your poetry only from the future in a sustained and seemingly limitless critique of culture and politics, was the foundation of early-twentieth-century modernism. In art, design, and visual culture, the dream of a decisive break with an overdetermined past was linked to radically original visual form and thus to a particular idea of criticality. Constant innovation, the negative critique of everything already existing, has long since been the dominant logic of serious visual culture, the key to its reception both in writing and as a basis for the production of new art and design.

However, if this avant-garde impulse was once aligned with the politics of permanent revolution (especially in Berlin and Moscow), it has since become the mantra of entrepreneurial business.³ Driven by the monkey's paw of relentless innovation, images and technologies of information have multiplied digitally, virally, exponentially, into infinitely recombinant strands of cultural, economic, and especially *visual* syntax. The ability of a rapidly flickering and accelerating graphic landscape to command our attention has made it a key engine of contemporary production and exchange, and indeed made design the basis of our contemporary, linked-in, lived experience.

Yet, in all this we have been left with a powerful contradiction: the logic of the cult of the original has given rise to a culture of replication, copying, and ever-greater speed and *immediacy* of reproduction. As the stimulant of originality has expanded quantitatively it has metastasized into something qualitatively different, a culture where originality, even avant-garde provocation, no longer has critical force; indeed, it is everywhere, the drug of choice of marketing and global markets, the holy grail of capital's sleepless search to reproduce itself. In 1983, Fredric Jameson posed the problem of contemporary visual culture starkly, in his vertiginous conclusion to "Postmodernism and Consumer Society."

He argued that the postmodern moment was also that of “late, consumer or multinational capitalism.”⁴ To paraphrase one of his central questions,

We have seen that there is a way in which [graphic design] replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic.⁵

This essay will address Jameson’s question, framing it not in terms of the postmodern, but rather as the central problematic of contemporary graphic design. Has the ubiquity of innovative form—the explosion of highly professional, commodified, and original graphic design specifically—done away with the possibility of critique? Or has critique simply changed form? What is the place of critique *within* graphic design, the professional, industrial branch of visual culture devoted precisely to the creative production and mass reproduction of images? And what is its place within a vastly accelerated and enlarged mass culture where all images seemingly aspire to the condition of spam? Is design by definition nothing more than the uncritical servant of capital? Mass reproduction and the sheer scale of image and object production have clearly changed global cultures and indeed the rules of the game. It stands to reason that we need to look critically at criticality itself, and understand whether, or where, it has gone. Our approach to this contradiction will require examining the assumed link between original and innovative form, on one hand, and, on the other, the critical resistance that visual culture quite possibly has left behind.

Simultaneous opposites

Figure 1 reproduces a full-page advertisement for an enamel paper stock. | fig. 1 | It is aimed at the printing and advertising trade and simple in its premise: choosing the right paper provides direct mail and other printed materials a dignified, proper, and somehow even punctual (“on the dot”) delivery. It is opaque, smooth, bright, and “well-dressed,” folds well, and takes both letterpress (from raised metal type or plates) and colour (offset) printing. The carriage, with its sharply dressed footman in top hat and tails, promises an aura of high class and meticulous results just from that choice of paper, as does the restrained size and sophisticated typography of the upper headline. If the open white space and the solid structure of its layout speak to a postwar modern sensibility (or mid-century modern, as it might be called today), the cartoon illustration and high Victorian decorative display typeface that announces the brand name show a lack of complete obedience to the high modernist program. We should also note that the manufacturer, Provincial Paper, was an important and progressive supporter of Canadian graphic design and a long-time sponsor of the *Typography* exhibitions that were so central to the formation of the Typographic (later Graphic) Designers of Canada in this period, during the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁶ Furthermore, art director and illustrator O[swald] K[enneth] Schenk was a respected and award-winning figure in the Advertising and Design Club of Toronto.

The reception of work like this, and from this period, has generally followed a breezy, easy, but definite derisiveness. The invisibility in histories of art and design of vernacular or even mildly decorative or playful work like this speaks perfectly clearly. But critics then and now have not been reticent about

instructive that one place where this futurism intersects in a serious way specifically with design, Roger Martin’s *The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking is the Next Competitive Advantage* (Boston, 2009), devoted a chapter to the genius of BlackBerry just as the company was about to undergo a massive collapse in the market.

4. Fredric Jameson, “Post-modernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA, 1983), 125.

5. Ibid. (The term “modernism” is the subject of the original quote.)

6. See the contribution to this volume by Cheryl Dipede.



Figure 1. "One should arrive smartly," Provincial Paper advertisement ca. 1959. O.K. Schenk, art direction and illustration. Photo: author.

Figure 2. "Industrial screw jacks," page from an industrial goods catalogue ca. 1958. Ernst Roch, design. Photo: author.



7. Max Kozloff, "Adventures of the Twentieth Century Poster," in *Cultivated Impasses* (New York, 2000), 299–301. (Orig. *The Nation*, 5 February 1968.)

8. Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modernism and Modernity*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax, 1983), 219.

9. Hal Foster, "Design and Crime," in *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (New York, 2002), 17.

10. *Ibid.*, 21.

