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

What if I told you that I had something which could completely change the graphic design world that you know? well during the mid 1980's exactly that happened, a technological revolution that questioned the past and pathed a new future for graphic design, the invention of the Macintosh computer. At first many designers didn't accept this new technology, it went against everything they had learnt, all the traditional processes they knew were becoming obsolete, in the documentary *graphics means* there are number of designers who worked through many different processes from letterpress in the early 20th century to phototypesetter and cold type in the mid to late 20th century. These designers all mentioned how sceptical everyone was when this new technology was introduced in the mid 1980s which showed its human nature to be afraid of change, humans "face resistance from their primitive mind when they try to change their ways of living, their ways of thinking" (Pinglikar, P.19, 2016). So, some designers sunk, and some designers swam when it came to this new technology. In the 2016 graphic design documentary *Graphic Means* it mentions initially computer only geeks used the Mac however "in spite of strong initial resistance by many designers, this new technology improved rapidly, inviting widespread acceptance" (P. Meggs 2012) In this essay I'm going to explore how particular designers were impacted by the technological advancements of the mid 1980s and how they used it to their advantage to challenge the past and define the future.

To understand the impact of the Macintosh computer, we need to understand some key moments in graphic design history leading up to that point. I think it's important to consider all

the factors which impact designers and influence their creations. Graphic design is on the frontline of communicating with the masses, therefore audience sensibility plays a big part Graphic design, and its audience are always influencing each other in different ways. I think the t factors which have initiated the biggest change are political, economic and technological. Graphic Design changes as the state of the world fluctuates which makes for a flexible history. I will explore a brief timeline leading up to the 1980s mainly focusing on key events.

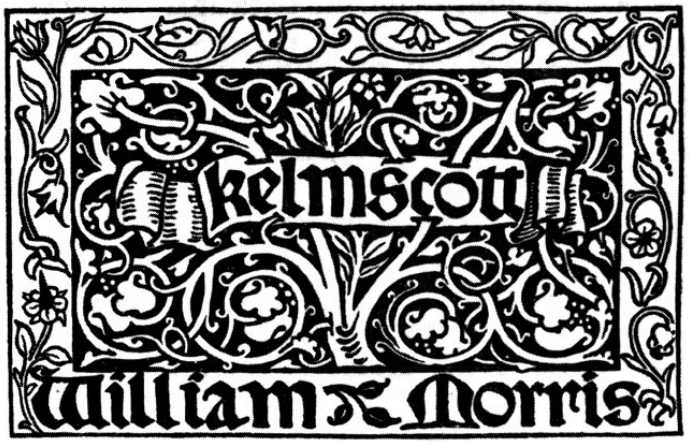

Figure 1. Morris, W. (1891) *Kelmscott Press*

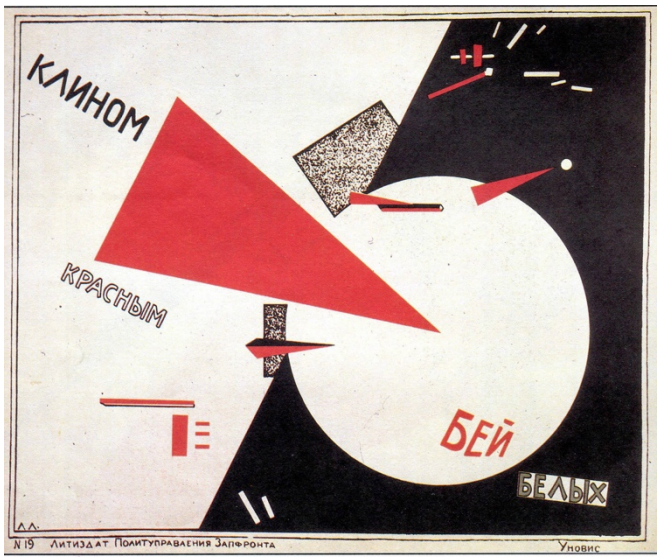

Figure 2. Lissitzsky, E. (1919) *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*

Figure 1 is a piece by William Morris as part of the Art Nouveau movement in the late 18th century. Art Nouveau was characterized by delicate floral patterns that required skilled craftsmanship, Morris believed in keeping craftsmanship alive even thought the industrial revolution was in full swing. By WW1 Art Nouveau disappeared as “the political and nationalist forces thrusting Europe toward global war having made its joie de vie irrelevant” (Meggs p.229

2012) This gave artists the need to communicate different messages. This led to the birth of constructivism and suprematism (1913) a reaction to rising tensions in Russia. These movements offered a new approach “one which sought to abolish the traditional artistic concern with composition and replace it with construction” (theArtstory) This was a major change which influenced the next generation of designers, placing function over form hence basic shapes to communicate messages (figure 2).

