

The digital graphic design revolution of
the mid 1980s. Past Present and Future

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The mid 1980's heralded a huge shift in design across all disciplines, postmodernism had gone from being considered the work of self-indulgent students with no sense of unified style or rules (Moszkowicz, 2013, p. 382) and instead an exciting new way of designing and thinking about design. This new style was all about contradicting the norm and being less confined by genre, which led to a great amount of experimentation in this period (Beggs, 2012). Graphic design in the 1980's, therefore, is unapologetically in-your-face with "bold, neon colours, jagged typography, and hair raising styles" (Clark, 2021) that were meant to grab the viewer's attention. However, there was yet another change to come, this time in form of the Apple Macintosh, first released in 1984. This computer would revolutionise not only the computer industry, with its more affordable pricing and superior power, but also the graphic design industry. The Mac was able to display bitmapped graphics, with up to 72 dpi on a black and white screen (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.531) and, with the assistance of software like PostScript and PageMaker, made designing using a computer a reality for a mainstream audience. The invention of this software gave artists a quick and easy way of creating 3D images and manipulating colour, form, and layout (Clark, 2021) and heralded easier and more expansive typographic and photographic manipulation. This encouraged graphic designers to experiment and push the limits of the software to see just what they could achieve with this new software. Combined with postmodernism's distaste for the previous way of doing things, this meant that graphic designers soon started to abandon established rules and typefaces, mixing "font families, weights, and sizes to create a jumbled, spontaneous feel" (Clark, 2021). The development of this new technology and the popularity of postmodern meant that there was a lot of pushback from those who preferred the older, more traditional methods of graphic design and called this new design style "ugly"

and loaded with “special effects” (Poynor, 2003, p.149) but many designers were able to ignore these criticisms and create ground-breaking and influential work. This essay will discuss three such designers, and how they utilised the new technology available to them to create their work, as well as examining the progression of graphic design through the years and how the postmodern style of the mid 1980s came to be.

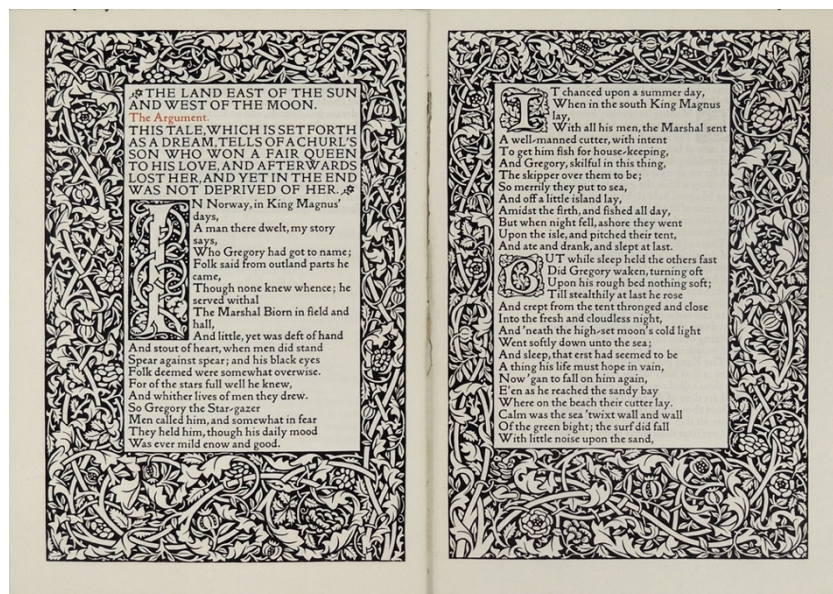


Fig.1- A spread from *The Earthly Paradise*, a collection of epic and romantic poems by William Morris.

This analysis of graphic design history starts in the late nineteenth century, where many artists, particularly in England, were growing tired of the drabness of design thanks to the country's rapid industrialization, stoking a “positive revaluation of handcraftsmanship and precapitalist forms of culture and society” (Obniski, 2008), which means that a more decorative and typographical style began to emerge once more as artists, architects and designers embraced this new movement. Unlike many of the other movements that will be discussed later, there was no certain style that was prevalent, since it pushed for social change and was critical of industrial labour, which stripped the individual's work of all

creativity (Obniski, 2008). Labelled The Arts and Crafts Movement, it focused on recapturing the old “spirit and quality of medieval craftsmanship” (Brittanica, 2021). William Morris was an influential graphic designer during this time thanks to his dedication to typeface design and printing. His early typefaces took heavy inspiration from medieval manuscripts such as his first typeface Golden, which was based on Venetian roman faces from the 15th century (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.181). His work on typefaces would reinvigorate an interest in typography leading to classical typefaces such as Garamond, Baskerville and Bodoni being refined and offered more widely for “hand and keyboard composition” leading into the 20th century (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.192)



Fig.2- A poster by Joost Schmidt for a Bauhaus exhibition in 1923.