11. For a parallel argument in the teaching of graphic design studies and the issue of criticality, see the essay by Wayne Williams and Janice Rieger in this issue.

repeating and underlining the message. In his review of "Word and Image," the 1968 poster exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Max Kozloff asserted, "We are in the heyday of the expendable visual image," where styles in design generate a "hodgepodge," or "babble" that swings from the "frenetic" to the "nervous." Like their products, "poster artists are the most unashamed predators imaginable ... in search of ideas, rather than a vision," good for nothing more than "opportunism" and service to the "cash nexus."⁷ Further, as Thomas Crow's well-known article, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts" articulated, "Emancipated vision will not come from imitating the degraded habits induced in the multitude by its currently favored amusements."⁸ Crow succinctly drew a clear link between all of the following: lack of real freedom of choice, unacceptable taste, mass reproduction, a duped, docile, and fickle public, visual pleasures, mimesis, and lack of *originality*.

More recently, in *Design and Crime*, Hal Foster critiqued design's putative complicity with consumer spectacle and Culture Industry, and he, in fact, identified a much greater problem than whether design—or as he put it "so much *design*"⁹—is a crime. Design, he said, thrives on "the increased centrality of media industries to the economy" (by which he presumably means the singular, combined-and-uneven, global economy). But Foster looked further yet, to "a more fundamental development: the general "mediation" of the economy" and to "a retooling of the economy around digitizing and computing."¹⁰ This necessarily points us to economic facts far beyond art or design, to "the economy" itself—something far larger than any one industry or any one nation. If we wish to join Foster in this critique (and I do), bad design alone cannot be seen as the sole culprit or cause. The more fundamental fact of a redesigned and retooled digital economy logically suggests that criticality in art or design needs to do more than consider how visually and formally *original* is any given work of visual culture.¹¹

As a means of getting to the bottom of such distinctions and their limitations we should look at a common binary, two contradictory values that shape the shared visual economy of art and design, those of mimesis and originality. As a public and shared *practice*, design inevitably prioritizes mimesis over originality. But far from being the scene of a crime, we will propose reproduction as the site of criticality itself in contemporary graphic design. This is suggested as a way of offering a different resolution to the highly ideological opposition between a mimetic culture of sheer necessity and an original culture of artistic autonomy.

Compare Schenk's advertisement above with a contemporary work by Ernst Roch. | fig. 2 | Roch was a Yugoslav-born and Austrian-trained designer who immigrated to Montreal in 1953. The internationalism of this piece of pure information design is hardly guilty of being frenetic, slangy, or lacking in vision. Its aim is to establish meaning through controlled visual thought and graphic play: the *sachlich* (roughly translated as *objectively rendered*), close-cropped product shot of the jack virtually "lifts" a column of the layout, while the grid, lower case sans-serif type, and stark red and black colour scheme work to lift Canadian graphic sensibilities generally into the likeness of the European modern. In an interview, Roch mentioned he did not miss the irony of focusing all of his skill onto the smallest of jobs for a local client.¹² The power and influence of this example is not denied in the least by the minor nature of the product being designed: a page from a catalogue of specifications for mundane industrial equipment, just as it says on the label. In that interview, Roch also suggested that it is hard to see now (i.e., in 1996) the full revolutionary force of these simple and original examples of modernist design thinking.

Originals as Copies

This narrative of Roch's role as avatar of an original, progressive, European, and internationalist style, sweeping away the inferior local, decorative, and derivative product, follows the template of the modernist myth. It positions him squarely within a well-known and increasingly dated historical trajectory, but this nonetheless requires some further retracing. What would happen if we were to compare Roch's work with designs from the avant-garde of the 1920s, for example, advertising layouts for Pelikan ink by Kurt Schwitters, | fig. 3 | or pages in Jan Tschichold's manifestos on the New Typography? We find the same emphasis on grids and information, geometric red bars within a restricted colour scheme, the same restrained, orderly, and asymmetric structure, a marked preference for photography over illustration, and a precise sense of rhythm and control of the page. Also, we might assert that this is what made these works *matter*, what gave them historical importance as visual culture. The choices and quirks of the designer's hand, usually taken as a guarantee of originality, have been replaced by seemingly objective decisions within a mechanical-looking visual logic; and illustration has been replaced by photography, even as the page itself has become an abstract arrangement that illustrates the idea of the design.¹³

But even as the similarity or family resemblance becomes clear, we accept the originality that Roch's work could clearly and justifiably claim in the postwar Canadian context, *even as* it begins to unravel. An act of mimesis by a

12. Interview with Roch by author, Montreal, 21 June 1996.

13. Many of these principles are laid out in Tschichold's writings as designed, self-supporting visual examples, such as *Typographische Mitteilungen* (1925) and *Die Neue Typographie* (1928), or as a manifesto, such as "New Life in Print," which can be found in *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design*, ed. Michael Bierut et al. (New York, 1999). When reprinted in more contemporary layouts, of course, they lose much of the visual force of their argument.