Figure 3. Ruder, E (1967) *Book cover*

Another key movement which shaped design history was the birth of Swiss Design also known as the international typographic style. Swiss design emerged in the 1940's, with great impact, right through to the 80s and is still has much power and influence on visual communication today. Like constructivism, "The social philosophy behind this design movement rejects

personal expression and eccentric solutions and embraces a scientific approach to design" (Tafoya 2011). Emil Ruder showcased this philosophy by experimenting with type form to be the form itself, discarding expression and emotion. He was one of the first to do this (Figure 3). Other designers such as Joseph Muller Brockman and Armin Hoffman were also catalysts in the swiss design movement who also created some popular works which further displayed its social philosophy. The typeface, Helvetica was created by Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffman, this was a huge thing to come out of Swiss design, one of the most widely used fonts today.

Figure 4. Rand, P (1950) *No Way Out*

Another important moment was During WW2 in Germany the Nazi party created an exhibition named 'Entratete Kunst' (degenerate art) In which they stole work from artists and displayed

them in a nationwide exhibition shaming the art, a warning to the artists and anyone who liked their work. This led to art schools and galleries closing down, also artists fleeing Europe. Because of this event, German and Swiss designers fled to the USA. American designer Paul Rand (figure 5) was taught by Swiss designer, Herbert Matter, who fled Europe during the war. This led to the integration of Swiss design in corporate America, resulting in modernist design characterized by elements of Swiss design.

Figure 5. Scher, P (1994) *The Public theatre*

Figure 6. Reid, J (1977) *Sex Pistols, God Save the Queen*

Leading up to the introduction of the Macintosh was the post-modern era of graphic design. This was an important era. Postmodernism resulted in many styles, it was “made up of a mixture of styles, with no formal characteristics” (Beggs 2012) Postmodernism questioned all design and arts leading up to that point and inspired others to question everything. Postmodernism wasn’t just a design movement “the cultural norms of Western Society were being scrutinized, and the authority of traditional institutions was being questioned” (Meggs 2011). Graphic designer, Paula Scher (fig) started designing in the 70s and at the time there was “a predominance of the international style (Swiss deign) in which the ultimate goal was to be clean. So, I was looking for ways of designing typography that could be more expressive that were not about creating order but creating spirit” (Scher) We can see by looking at fig & fig that the previous notion of functionality over expression had been abandoned. This new postmodernism world didn’t have any rules apart from to question the rules and think subjectively. This changed would’ve challenged many designers who weren’t bought up in this era. Jamie Reid’s work (fig) for *The Sex Pistols* is politically charged, he was an anarchist with controversial beliefs and expressed himself freely through his work as that was the climate postmodernism created. Parts of the movement is characterized by the punk aesthetic. “In the 1970s and early 1980s, graphic artists associated with punk rock mounted as sustained assault on professional designs’ orderly methods and polite conventions” (Poyner P.38, 2003) however in the nature of postmodernism “it becomes increasingly difficult to defend the idea that there are right ways and wrong ways of going about visual communication” (Poyner P.38 2003) It was this freedom of expression and divisions of genres that opened the door of graphic design to wider society and more people who had no background in graphics were getting involved.

Figure 7. Resinger, D (1984) *Original Macintosh 128k*

The period of when the mac was introduced in 1984 and onwards was known as the digital revolution. The release of the mac in 1984 did not suddenly alter the graphic design world in a very short space of time however it did mark the beginning of a significant change. Technology in this period of time had been enhancing at a fast pace, evolving in many areas that improved human life and activity, not just design. By the 1990s the Macintosh was more widespread to the public, they would be more common in schools, universities and places of work. Adobe photoshop had been invented in 1990 which was a huge leap forward from the original apple software. Before the digital revolution the discipline of design relied heavily on craftmanship, "layouts were drawn by hand in order to visualize a design; type was specified and ordered from a typesetter; and type proofs and photostat of images were assembled in position on heavy paper or board for photographic reproduction and platemaking" (Britannica) This was now coming a thing of the past in the late 20th century, it's understandable that people were

sceptical about the digital revolution after devoting so much time to learning these skills. Although many resisted the digital revolution during its preface and criticized designers who were trying it out, there were also many who embraced the new tools and features that came with it, perceiving digital technology as broad horizons with endless opportunity. “Colour, texture, images and typography could be stretched, bent made transparent, layered, and combined in unprecedented ways” (Meggs 2016) opening up a world of possibility for visuals which have never been achieved before, a catalyst for the design process.

