

Research in Context (ADAD5003/C)

Investigate the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s. Discuss the work of 3 designers who embraced this new technology to challenge the past and define the future.

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Word Count: 2682

Research in Context

Investigate the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s. Discuss the work of 3 designers who embraced this new technology to challenge the past and define the future.

The revolution of digital technology has heavily impacted the way that the creative industry operates, providing graphic designers with a greater range of tools for their craft and allowing people to break limitations that the pre digital era faced. But how did we get to this point? Living in a fast and progressively competitive society, we as people have had to learn to adapt and embrace change in all aspects of life.

However, the idea of altering the way we operate can be daunting as people choose to “either embrace or resist the change” (Risto Gladden, 2019, p.4). This is no different within the creative industry, with the advancements of digital technology, this provoked a major change in the way that graphic designers operated. During the 1980’s many designers had to learn to embrace the new technology even if they didn’t side with it, due to efficiency and the variety of work that it provided. Through this period of time, the world was becoming more eco aware and the introduction of digital formats saw industries “shift away from our dependence on physical materials as we operated more and more in the virtual world.” (Huppatz, 2020, p.51). This opened a new way for graphic designers to create their work, expanding the library of opportunity and giving more freedom to challenge the boundaries that once surrounded the industry. Within this essay I will explore how digital technologies revolutionised the graphic design industry in the 1980’s, while looking at the contrast with pre digital work, including some of the earliest forms of design. I will also look

the important technological advancements that took place during the change, as well as the designers who embraced this change and used it to sculpt the future of graphic design.

The term Graphic Design first originated in 1922, yet the idea and foundation of the subject carries a greater history. To gain a more mature understanding of how the 1980's revolution in Graphic design redefined the industry, it is important to gain a basis of what came before that and whether the industry had seen any similar transformations.

Before the digital era, all types of design were processed entirely using traditional tools and although the craftsmanship has changed over the decades, the reasoning behind why we design has always stayed the same. The earliest example of this comes from cave paintings roughly 38,000 BCE. Although we can't be sure as to why they were created, the repetition of similar paintings found "suggest that there was a shared understanding of their meaning." (Lawson, 2012, p.201). This demonstrates that visual communication has been prevalent throughout human history and design has always been part of our nature. Moving down the timeline to the 1800s - 1900s, one great example of craftsmanship in design is by William Morris, (1834-1896) who was a British artist and writer. This designer made great contributions to the Arts and Crafts world, which can be considered as the foundation for graphic design. William Morris's work used many techniques that have been implemented and viewed as modern design principles. The use of carved wooden blocks and dye to create patterns was a technique which William Morris predominantly used that progressed and found its way into graphic design, early

methods such as manual typesetting and letterpress are evidence of this. Another artform which played an important role in the transitional stages of design was Art Nouveau, a style which was popular between 1890 – 1910. This style shared similarities with that of William Morris, noted “as a precursor” (Lenning, 2013, p.5) to the Art Nouveau phase. Believed to be a new, optimistic, international style of Art, it was practiced across a large area of Europe. The art style used intricate detail and flowing lines throughout. Many countries had different interpretations of the style, yet they all did “attest to its association with the new” (Warren, 2017, p.3). This shows that Art Nouveau was believed to be the way forward and yet crumbled after 20 years. To think that a style of art which was heavily submerged within Europe, was no longer practiced after such a short period of time shows that a change within the creative world was due. I believe from observing these intricate and sophisticated art pieces, it gives a clearer representation of how severe the sudden transition from the late 1800s to the mid 1900s were for the design industry. Furthermore, I believe from looking at the collapse of the Art Nouveau phase, this will help provide a stronger overview for how revolutionary the successful change in the 1980’s was for graphic design.



Fig 1: Strawberry Thief (William Morris, 1883)

<https://wmgallery.org.uk/object/strawberry-thief/>



Fig 2: La Plume (Alphonse Mucha, 1897)