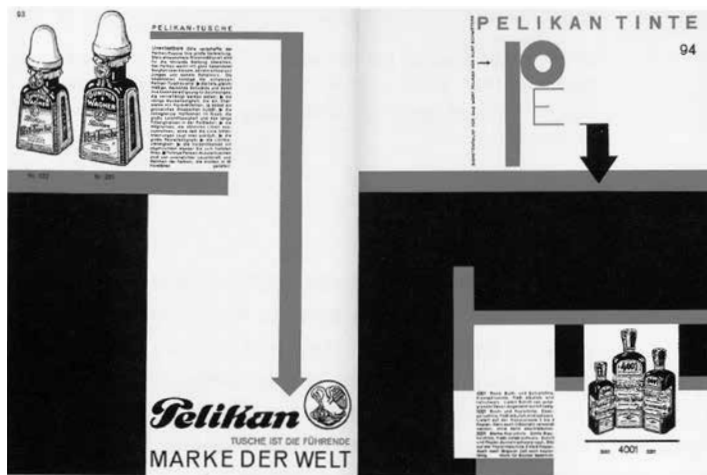


Figure 3. “Pelikan Tinte,” ink advertisement, 1924. Kurt Schwitters, design.

postwar modernist, reiterating the revolutionary form of the 1920s avant-garde can be simultaneously an original, modernist prescription for moving postwar design forward, *even as* it is obviously an everyday, commercial graphic, *and* a copy or repetition of decades-earlier thinking from a prior, and more uncompromising, avant-garde program.

The implicit values of this discourse—radical invention, autonomy, or self-determination as a rejection of instrumentality, and uncompromising originality—developed into the *parergon*,¹⁴ the framing boundary condition, that defined avant-garde movements and works and their theorization throughout the twentieth century. It is important to note that the exclusionary role of “originality” as a boundary has survived long after the works of modern art and design it was intended to distinguish have passed from the vital, emerging, mid-century present into the canonical and historical; the principle of the completely “original” remains even as it no longer defines which works have contemporary or original relevance.

This is not to suggest that Roch’s achievement is in any way reduced. His impact and his influence on Canadian graphic design were enormous, and the respect that his work still commands, especially among younger professional designers today, is genuine. His historical position is well deserved, even if it still remains to be properly established and studied. Designers in Canada, such as Roch, his long-time design partner Rolf Harder, Walter Jungkind, Tony Mann, and many others did not simply or slavishly adopt European formulae. Notably, the latter two figures were positioned in important university-level graphic design programs; all these designers were active in the formation and dissemination, or reproduction of this very specific approach and modern visual logic in the postwar moment right from its emergence in the mid-1950s. It is precisely in their adoption of earlier forms and repeating them in a very different context that the criticality of their reproductions emerges. The basis of these designers’ reception as representative of the modern and progressive ideal, their importance, was based on iterations of existing ideas, copies that were also seen as new, original, and critical.

14. This term is derived from Kant via Jacques Derrida. Any work, or *ergon*, will always require definition by things that are properly *para*, or external to it. In/out remains the basis of all identity, a distinction that cannot be eliminated. But typical of deconstruction’s own purpose, the result of Derrida’s encounter is not to draw a clear and universal boundary, to fix what is and is not art or design, or even to bind what is modern; nor does it simply dissolve the idea of a “boundary” in itself. It merely unsettles the confidence with which we draw such lines and suspends rather than decides what is in and what is out of our categories. A good short introduction to these terms is in Mark A. Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline* (Cambridge, 2001), 11 ff.

Locating the strong influence of the interwar avant-garde in the postwar is not to devalue the later work, but to take a necessary step toward understanding how the value of originality informs and drives design and design thinking, past and present, even as its power derives from repetition and mimesis. It is also to introduce uncertainty into our measures of value in visual culture. However we read these avant-garde forms, they retain the inherent contradiction between the value of “originality” as the measure of a work’s undeniable historical importance and the forceful, uniform approach of the modern or international style as it was being developed; that is, between the highly creative and influential individual *ergon*, and the restrictions and inevitable conformity that enable its enframing logic, or *parergon*. We might take this to mean that, flatly, since the modern movements in the postwar are mimetic of earlier visual ideas, the former simply fail as fully original, radically inventive avant-gardes (the thesis developed in Peter Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* of 1974). But possibly we can better use these contradictions to turn the idea of originality against itself.

The idea of modernism in design had a verifiable and undeniable impact on work in Canada, which resounds today in its rejection, as much or more than in its reuse and renewal. Even as we see the modern as canonical, that is, not subversive or oppositional but something to learn in school, we need to compare it to what *outside* of itself gives it that status. Schenk’s Provincial Paper ad is what modern graphic design, by its own account, had to repress or reject. But if we justifiably place Roch’s work in a line of succession from, say, Schwitters, Tschichold, and El Lissitzky, then this also allows us to reimagine it outside of the terms and elevated status conferred by the “original,” which is to say, we must critique or negate the necessary link between originality and criticality, and *vice versa*. A work’s ongoing place in our visual cultural history can no longer be measured by its unchanging fact as an original moment in a narrative arc, just as we cannot ignore the fact the International Style was already “retro,” some forty years old, when it began to become widely influential, that is, *repeated*, in Canadian graphic design during and after the 1950s. However much the writings on modernist designers, and the reception of modern design in the postwar generally, has argued that certain historical forms were the true icons of historical progress, it is important to note that they were also *mimetic*, reproductions of earlier ideals.

The suspension of copy and original

To call Roch’s work a “copy,” in however limited a way, is to do at least three things simultaneously: misrepresent its reception and importance; place it in its context by simply and properly describing its most obvious antecedents; and reflect on, or reflect back on themselves, both our highly ideological measures of critique and the ideal of originality itself. Graphic design, as the highly technological, liberal art of a single, global culture of mass reproduction, is arguably where the binary of repetition/originality is most vividly played out. Perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that design is the only place where it remains properly suspended, unresolved, where the contradiction repetition/originality retains a resistance to classification, to ideological or economic fixation, because it is inherently a paradox, indeed the central paradox of the arts of technological reproduction.