With the rise in popularity of the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau, it wasn't long until a new design movement took root as a reaction to this decorative movement, this time

in Germany. In 1919, an architect by the name of Walter Gropius set up a design school called the Bauhaus intending to create household objects that was “ornament-free, functional and intended for mass production” (Weber, 2019, p.174). It also intended to blur the boundaries between craft disciplines, encouraging students to make use of multiple methods of creating design. Gropius had a scientific approach to design, believing that it should always serve a purpose, and that form should follow function (Yakovlev, 2021), a term that would come to encompass a lot of other modernist movements, serving as a mantra of sorts. As more and more people joined the Bauhaus and more people started teaching there a distinct set of principles started to emerge. One of the most important of these was minimalism, Bauhaus artists favoured geometric shapes and lines to the curves and ornaments of old, viewing them as unnecessary (Yakovlev, 2021). The minimalist approach meant that everything had to have a purpose, a staple of Bauhaus design therefore is only using a few colours, normally black and white or primary (Yakovlev, 2021). As its popularity grew, it began to become a “vessel in which diverse movements were melded into new design approaches” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.328) with an increased focus on designing for the future and embracing new technology. As a result, photography became more prevalent in graphic design, being used more and more as a tool for design and integrated with bold coloured typography. Despite this experimentation there was always a focus on a “clarity of communication without preconceived aesthetic notions was stressed” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.329). Instead, designers at the Bauhaus were encouraged to forget the past and embrace the future. The Bauhaus’ demise was sealed in the 1930’s, when the Nazi party took over and demanded that “cultural Bolsheviks” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.334) be removed from the school. This led to many of the artists fleeing

to America and neighbouring countries like Switzerland, spreading Bauhaus principles much further than they might have otherwise.



Fig.3- A poster by Josef Müller-Brockmann for the Tonhalle series.

The Swiss Style of graphic design took elements from Bauhaus and other popular art movements to try and create an International Typographic Style. It's a style characterised by asymmetrical design that follows a rigid grid structure and use of photography and text "that present visual information in a clear and factual manner" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.372). Swiss design was all about making sure that design was clear and could be understood, not simply admired, evident in the way it favoured photography over illustration (Budrick, 2020). During this time, sans-serif typefaces became a lot more popular since they were thought to "express the spirit of a more progressive age" (Meggs and

Purvis, 2012, p.372) and fit better into mathematical grids. Gaining traction in the 1950's, this style would remain popular for the next two decades.



Fig.4- The album cover for *God Save The Queen* by the Sex Pistols. Designed by Jamie Reed.

Because of Swiss Style and other modernist movements' dedication to strict grid-like systems and dismissal of past design styles, it was inevitable that a new movement would start up to challenge these principles. During the 1970's 'Corporate Style' had hit its peak, where "security and safety replaced risk as the dominant selling tool" (Poynor, 2003, p.25), leading to design feeling same-y and constrained. Fuelled by more diverse cultural change and activism, as well as the emergence of a "post-industrial society" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.460), postmodernism was born, challenging modern values and looking to the past for inspiration. Some postmodern graphic design would start to argue that form follows function wasn't quite the set-in-stone rule that many assumed. One such movement was the Punk movement in Britain during the 1970s, which effected graphic design in much the same way it did music, turning it into something "fast, messy, unpolished" (Budrick, 2019) and with a DIY feel, a far cry from Swiss designs, neat, purposeful design. Postmodernism

was becoming increasingly popular in the 1980's and so the introduction of the Mac created the perfect opportunity for the following three designers to leave their mark on graphic design history.