One designer who found herself waking up to her friend dragging her down to the computer store the day the Macintosh was released was April Greiman, she bought one the day it was released. April Greiman was a pioneer of the digital revolution; she was “recognised as one of the first designers to embrace computer technology as a design tool” (Barndt P. 1 2014) As seen in figure this was an early exploration for Greiman using the new Macintosh computer, she experimented with “bitmapped fonts, the layering and overlapping of computer-screen information, the synthesis of video and print, and the tactile patterns and shapes made possible by the new technology” (Meggs 2011) Prior to the introduction of the Mac, Greiman had studied in Switzerland in the 70s under the supervision of designers such as Wolfgang Wiengart and Armin Hofmann where she gained an interest for the swiss style. “Coming from the swiss training, learning about grids, learning the discipline of design, the mac was a great liberator” (Greiman 2016) she felt like this new technology offered new ways of thinking as the computer had a mind of its own. Anna Gerber’s book *All Messed Up*, includes comments from Greiman about encouraging accidents and unpredictability, by using technology “that you aren’t familiar

with or comfortable with, and have a go at it with no end in mind" (Greiman 2004) "technology definitely encourages accidents" (Greiman 2004) I think that this mindset parts Greiman out from other designers, her childlike sense of wonder which initiates action and experimentation has enabled to face this new change head on and thrive from it, making her one of the most successful designers in the world. Her attitude to work is well suited to this, at the time, new postmodern and digital revolution world of unpredictability where innovation and exploration is key. It is evident that she has challenged her understanding of the previous movement, swiss style, by discarding the philosophy that design should purely be functional and informative. This can be seen in figure there is a lot on the page which serves no purpose, however there are similarities to Swiss design in the text layout. By adopting a post modernistic approach and embracing digital technology combined with her background in Swiss design the outcome of her work is distinctive and definitive of the future.

Figure 8. Grieman, A. (1986) *LAICA Fashion Show + Clothing Sale*

Like April Greiman another 2 designers who acquired an Apple Macintosh as soon as they were available in 1984 was Rudy VanderLans and Zuzzana Licko they “set about experimenting enthusiastically with the tools” (Poyner P.96 2003) Vanderlans worked alongside his wife Zuzzana Licko and together as a team they made some groundbreaking changes in the magazine publishing and world in the mid 1980s. Their work would go on to be influential to this day. In 1984 Vanderlans started designing, editing and publishing for *Emigre* magazine. Rudy was quick to embrace the new technology of 1984, thus making *Emigre* one of first magazines to use the Macintosh for publishing. *Emigre* were printing about seven thousand copies per issue, this gave Vanderlans a fertile breeding ground for experimentation “outraging

many design professionals while captivating those who embraced computer technology's sense of infinite possibility for reinvigorating and redefining graphic design" (Meggs P.533, 2012) Whilst Vanderlans was exploiting the mac for avant-garde magazine design, Licko applied her background in computer programming to create fonts on the Macintosh as she was "dissatisfied with the limited fonts available for the early Macintosh" (Meggs P.533, 2012) This was a shared feeling among the graphic design community and was part of the reason why people resisted the Macintosh and why it was highly criticized. Many didn't like the bitmapped fonts and that was enough of a reason for them to give up on the idea of the new mac. Unlike Greiman who embraced the bitmapped fonts as they were and used it to her advantage to create a new aesthetic, Licko saw a problem with these fonts and solved it. She created new low resolution fonts at first then as software developed higher resolution fonts, you can see in figure ()())(how they developed over time.