We can see that Richard Buchanan's well-known formulation of graphic design as "a new liberal art of technological culture"¹⁵ has its deliberate echo here. He uses it to culminate the arc of historical development of design, which he traces from a trade, to a profession, to a field of research, to an "art." We can follow this sequence further (although Buchanan does not) to argue that design is not the degraded and commercial "other" of art, but rather a solution to one of its persistent, foundational problems: that of originality. Design by its very operation, reiterating and reproducing forms and visual logics in the solution of practical problems, can be seen to demonstrate that originality is not an absolute claim to artistic importance. Design effectively works, or plays, with that fact, and in this play we find its strongest claim to a critical role. While "originality" is the paradigmatic value used to ensure, in writing, the importance of visual works, that importance is only truly ensured by its opposite: "reproduction," re-presentation, mimesis, the paid compliment of the copy, an iteration in some significant way of the logic that made, or was later claimed as making up, the importance of the original.

If this reversal of the power of the original and the copy can be demonstrated in these two pieces, it can be applied to more than design. Let us work this idea through in two different registers: first, the science of cybernetics, which arose in the postwar period as the precursor to modern computer science, and philosophy, as we shall see below. The term "cybernetics" was coined in 1948 by Norbert Wiener, from the Greek verb for "steering," to refer to how communication systems convey and control information, defined as meaningful difference, and how both living and mechanical systems need information and feedback, especially negative feedback or correction to govern their actions.¹⁶ (This and related theories formed the basis of modern computer science.) Central to this thinking was the need to quantify and measure information, and to do this the binary terms "variety" and "redundancy" were developed. From the point of view of delivering a message, variety is the enemy. Anything that deviates (however creatively) from the original signal is disruptive, mere noise in the channel. In measuring communication, variety is a form of originality that defeats the originality of the original message. The goal is perfect redundancy, the delivery of as faithful a repetition of the original information as possible. A work of absolute variety—for which we may usefully substitute the term "originality"—would by this definition be literally meaningless. Indeed, as noise, variety is very easy to generate; it is the universal and inevitable manifestation of entropy in information and computer systems, and engineering devotes all of its efforts—partly in vain—to the absolute elimination of the uncertainty and failure it brings. Mimesis, the *copy*, is the measure of success in reliable communication, information exchange, and control.

To work through this idea in a second register, that of philosophy, the idea of repetition is examined by Jacques Derrida in his consideration of the term "iteration." From the Latin root *iter*, "once again," he finds simultaneous overtones of the Sanskrit word for "other," *itara*. The repetition of a thing always results in a paradox, a "new iteration," something which can be seen as identical but also different.¹⁷ By virtue of this logic, "the logic which links repetition to alterity," iterations cannot be perfect duplicates, only new variants. A repeated word or image leads not to the *solution* of a message, to some final or certain

15. Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues* 8, 2 (Spring 1992), 5. Emphasis in original.

16. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, 1948).

17. Jacques Derrida "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982), 315 ff.

meaning at the other end of the chain, but only to further puzzles. Even as images link to words, and words to images, they do not thereby anchor their meaning or take root in systems with a determinate force. Derrida's discussion, of course, picks away at this self-contradictory "logic," reflecting his fascination that the root of the word for "spoken repetition," iteration, necessarily contains its subversive other.

Communication, he repeats, is not the transmission of some thing; meanings do not mean any *one* thing, nor can they be said to deliver anything at all; communication may be, or usually is, "non-semiotic;" the only agreement or context that proscribes meaning is a "vague consensus." (This latter phrase captures the nature of design far better than the oft-repeated, positivist, and misleading term "visual language.") Recapitulating in miniature the history of language and writing, Derrida notes that as communication restlessly moved from gestures to sounds to writing to pictographs, hieroglyphs, ideographs, and alphabets, it became addressed to an absent addressee. Writing *by definition* transcends, or survives, the idea of a single destination or a given reading; it must be a repeatable, iterable event without its original context or *it is not writing*.

Derrida continues by noting that as writing repeats an author's given sequences of words, it removes the author, eliminates his or her authority in the act of asserting it, transcends his or her death, just as the presence of a signature is in fact proof of someone's absence.¹⁸ Derrida writes of this effect as an "essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility, from *consciousness* as the authority of the last analysis..."¹⁹ There is no ground to be found, not in the conscious author, the original artist or designer, nor in the "original" works they pass on for later, different applications, that is, further original uses. This is obviously not only a challenge for works of art or movements in design, but also for our wider understanding of the working of visual culture. Derrida has located an aporia, possibly *the* aporia, at the heart of the idea of the "original," revealing its inherent dependence on reproduction, mimesis, and copying.

The wider implication, therefore, whether traced in the design object or in theory, is that originality and variety are neither desirable as communication, on the one hand, nor strictly coherent as philosophical and aesthetic concepts on the other. We cannot in good faith claim to locate works of a unique or special nature that rise above or fully discard reproduction and repetition. That is, we *can* continue to insist on valuing originality and authenticity in opposition to a mass culture of reproduction. We *may* elevate *certain* forms of visual culture as high art or an avant-garde bulwark against the very logic of that culture itself. But such claims can never be said to stand on anything more than the repetition of an ideological assertion.