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/art-nouveau>

The drastic transition of art style within the pre-digital era of design is something to be mentioned. In the early 1920s a new modernist movement came around called Swiss design, which challenged past design narratives by simplifying what design was intended to be. Swiss design continued to gain popularity and is synonymous with the 1950s – 1960s. Swiss design is commonly described as “an international style that can be applied to a variety of media” (Fornari et al., 2021, p.4), and continues to be a staple in design culture today due to its minimalistic ethos. The basis of Swiss design helped it gain such popularity, due to the ease of reading that it provided, while still being aesthetically pleasing. This was emphasised by using “white space, plain letterforms and photographs” (Hollis, 2007, p.16) in replacement of intricate illustrations and colour schemes, which the world was so regulated to. The most popular feature within Swiss design is the grid structure, being heavily influenced by artist and designer Josef Müller-Brockmann. The grid is seen as “a flexible and resilient structure, a skeleton that moves in concert with the muscular mass of information.” (Lupton, 2010, p.151). This element of Swiss design provided a strong presence, which contrasted against the elegant fluidity of art styles that came before the modernist era, somewhat of a revolution at that time. (Fig: 3)

Another large influence in graphic design is The Bauhaus (1919-1933), which was an influential German art school. The Bauhaus shared a similar message and idea as of Swiss design which was “to challenge traditional hierarchies of the arts, and to place fine art, architecture, and design on equal footing” (Bergdoll and Dickerman, 2009, p.7). This shows how The Bauhaus was trying to develop what design really meant, and how it’s core values could be enhanced across all industries. I believe a great representation of this, is how The Bauhaus intended “to “unlearn” students and return them to a state of innocence” ((Lupton and J Abbott Miller, 1993, p.4). This

shows that during the beginning of the modernist movement, there were designers who already wanted to embrace change and completely redefine the future of design. (Fig: 4)

Finally, before I move onto the digital revolution of the 1980s, I will briefly cover both pre-digital modernism and post modernism as they played a role towards the digital era. Modernism is the idea of breaking away from the past and creating something fresh and new. Yet, the earliest stage of modernism “preferred economy and thus rejected complexity” (Heller and Ilić, 2011, p.35). Whereas the later stages in Modernism with designers like Paul Rand, his ideas were to take the foundations of modernism and yet “misunderstand the very spirit” (Henry Hongmin Kim and Steff Geissbühler, 2018, p.115). For the Modern style to evolve it required designers to resculpt and expand modernism from its initial bedrock principles, which enabled it to be an asset within mainstream advertising. On the other hand, Post Modernism was an answer for designers who believed Modernism was a saturated trend. Arriving around 1970, “Postmodernism sent shock waves through the design establishment as it challenged the order and clarity of modern design”, Further emphasising the impact that this style had. Postmodern design continued to gain popularity all the way to the digital era, and with the capabilities that digital design offered, it created many opportunities for this style to flourish. (Fig: 5)

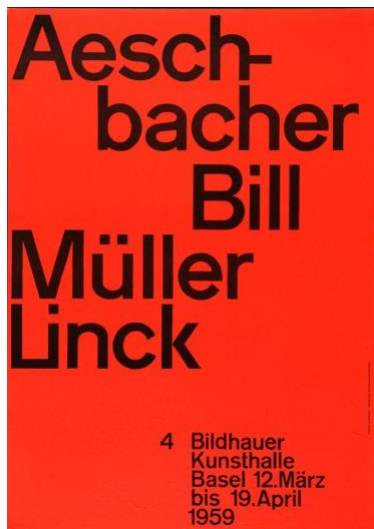


Fig 3: Poster for Kunsthalle Base (Armin Hofmann, 1959)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiss_Style_\(design\)#/media/File:1959 -
Kunsthalle Basel - 4 Bildhauer.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiss_Style_(design)#/media/File:1959_-_Kunsthalle_Basel_-_4_Bildhauer.jpg)



Fig 4: Poster for the Bauhausausstellung (Bauhaus, 1923)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus#/media/File:Joost Schmidt Bauhausausstellu
ng 1923.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus#/media/File:Joost_Schmidt_Bauhausausstellung_1923.jpg)



Fig 5: Jazzways Magazine (Paul Rand, 1946)

<https://www.paulrand.design/work/Jazzways.html>

Now we reach 1984 when the first Apple Macintosh was released, changing the course of Graphic Design forever. This revolutionary technology allowed designers to use tools and design processes which were impossible before. The introduction of digital design gave many graphic designers more freedom to break away from the boundaries once set, “new opportunities for multi- media and new avenues for audiences to access art” (Lopes, 2009, p.8). This ultimately enabled graphic designers to express their ideas in more ways than ever before, leading to some incredible art.