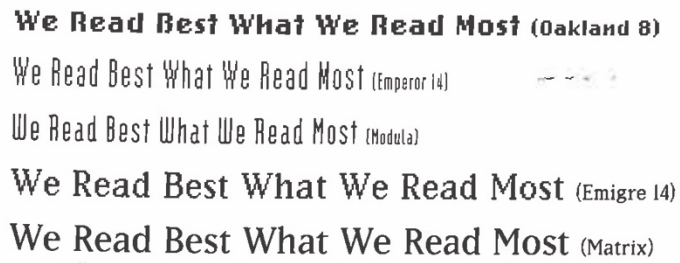

Figure 9. Licko, Z (1987) *Digital Typefaces*

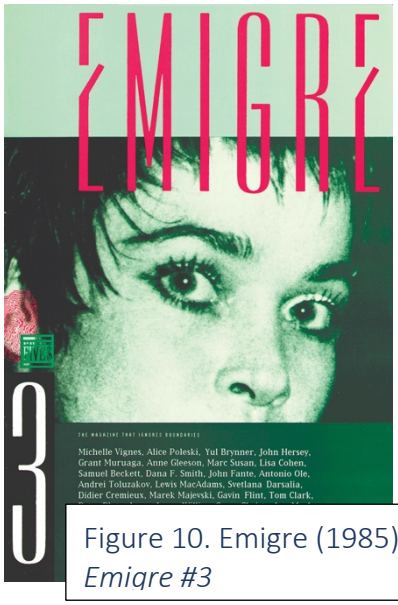

Figure 10. Emigre (1985) *Emigre #3*

Figure 11. Emigre (1992) *Emigre #23*

Emigre today is no longer a magazine they ran from 1984-2005 however after "exposure of the typeface in Emigre magazine resulted in demand for the fonts" (Emigre fonts) this initiated them to start their own type foundry, creating original and popular typefaces. This is all because they embraced the Macintosh and used it as a window of opportunity. Instead of resisting the problem of the bitmapped fonts that so many argued against, they stuck with the technology and found away around the problem. Just like Helvetica that came out of Swiss style took a long time to design so did this. They Challenged the physical craftmanship that Swiss design demands, Licko had shown there is a new age of craftmanship for type design the digital craftsman. This change also reminds me of the uprise of Suprematism and Constructivism in which avant-garde designers chose concept over what 'looked good' and challenged Art Nouveau. I see the same here with designers criticizing the Macintosh because the graphics don't 'look good' and is poor craftmanship, however there are a few pioneers who believe in the concept that this is the start of something big. *Plazma* magazine carried out an interview with Rudy Vanderlans, Rudy talked about how when they were using the Mac in its early stages they were called 'computer designers' "designers laughed at us for using it to do graphic design" (Vanderlans 2013) However they called themselves the 'the new primitives' the meaning of primitives: "being the first or earliest of the kind or in existence" (Dictionary.com)

which I think is an accurate analogy to their groundbreaking work. They have defined the future by leaving a legacy for the younger generation. Just like the internal combustion engines took over the steam engine in the industrial revolution another leap forward had been made in the digital revolution.

Greiman, Vanderlans and Licko are three pioneers among the few who embraced this new technology to challenge the past and define the future. Comparing Vanderlans, Greiman and Licko I would argue that they had changed the graphic design world in different ways. I think Vanderlans and Greiman perceived this new technology as an opportunity to experiment and in doing so influenced others in their field. I think Vanderlans work mainly changed the field of magazine publishing however Greiman's work influenced a graphic design in a broader sense and is viewed by many as an icon of the digital revolution whereas Licko and Vanderlans don't have that status, but their work is still vital. I think that Greiman has that iconic status as she thought about how graphic design could be perceived, she understood that design was changing, post modernism offered an equal playing field for all whether you were a designer or not. Greiman affected the bigger picture however Licko was devoted to the smaller details of the new digital technology. She thought how we can use it in a functional way and can we develop it further for the next generation, a very logical standpoint. They have all changed graphic design in different ways for the better through the vessel of technological advancement.

This investigation has inspired my own graphic design practice, it has taught me to be aware of the ever-changing climate of the world and to accept what's coming next as it may be full of opportunity. It's made me realise that being a graphic designer isn't only about perfecting your skills visually but it's about being in tune with the world and learning how to make a difference.

Figures

Figure 1 - Morris, W. (1891) *Kelmscott Press* [online]. Available at: https://modernistarchives.com/business/kelmscott-press (accessed: 6th December 2021)

Figure 2 - Lissitzsky, E. (1919) *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* [online]. Available at: https://smarthistory.org/suprematism-part-ii-el-lissitzky/ (accessed: 1st December 2021)

Figure 3 - Ruder, E (1967) *Book cover* [online]. Available at: http://www.designishistory.com/1940/emil-ruder/ (accessed: 7th December 2021)

Figure 4 - Rand, P (1950) *No Way Out* [online]. Available at: https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2000.556/ (accessed: 24th November 2021)

Figure 5 - Scher, P (1994) *The Public theatre* [online]. Available at: *https://99designs.co.uk/blog/famous-design/paula-scher-titan-of-postmodern-design/* (accessed: 27th November 2021)

Figure 6 - Reid, J (1977) *Sex Pistols, God Save the Queen* [online]. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/156133 (accessed: 27th November 2021)

Figure 7 - Resinger, D (1984) *Original Macintosh 128k* [online]. Available at: https://www.macrumors.com/2020/01/24/macintosh-36th-anniversary/ (accessed: 7th December 2021)

Figure 8 - Greiman, A. (1986) *LAICA Fashion Show + Clothing Sale* [online]. Available at: https://archives.artcenter.edu/h-m-c-t-agp-16 (accessed: 6th December 2021)

Figure 9 - Licko, Z (1987) *Digital Typefaces.* In Meggs, P. *Meggs' History of Graphic design* Fifth edition. 2012, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Figure 10 - Emigre (1985) *Emigre #3* [online]. Available at: https://www.emigre.com/Magazine/3 (accessed: 4th December 2021)

Figure 11 – Emigre (1992) *Emigre #23* [online]. Available at: https://www.emigre.com/Magazine/24 (accessed: 4th December 2021)

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