Anachronisms

In the period of both of the Canadian designs we have been discussing here, the late 1950s, Schenk's lively and popular illustrated advertisement would in fact have been received as the more *contemporary* work. The looseness of the cartoon line, the brushy ink wash, the Disneyesque clichéd signifiers (clown-like circles on an eggheaded Humpty Dumpty's cheeks, a footman and top hat for a Cinderella carriage), the evidently swiped period engraving of that

18. This can also be usefully applied to the embodied eye. The technologically reproduced, designed artifact is always an iteration, a fact that perhaps allows design to more readily confront us with the fact that in looking we never see the original. As much as the designer's client may want to copyright a style or identity and thus arrest copying, they also want to disseminate and publicize the image as widely as possible; but to show a design is to influence others. It is in looking around at what others have designed that we know what is and isn't the *ergon* of design. We can equally see the effect in painters who repeat the signature style that is or was the mark of their originality and importance. See the reference to Krauss, below.

19. Derrida "Signature, Event, Context," 316. Emphasis in original.

carriage (complete with superimposed letters that are comically missing their original descriptive key), and above all the ornamental Victorian display font can all be seen in two ways: as a revival or even a horror in need of some design discipline; or else as a popular, historically informed but nonetheless *newer* visual logic, appropriate to the later, very different postwar period that had superseded (and not just chronologically) the defeated political idealism and abstract Constructivism of the interwar avant-garde. Schenk captured the look and feel of life in a newly prosperous world through a properly postwar vision, in an image capable of stimulating the demand needed to rebuild prewar industries; reestablishing 1920s levels of *reproduction*—of capital, of populations, and gender roles; prioritizing consumer desires for the new world of leisure in place of Depression, the War, and sacrifice.

There is an inescapable irony here, because Roch's design could reasonably lay claim to the historical modern, and thus the future. But it was Schenk's little ad that, meanwhile, had performed the more immediate, critical task of capturing something contemporary in visual culture. If we can step outside the ideological value system that has erased the value of such work, we can see that the illustration and the cartoon *were* the authentic style of a popular, rapidly expanding, "on the dot," at your service, newly feminized or domesticated culture. Both Schenk and Roch, in their different ways and visual strategies, seem to be aware that to keep up appearances they must be reproduced, copied, and that such mimesis is also their renewal. Schenk's is simply the more recent, the more original, and more critical expression of the problem of graphic meaning—which is the problem of all visual meaning—as always also repetition. This process inverts the roles of the contemporary and the modern, whereby the more "modern" work by Roch is in fact a revival, which displaces the more authentic (if less disciplined) contemporary work. Both works borrow: originality is not the measure of which work has a more critical role to play. Indeed, it is the Schenk that must be said, in properly critical fashion, to be more engaged with working through the visual culture of its own time and place.

Design has a history of this process—an often unintended but actual critique through repetition, copying something until it becomes something else and bringing revolutionary change out of reproduction. At an early stage in the slow development of the alphabet, the use of pictographs—that is, representational symbols or icons that *looked like* things—gave way to arbitrary shapes, or *abstractions* that only represented ideas. The rise of abstract thought in language and forms of writing gave us such brilliant inventions as the letter A, which started from the reduction and schematization (powerful ways to abstract something) of drawings of *aleph*, the ox, into a triangle with two horns; the process continued through the simplification and rotation (also marvellous ways to abstract something) of this form until it was standing on its own two "feet." This crucial change was the unintended outcome of slow but enormous *change* that emerged out of repetition. The new, abstract alphabet was not a designed, radical new form, but something that became powerfully new precisely through repeated use that merely sought to copy. Like all social technologies, the basis of graphic design in the alphabet and in typography yields an art that is most powerful without the individual genius, find-

ing powerful critique out of existing forms and relations of communication, through mimesis, common agreement, and public, shared practice.

A further important example comes with the reintroduction of Roman letterforms, shortly after the invention of printing. Gutenberg famously cut that first metal font in the Gothic style, which we will recall was the contemporary evolution of letter shapes from earlier, and at the time largely obsolete, 1,500-year-old Roman forms. The movement of post-Roman letterforms through the uncial to the gothic partly reflects new technologies, perhaps indicating a precedence given to scraping a flat nib on private pages over the Roman preference for public carvings. But when Roman letterforms were reintroduced through print, they were quickly seen to reveal a progressive and contemporary adoption of pagan and humanist ideas from within the strict medieval totality and Christian hegemony over knowledge. The new type forms of the fifteenth century, roman and italic, signified both a new society (one identified as a rebirth), but also very old (in fact ancient), revived and copied forms. The ancient Roman forms came to displace the more contemporary and original Gothic quite thoroughly, a criticality arising from their social role and not immanent in any originality on the part of their users or in the forms themselves. We might note this suggests a process without an end: the subsequent iteration of the obsoleted gothic blackletter into a signifier of everything from legal documents to medicine, fascism, heavy-metal rock music, motorcycles, and subcultural rebellion in general. As Rittel and Webber put it in 1973, "Wicked problems have no stopping rule."²⁰

Gutenberg's originality was largely limited to a reimagining of existing technologies. He did not invent movable type, as is often stated; the printing of words with individual wooden blocks is much older and arose much farther to the east. In looking to make money (or more precisely, reproduce someone else's capital) by printing Bibles more efficiently, he did combine several existing technologies in a highly original way, including rag paper, metallurgy, oil-based inks, and the Roman codex or paginated form of the book. What he imagined instead was the mass *reproduction* of letters, which could be poured at will out of his one original invention, the matrix. It was the ability to copy that gave printing its immeasurable critical leverage on culture, including visual culture, thought, and society.