David Carson is one designer who revolutionised Graphic Design in the 1980's. Known for being one of the most influential designers of all time, David Carson retains a high status for his unique and trademark style of design. Being a professional surfer before finding graphic design, Carson's past endeavours evidently soaked into his grungy and chaotic style, it seems his past surroundings played a part in his free-spirited ethos. Furthermore, being a self-taught designer; Carson continued to disregard conventional graphic design principles. He strayed away from using grid structures and clean typefaces, and often used distorted, overlapping text and digitally manipulated images. I believe that Carson's negligence towards design principles helped display a sense of curiosity in which the digital revolution brought, while also challenging the past design narratives. An example of this is within (Fig: 6), Carson demonstrates his ability to break away from common design principles, fusing both digital and handmade elements to create a unique image for an exhibition. This image holds a sense of rarity and mystery, this is achieved by the various overlapping typefaces combined with a distorted image. The inclusion of hand drawn shapes further demonstrates how Carson used digital design to combine both elements and create illusive, seamless art. The overall look

serves the purpose, as the audience would have to engage to decipher what the interesting design is about.

Another reason as to why David Carson played a large part during the digital graphic design revolution, is because of his impact on the commercial world. Becoming art director in the 1990's for Ray Gun, which was an American rock-and-roll magazine, allowed Carson to push his visionary designs in a direction which would resonate with the audience. This was eye opening as "In the field of design, there is a long-standing debate regarding the interaction of aesthetic and functional properties of designed artifacts." (Agrawala, Li and Berthouzoz, 2011, p.62). In other words, it is difficult for design pieces that are abstract to make it on the front of commercial material, yet David Carson achieved this (Fig: 7). Moreover, Carson's style became so popular that he began to work with many notable brands. Gaining a "near-universal appeal" (Bierut, 2007, p.39) he solidified a new beginning for corporate design. Carson's Disregard for complying to the past, for example Swiss design, inspired a new attitude towards design genre limitations. He demonstrated the capabilities of digital tools, while inspiring designers to embrace change and experimentation.

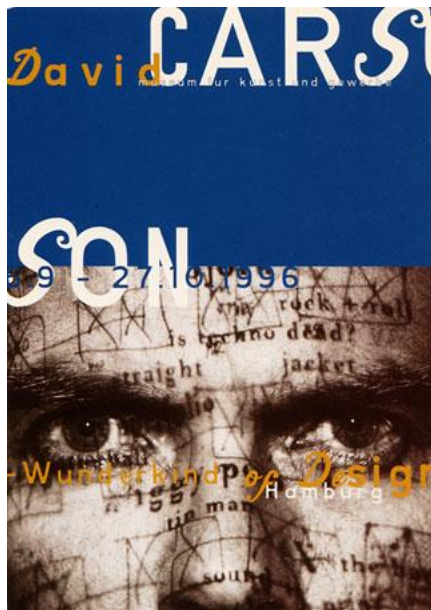


Fig 6: Hamburg Exhibition (David Carson, 2001)

<https://www.davidcarsondesign.com/t/2001/>

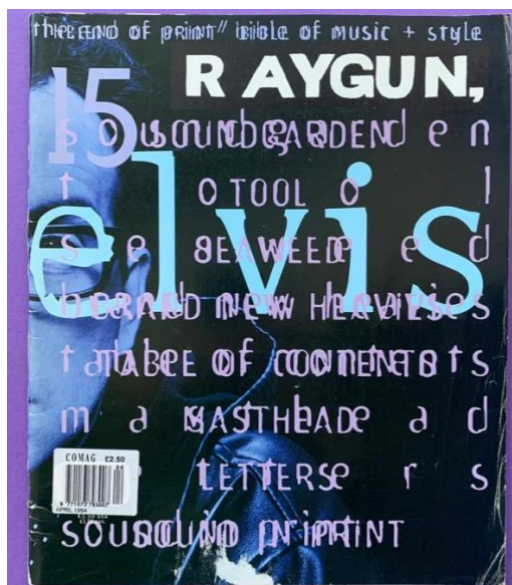


Fig 7: RAYGUN #15: Elvis Costello (David Carson, 1994)

<https://www.theprintarkive.co.uk/products/2538-raygun-david-carson?variant=42931709313201>

April Greiman is another massively influential designer, who was an important figure during the 1980's digital revolution. Being one of the first designers to embrace the new technology, Greiman saw the potential it had to be used for more than just a tool. The American designer's open mindedness at the time allowed for innovation that no one had thought of, creating a brand-new style that had only become available because of the digital advancements. Within a popular piece of work called *Does it Make Sense?* (Fig: 8), the designer established an impressive use of digital tools as she "treated the computer as a design object, not just a functional machine" (Leonard, Way and Frédérique Santune, 2020, p.12). Combining scanned photos with digital graphics and co-ordinated composition, Greiman created what has become a very popular, early piece of digital design. Initial influences from Swiss design are prevalent throughout Greiman's work, as she was a student in Basel during the 1970s. However, in later years, Greiman evidently pushed away for the modernist style by using experimental assets such as layering images and re scaling. There is still a sense of order and coherency within her 1980-1990s work, placing the designer's style between both modern and post-modern.