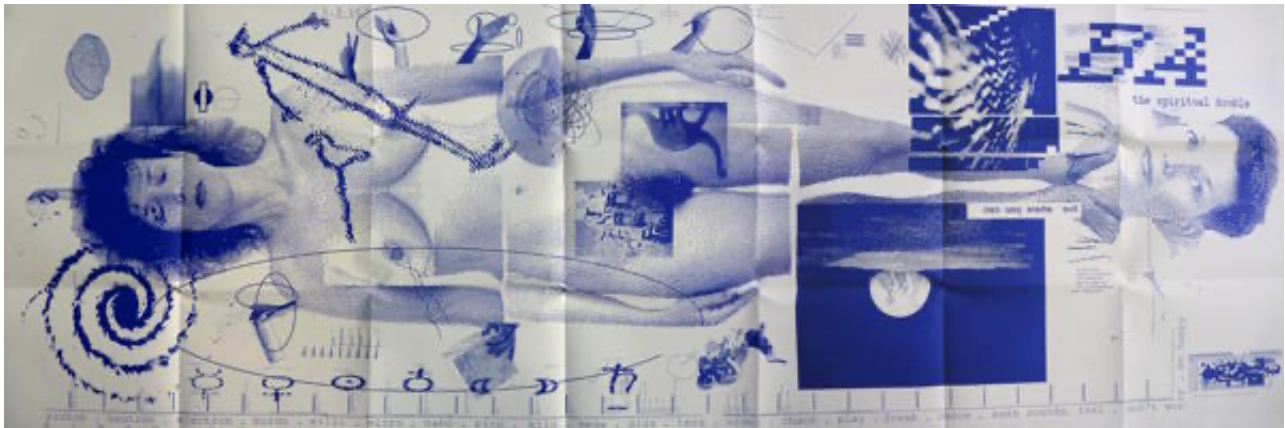


Fig.5- A spread by April Greiman for issue 133 of the *Design Quarterly* journal.

The first designer I will be discussing is April Greiman, who studied at the Basel Design School in Switzerland under Wolfgang Weingart, who was questioning the “settled notions about modern “Swiss” design supremacy” (Donohoe, 1989, p. 34), this influence is clear in her work, which would help to define the new wave and postmodern movements in graphic design at the time. Greiman was one of the first designers to truly put the new digital technology in the 1980's through its paces (Poynor, 2003, p.96), bringing to it her own distinctive style. Her work has an almost sci-fi or space feel to it, taking cues from Surrealism, Art Deco and ornamental patternmaking (Poynor, 2003, p.23). It most often makes use of multiple pieces of media, primarily photography, to create excessive, collage-like designs that, through her application of a strict sense of order, gives her work a sense of equilibrium (Donohoe, 1989, p.34). Greiman achieves depth in her typographic pages by use of overlapping forms and diagonal lines that imply both perspective and reverse perspective

(Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.468). She took a very experimental approach to computer design, describing it herself as a “conceptual magic slate” (Poynor, 2003, p.16) and understood that the design process had to be approached in a different way. The technology inspired her to think outside the box and wonder what she could achieve with these new tools. For example, to design one of her most famous pieces of work, issue 133 for design-journal *Design Quarterly* (Fig.5) she used MacDraw software to be able to “incorporate images captured from a video camera and generate typography, all composed within the same program” (Walker Art Center, 2021). The experimental nature of her work as well as it’s flaunting of technology naturally lead to criticism from more traditional designers, who believed that a poster should be stripped to its essentials and questioned whether her designs made sense (Poynor, 2003, p.99). Even her colleagues lambasted her work for its “reckless” mixing of media and “obsession with technology at the expense of design values” (Whiteson, 1988, p.6). However, rather than letting this put her down, she used it to articulate her ideas and improve her style (Whiteson, 1988, p.6).

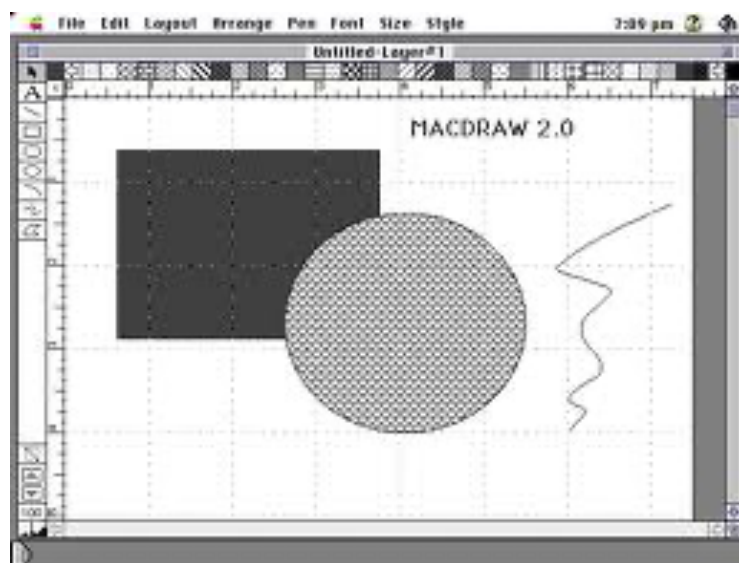


Fig.6- MacDraw, a vector-based drawing application released with the original Mac.