Out of these choice examples we can begin to outline an approach to criticality in design that does not conceive of itself as stepping outside of the everyday; nor having an intentional, oppositional, negative aesthetic effect that is immanent in the work's radical difference; nor something that can only be seen or received in an autonomous space isolated from the dominant culture (and presumed immune to it). Design is an approach to visual culture that struggles within the practical world, developing and improving everyday objects to meet human necessities *at the same time* as it also defines itself as a distinct visual culture, yielding unique effects with its own idiomatic logic and collective visual standards. So a simple advertisement for paper can confound notions of modernist taste, appearing anachronistic or retrograde (before retro was an acknowledged marketing tactic). But does it not also suggest a relationship to its audience, different from the universalizing claims of the modern, that does *not* shape them into rational, functional, and mechanized

20. Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, 2 (June 1973), 162. It should be noted that the widespread repetition of the term "wicked problems" has changed its meaning from an original intervention in professional design and planning (see the reference to Buchanan, above) to the "brand" by which these disciplines have become known in popular culture. In recent years, public intellectuals such as Roger Martin and Marty Neumeier have worked to popularize the idea that problems rarely are simple or yield to linear solutions, especially in business. See the Winter 2009 issue of *Rotman*, www.rotman.utoronto.ca.

subjects, or acclimatize them to the efficient, corporate culture of the economic boom in the postwar era? In that context, does this advertisement not embody the idea of rising, aspirational living standards, the desire for a familiar, lived environment designed to provide plenty (however falsely promised)? Is that not something to try to understand, and with which to work?

Design Without an Avant-Garde

Precisely because of this, graphic design is uniquely positioned to answer what we will suggest is one of the central dilemmas of contemporary culture: the ability to make a difference in a culture already driven by endless difference and constant upheaval on a mass scale. The problems of design must be solved precisely because they suggest a visual culture that systematically, collectively, necessarily reasserts a framework, a set of standards, *within* mass culture, and within which variety and visual intelligence can be usefully applied and understood. What decides all these debates, it seems, does not lie within the overdetermined and ideological powers and visual products of the discourse itself, but rather is contingent on the effect of the tools and designs we develop within the practice of mass reproduction.

For this reason, design appears as an answer to the exhaustion of the idea of the avant-garde, whose afterthoughts of the future T.J. Clark has begun to regard with suspicion (as suggested by the epigraph above). Rosalind Krauss's well-known essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition" posed this question in terms of the problem of originality. She asks, "Are we not ... clinging to a culture of originals which has no place among the reproductive medi[a]?"²¹ In its place, a "discourse of originality" emerges, but "from a ground of repetition and recurrence."²² Interestingly, she notes that the unintended consequences of repetition and mimesis occur especially through the figure of the grid, a central tool of graphic design and now the very basis of digital photography, a grid of sampled pixels as well. In its reductionism, anti-humanism, and mute toughness as a structure, the regular grid of Krauss's imaginary is "a purely cultural object," which innately refuses language, reference, hierarchy, narrative, and within which the originality of work, its status as a marker of avant-garde intent, comes about through *repetition*, compelled to repeat and rehearse single, arbitrary forms "bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy."²³

Krauss's goal in working through this properly paradoxical logic is to expose "originality" as a fiction of modernism, with its prejudice against the inherent deceptions of mimesis, which is itself a modern idea as old as Plato's cave. What Krauss is arguing for is a postmodern visual logic, but the structure of the argument takes the form this paper has been working through: a regular, structured formal logic drawn from the past, which is revived to displace and supersede later, contemporary forms. "What would it look like not to repress the concept of the copy?" she summarizes rhetorically, "What would it look like to produce a work that acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals?"²⁴ She nominates photography, from Rauschenberg to Sherrie Levine, and "pictures," or the practice of reproducing images without producing them. But, as I suggest, would it not more precisely look like, exactly like, contemporary graphic design?

21. Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," *October* 18 (Autumn, 1981), 52.

22. *Ibid.*, 54.

23. *Ibid.*, 56.

24. *Ibid.*, 64.

Of course, this conclusion is not an option for Krauss, who is deeply invested in the premise that commercial products and mass reproduction are monstrous, necessarily and utterly lacking in critical power. But what could be more *deterministic*, in fact, than to erase—or, in Krauss's term, "repress"—visual forms because of their economic origin, as if their simply practical or even popular functions within a particular mode of production precluded any use-value or positive effect they might create?

Critique After Adorno

This deep opposition to the culture of mass reproduction is perhaps most often linked to the tradition, dubbed Western Marxism, flowing from Lukács and Gramsci through Sartre, Althusser, Marcuse, and especially Adorno. If this line of thought is seen at all today, it is at least partly used as an example of a post-Marxism, to replace the determinism of certain narrow readings of Marx, with their imputed reduction of cultural forms to a mere reflection of the productive or economic base. But Theodor Adorno was a subtler Marxist than that; he had a precisely worked out sense of the totality of the present system, dialectical in its contradictions and irreducible to a choice between simple either/or binaries. He was looking for work of genuine critical power, and refused to settle for false idols. But we fail to seriously analyze virtually the entirety of our contemporary culture if we limit our analysis to work that is intentionally or immanently difficult and challenging, products of wilful variety and negation. These works reward careful study, but there are more powerful critiques of our culture than avant-garde practices, and they rely far less on scholarly reception within carefully protected borders. The avant-garde stands in the place of critique, i.e., it mimes or performs opposition, but its idealism cannot encompass the entirety of critical visual practice and the changing reality that we are forced to negotiate given the recombinant cultural DNA of our present. Critique is the natural—if also entirely artificial and largely unconscious—condition of mass visual culture, visual practices broadly held and built on mimesis, unconcerned with any need to claim pure originality or autonomy, or other impossible ideals that are also the grounds for so much deliberate ignorance of our own visual culture.