Moreover, April Greiman is also considered to be closely connected with the New Wave design style (Fig: 9). This was a transition away from Modernist design, and was constructed with bold colours, geometric shapes, asymmetric layouts and playful typefaces. The idea of this style was to break away from the constraints of historical parameters, which early Modernist design was built on. Yet, similarly to Greiman's other work, her New Wave designs maintain order due to her dynamic skill with hierarchy. The designer further progressed this style as, according to Heller (1998) Greiman would work "with ways to alter the two-dimensional space of the page and reimagine it as a more three- and four-dimensional continuum of time and

space". This further demonstrates how the designer pushed the capabilities of digital design to the max, pioneering the industry to a new future. As a whole, April Greiman's designs were very influential during the 1980's revolution. The combination of experimental compositions, complex digital graphics, and pure will to look past the traditional principles show that this designer embraced the change, while questioning the past.

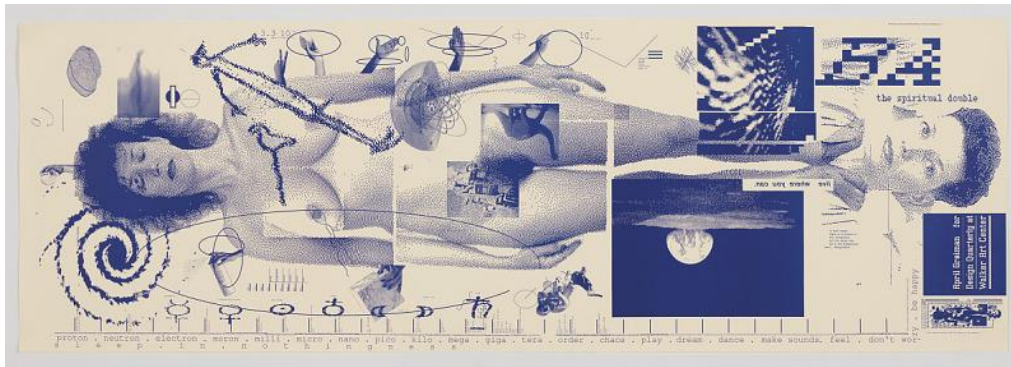


Fig 8: Does it Make Sense? (April Greiman, 1986)

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/172729>

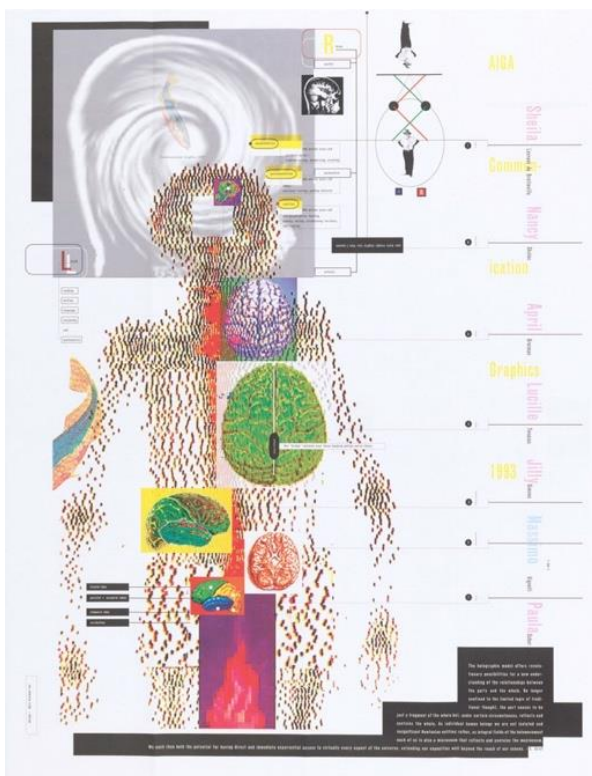


Fig 9: AIGA Exhibition Poster (April Greiman, 1993)