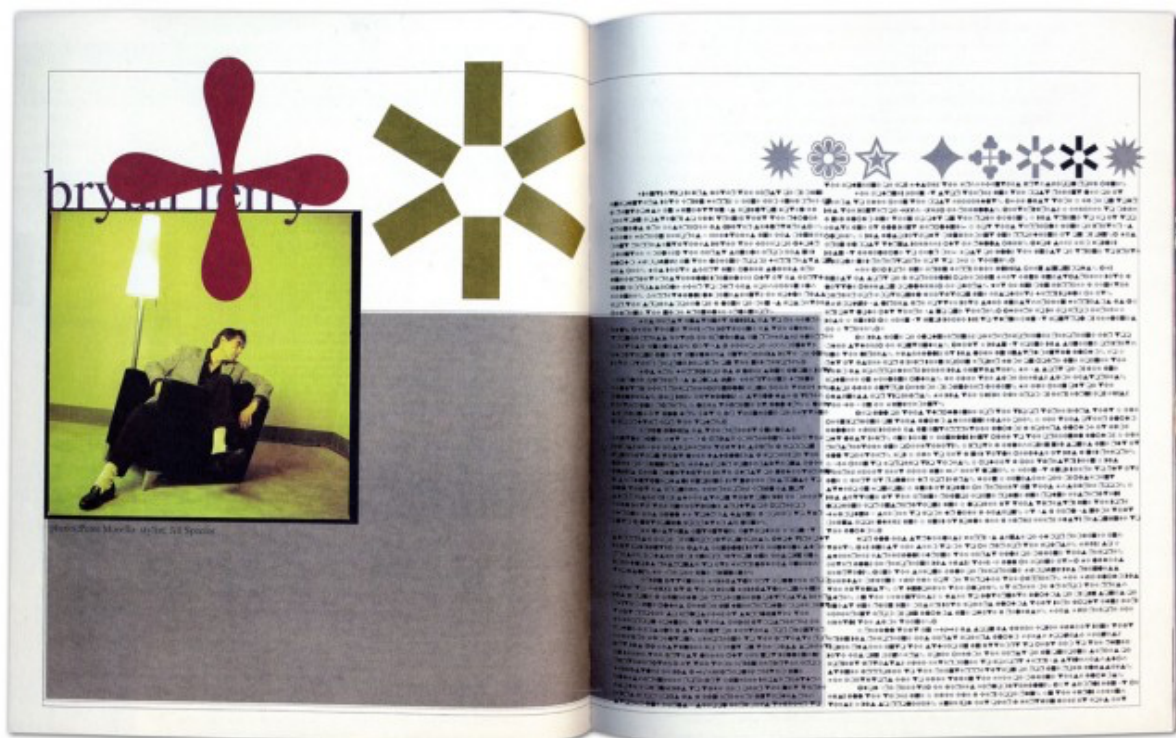


Fig.7- A spread by David Carson for *Ray Gun* magazine, typeset in Zapf Dingbats.

Before becoming an editorial designer in the 1980's, David Carson was a schoolteacher and professional surfer (Brittanica, 2021), despite his lack of experience in the field, Carson was about to make a scene in the graphic design industry that would cause fundamental change. Much to the dismay of other, more classically trained designers, Carson's work "eschewed grid formats, information hierarchy, and consistent layout of typographic patterns" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.535), arguing that the complexity of the contemporary world left grid systems and traditional typographic formatting feeling out of place (Poynor, 2003, p.62). The digital revolution in the 1980's coincided with the start of his graphic design career and allowed him much more freedom and ease when it came to manipulating artwork and trying different layouts (Blackwell, 1995, unpaginated). His approach to creating work usually involved generating design elements digitally, before preparing camera-ready art boards (Meggs and Purvis, 2012. p.535). Carson's desire to break the rules partially came from how

bored he had become with conventional design, believing that young people were much more likely to read something if it visually interested them, and that just because a design was legible, didn't mean it communicated (Blackwell, 1995, unpaginated). Carson's approach instead focused on bringing out the meaning of the words in the article. This meant reading it or looking at the title and the images and trying to interpret the meaning of the article through design. He argues that because of this approach, "every spread is different" and "ends up in a more interesting place than if I just applied formal design rules" (Carson, 1995, p.46). Carson stresses that his way of designing is very personal, going off what makes sense to him, he even admits that it is self-indulgent, but encourages all artists to work that way since "all the best work comes from self-indulgence". (Carson, 1995, p.46). Naturally his extremely experimental work drew criticism, with many feeling that he was "crossing the line between order and chaos" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p. 535-537). Despite this, his popularity with young people at the time cemented him as "a significant shaper of contemporary culture" (Poynor, 2003, p.62).