If a critical or oppositional space seems to have been lost, it will not be relocated in unattainably sublime objects. The avant-garde mechanisms by which visual culture could once claim to function as an antidote to this onrushing tide centered on various values, including the ideal of uniqueness and originality we have been examining; the difficulty and shock of visual forms that deliberately reversed existing or accepted practice; and jarringly unfamiliar images that asserted the autonomy of a specifically negative artistic logic. If the image or object could arouse genuine anger and condemnation on a wider, social scale, or have an effect outside its own distinct realm, so much the better; but that was incidental. The definition of meaningfully critical visual culture is never simply its usefulness in delivering an oppositional message, even if certain avant-garde practices consciously sought political leverage.

Design has shared the fate of propaganda, direct messages which do not include disruptive formal invention as their primary intent, and has remained outside the boundaries of critical culture. In this sense, graphic design can

flirt with radical visual form, and indeed histories of graphics almost unanimously focus on those unusual or original works that went against prevailing norms.²⁵ However, it logically and necessarily follows from this that all such cultural means of resisting the dominant culture rest on the ability to distinguish qualities and hierarchies among images; that is, resistance is said to arise from critical visual distinctions we infer, never directly from any intended or implied messages inherent in the visual event. They are necessarily interpretations and—not incidentally—also *idealisms*. Critical theory's very strength is dependent not on the usefulness of any immanent material quality or original intention, but rather on how certain special things are received, and the perception that some objects transcend the very demands of necessity itself. If the critical act was literally functional, directly instrumental, or effective, would it not simply be another tool, a weapon, more messages—in other words, *design*?

The delicate play between criticality and necessity is central to *Late Marxism*, Fredric Jameson's study of Adorno. How are we to imagine or practice a radically new thought if the totality of capitalism, as Adorno predicted, renders moot the individual unconscious, and subversion, the aesthetic, and even nature itself?²⁶ Adorno understood that the relationships of exchange within which we live also form limits to what thought alone can change, that "society precedes the subject."²⁷ If philosophy, theory, and reason strive for wholeness, unity, and a systematic completeness, this also tends to make them voracious, even imperialist, Adorno maintained. Understanding this contradiction as a *necessity*, something dialectical and inescapable, only heightens the demand to break with the closure of identity and the "domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership."²⁸ Jameson here suggests this is indeed a paradox, a problem inherent in being critical of criticality, or systematically anti-system.

In dealing with these contradictions as a whole, working through both sides of our many *actual* paradoxes, seeing the impossibility of a simple choice between them, we need to be wary of any too-simple adoption of a clear, oppositional position. For instance, John Roberts takes up the challenge posed by several of Adorno's critics, including Jürgen Habermas, Peter Bürger, Andrew Bowie, and Jameson.²⁹ He suggests that, from very different starting points, they have all largely missed the *social content* in Adorno, whose stance was always dialectical, never simply taking one side of an imposed binary; for example, the uncritical acceptance of modernism for its difficulty, the purity of its media, or its social isolation in the claim of "high art." Adorno knew there was no outside to society (least of all in art), merely the survival of the *possibility* of different forms of social relations and cultural production. For Roberts, the avant-garde ideal (and following Adorno, *only* the ideal, not the celebration of any of its specific forms) was a struggle between use-value and exchange-value. Every bit as much as, or even more than any other commodity, art cannot escape the confirmation of its value as cultural capital within capitalist institutions. All production is inevitably, *necessarily* locked into an opposition with its own alienation, and the many contradictions of social reality. All labour, and not just creative labour, is driven to realize its unique, autonomous use-value, whether the variable capital involved (that is, the labourer herself) realizes it

25. There are exceptions, of course, notably histories that examine entire categories and functions of design using anonymous examples, such as Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society since 1750* (New York, 1986).

26. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism* (London, 1990), 5.

27. Theodor Adorno, quoted in Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 24.

28. *Ibid.*, 41.