<https://readymag.com/designstories/april-greiman/timeline/>

Finally, I will be looking at the English graphic designer, Neville Brody. Being one of most accomplished typographers during the 1980s – 1990s, Brody has achieved a lot for graphic designers by gaining recognition in many industries. Similarly to the other designers mentioned, during the 1980s Neville Brody challenged design norms and re-established the meaning of typography. The introduction of digital design methods allowed Brody to break from the boundaries that the traditional typographic conventions faced. During his time as an art director for The Face magazine, Brody was able to showcase what benefits digital design brought by manipulating type and creating unconventional and progressive layouts. Brody rejected the idea that typography is merely an element of design, which only served purpose of being read. He intended for it to be an expression of imagery, a central piece of visual communication, which like a photograph, could convey narrative within designs. The result of his curiosity led to the work becoming more personal with the individual reader.

Within a cover that Brody made for The Face in 1986 (Fig: 10), he uses many new techniques to make the illusive design. The focus of the cover being the photograph, Neville Brody was still able to make impressive typography decisions. The use of various typefaces in bold colours complimented the chaotic central photograph. Brody also displayed the brand's typeface in a proud, tall font style, elaborating on the confidence that he had in his digital work. Another important design made by Brody, was the advertisement he made for Nike (Fig: 11). Within this design, Neville Brody uses a range of typographic experiments to bring energy to the overall look. By scaling and reshaping the typography, the message is "viewed and interpreted visually, heard and interpreted audibly" (Carter et al., 2014, p.112). The typography is structured so the words are not only read but also felt, it connotes emotion and

expression. Overall, these designs show how Neville Brody used digital design to create impressive and unique work, challenging past narratives, while introducing the commercial world to what the future of graphic design was capable of.

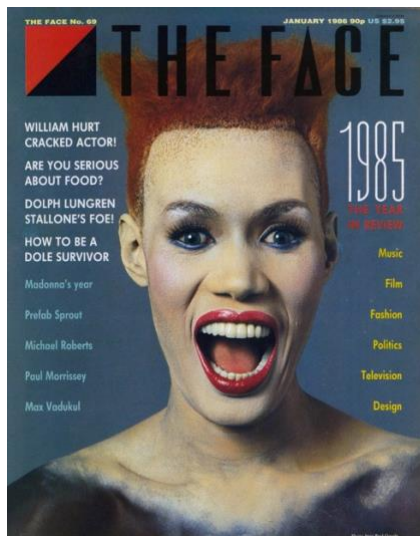


Fig 10: The Face Magazine Cover (Neville Brody, 1986)

<https://magazeum.co/content/neville-brody>

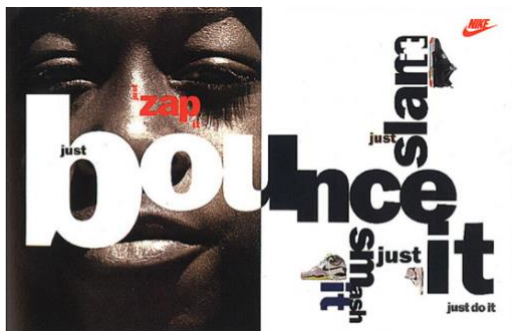


Fig 11: Just Bounce It: Nike Advert (Neville Brody, 1988)

<https://www.johnsonbanks.co.uk/news/neville-brody-fifteen-years-later>

In conclusion, I believe this essay has thoroughly investigated the 1980s digital revolution in graphic design. By looking at some of the earliest forms of art, as well as early graphic design styles, it helped give a clearer understanding as to how the design innovators questioned the past and sculpted a future for graphic design. By investigating what each individual designer did to embrace the change in the industry, we were able to gain a greater understanding as to how we can use the same philosophy in the future. Change is certain in life; it is how we react to the situation that will alter our fortune. These designers took the leap and ultimately changed graphic design forever.

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Figures

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Fig 2: Mucha, A. (1897), La Plume, Available at:

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Fig 3: Hofmann, A. (1959), Poster for Kunsthalle Base, Available at:

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Fig 4: Bauhaus. (1923), Poster for the Bauhausausstellung, Available at:

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Fig 5: Rand, P. (1946), Jazzways Magazine, Available at:

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Fig 6: Carson, D. (2001), Hamburg Exhibition, Available at:

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