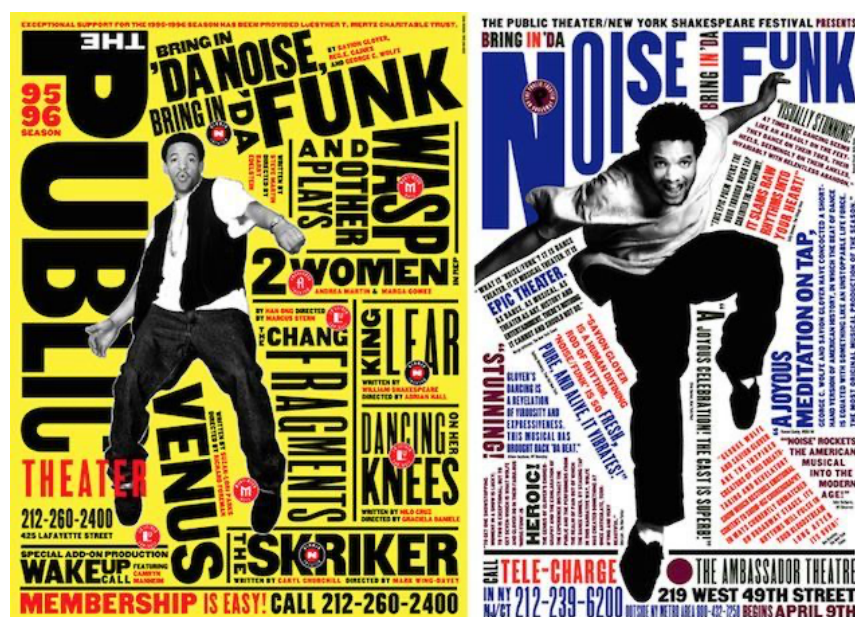


Fig.8- Examples of posters by Paula Scher for *The Public Theater* in New York.

Paula Scher's graphic design career began in the 70's, designing ads, posters and eventually record covers for CBS, before starting a company in collaboration with Terry Koppel in the 80s. The company would be hit by a recession at the end of the 80's and she was hired by Pentagram soon after (Gamolina, 2020). Scher is responsible for a number of iconic designs, such as her work with The Public Theatre in New York, that have left "an unmistakeable imprint on the visual symphony of New York and American popular culture" (Millman, 2007, p.41). Unlike many other designers at the time, Scher refused to get swept up completely by the possibilities of new technology, believing that in order to use it successfully, a designer must lead the technology rather than letting it lead them (Essmaker and Essmaker, 2013). Despite this more skeptical approach, she would take advantage of the ease at which typography could be manipulated to create some stunning and inspired designs. She often looked to the past for inspiration, with Art Deco and Russian constructivism being strong influences on her work, her typography especially. (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.475). Despite these influences, she made sure to build upon them by taking her own approach to her designs. In a bid to make it more engaging and commercially friendly, Scher references the harsh geometry of Russian constructivism but repurposes it with "a dense packing of forms in space with the weight and vigour of old wood-type posters" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.475). In an interview with *The Great Discontent* (Essmaker and Essmaker, 2013) she recalls one of the best pieces of advice she received, that being to "illustrate with type", a mantra that's clear through the experimental way she treats typography in her designs. Like the other designers mentioned in this essay, she received backlash from traditional designers "appalled to see the return of these letterforms and eccentric special organisations" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.476). Despite this, she stuck with her beliefs and remains a popular and versatile designer to this day.

In conclusion, I believe that the growing popularity of postmodernism, as well as the introduction of new technology such as the Macintosh created a perfect storm in which design would see fundamental changes in not just style and method but in approach and philosophy. I believe that the changes seen in that decade and the work of those artists who embraced a new way of doing things has had a noticeable impact even today, where different design styles all find their home in both commercial and non-commercial graphic design, it seems these changes have helped cultivate a mindset that all graphic design is valid. This mindset will help us in the future when 3D and motion graphics become more relevant, making it so that designers push the boundaries of this new frontier instead of dismissing it. The biggest lesson to be learned from this decade I believe is that change is inevitable, and the best designers are the ones who are able to adapt to this change while still bringing a personal touch to their work.

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