29. John Roberts, "After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, Critique," *Historical Materialism* 7, 1 (2000): 221–39. For the record, Roberts identifies these approaches as Dialogic (Habermas), Brechtian (Bürger), Aesthetic (Bowie), and an Anti-Habermas Totality (Jameson).

consciously or not. Roberts contradicts the assertion that *only* newness or original form can resist subsumption under exchange-value. To take just one side of the binary between “high” and “low” culture “identifies the current historical limits of Adorno’s defence of autonomy.”³⁰

Despite its limits, Adorno’s struggle to locate the tools of critique retains an undeniable appeal today, however much our concepts and our visual culture may appear to be corrupted by mimicry, mimesis, by taboo, reproduction, and instrumentality, or (in Adorno’s own terms) the identity-logic of repetition and affinity. But design, as the art of technological, mass culture, argues that individual, conscious acts are possible *through* the very tools of a given system, and that significant difference must emerge *out of* the totality itself. Radical, original expressions assume the image of opposition to social domination, but instead of antidote, as Adorno insisted, they remain only a metaphor for that torn freedom. We produce and consume images within media that constitute the dreamworld itself, even if we have come to understand our present as always *both* dreamworld and catastrophe. We imagine our utopias through ideologies which, in all their forms (capitalist, liberal, socialist, fascist, communist), have so far lacked the social basis to resolve the contradictions Adorno so carefully described—between the individual and the social, the universal and the particular—that sustain all forms of dominance.³¹

Returning to Usefulness

In another context, T.J. Clark puts the end game of the avant-garde strategy rather more starkly: “a previous language and set of presuppositions for emancipation has run into the sand,” and no new languages or possibilities can emerge from our present “frozen politics, ruthless economy and enthusiasm (as always) for the latest dim gadget.”³² The “present debacle,” he argues, requires an admission of defeat (and here it seems he means both artistic and political). But declaring the end of a *specific* set of critical strategies, from the modernist avant-garde and the postmodern to the Leninist party, does not necessarily mean the end of critique itself. Like Benjamin, Clark suggests we jettison the epic mode, cease the re-imagination of a glorious future through radically original, perpetually youthful ideas of negative form (again, both artistic and political), and adopt the far less sanguine attitude of “grown-ups.” In recognition of the seventy-five years of devastation and “human smoke” from 1914 to 1989, we need to reject the triumphant attitude of “elated denunciation.” In coming to grips with a culture that follows no single logic and embodies “catastrophe in the strict sense,” he suggests working locally and through whatever limited means of reform are left. In other words, he makes a virtue of the new necessities, delimited by capital, ideological control, and even state violence, finding slow change through the potential and promise of repetition and reproduction on an accessible scale.

Also significant here are the views of Gail Day, who continues this line of questioning, looking for ways that critique might be immanent to our cultural present. Theory must incorporate the exigencies of objects, she suggests, from the mundane to the monstrous, while understanding their simultaneous, radical effects. It is simply too easy to imagine that the neo-liberal market and globalized exchange values have utterly repressed the play of use-values, or the

30. Ibid., 228.

31. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Possession of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA, 2000). See also <http://susanbuckmorss.info/constellation/the-city-as-dreamworld-and-catastrophe>.

32. Clark, “The Experience of Defeat,” 253 ff.

resistance of simple pleasures. Even the highest of aesthetic statements, she notes, is “fully embedded within the commodity and yet also endowed with mnemonic critical potential.”³³ The spectacle through which we understand our lives is not, however, false in itself, something that we can simply reject or outside of which we can stand. Day reviews a list of contemporary critics working in and through the Western Marxist tradition, from Buchloh and Foster through Jameson and Debord. She suggests that, from very different starting points, they re-enact an allegory of the Fall, “tumbling from materiality into spectralized abstraction,” whereby it follows that everything today is false, commodified, and wasted, without use-value or positive use. Use-values, she counters, have in fact massively *expanded*. This mass of newly useful things, even in the form of dim gadgets, seems as good a definition of the unintended effect of contemporary design as any, especially the relatively weightless and immaterial production of digital graphic design. Surely it is at least on par with the critical impact of the alphabet, or printing.

Within this critical tradition, arguments for and against design, in all its forms, ebb and flow, rise and fall, surge back and forth, a part of but also apart from the immense stream of mediated culture. Rick Poynor correctly insists that Critical Design must resist the kidnapping of design by business through the facile entrepreneurship of Design Thinking. But it also seems the playful examples he gives merely suggest making space for an avant-garde within design, and especially for interdisciplinary practices incorporating interior, industrial, and graphic design: Jürgen Bey, Martí Guixé, Dunne & Raby, Metahaven. Architect and activist Teddy Cruz notes that the “glamorous economy of recent years,” and its immense accumulation and concentration of wealth, has led to an outpouring of radical new building, “dream castles that would catapult these enclaves of wealth into global epicentres of urban development,” which he suggests “only perpetuated the exhausted recipes of an oil-hungry globalization.”³⁴ The role of the autonomous but activist designer and researcher is to find ways to embed design practice into local collaborations, “rethinking the very meaning of infrastructure, housing and density.” This is a process he sees well underway in, for example, major cities in Colombia and Brazil.

Conclusion

No doubt design will continue to be a central site for the negotiation of the very idea or possibility of critique. But in doing so, the once disruptive, now traditional and gently humanist categories that we might employ to evaluate and assess images—originality, authorial intention, stylistic development, symbol and sign, modernism and the avant-garde, to name a few—will barely be able to retain their leverage or explanatory authority amongst the terabytes and petabytes. Modernity remains above all a system of *incorporation*. We would do well to remember how, in this process, both positive and negative attitudes toward design have long since become part of a single mechanical logic of expansion, by which images and our ideas about them relentlessly repeat and reproduce, in unintended ways and to historically critical effect. ¶

33. Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (New York, 2011), 189.

34. Teddy Cruz, “Returning Duchamp’s Urinal to the Bathroom? On the Reconnection of Artistic Experimentation, Social Responsibility, and Institutional Transformation,” in *Design as Future Making*, ed. Susan Yelavich and Barbara Adams (London, 2014), Kindle location 1965 ff.