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The Politics of Design, National Branding, Power.

This essay focuses on three key concepts: the politics of design, national branding, and power. By exploring these topics, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and impact of design, to view design not merely as a decorative element but as a powerful force that shapes the cultural landscape.

I began my research with a general view of art. According to T.J. Clark (2025), art has long served as a reflection of society, not only showcasing social and political changes but often influencing them as well. The author states that art can illustrate a political situation, act as a tool of ideology, or serve as a driving force of protest.

Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808* encapsulates the political context of its time by depicting the horror and injustice of war during the Napoleonic invasions of Spain. Goya had a remarkable ability to "tell the truths of suffering without false heroics" (The Guardian, 2003). In one plate from his remarkable series of etchings, *The Disasters of War*, Goya wrote, "I saw it." This is contrasted by the title of another etching, which states, "One cannot look at this" (Hughes, 2003).

A vivid example of art as an ideological tool is Soviet Socialist Realism, which was strictly regulated and used art to shape the "ideal citizen" and reinforce state policy (Gunther, 2000). In contrast, the work of street artist Banksy demonstrates art's power as a form of protest. His pieces often criticise capitalism, social inequality, and militarism. Through wit and satire, he draws public attention to pressing issues (The Critic, 2020). Thus, art is never neutral; it is deeply interwoven with politics.

What about graphic design? Are there universal signs meant to be understood by everyone, neutral fonts and colours, or does politics inevitably form part of design as

well? Let us analyse how design changes according to its intended audience and purpose.

The concept of “the politics of design” is not limited just to designs for political campaigns or government agencies. It is far broader and sometimes not immediately apparent. Today, the influence of visual communication has grown significantly: it plays a key role not just at the city or national level but also easily spreads worldwide through the internet. People in every corner of the world interact with graphic design every day—when reading product packaging, looking at a subway map, or searching for a sign to direct them.

Ruben Pater, in his book *The Politics of Design*, explains that the meaning of visual symbols is not truly universal—the cultural, social, and political features of a specific society form it. Thus, the same graphic element can be interpreted differently, depending on a viewer’s experience, the associations they have with that symbol, and the cultural codes they are used to.

A notable example of two different interpretations appears in Taylor Swift’s marketing campaign logo for her 2015 world tour: “T.S. 1989,” which represents the singer’s initials and birth year. However, for people in China, those same letters and numbers took on a completely different meaning—one linked to the violent suppression of protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Although the tour did take place, merchandise featuring the logo was not allowed to be sold in China (CNN, 2015).

Beyond cultural variation in interpretation, there is also the practice of adapting design to specific social, cultural, or political norms. Consider the case of the IKEA catalogue for Saudi Arabia in 2010 (Figure 1), where the images of all women were removed. The

edited images did not show any signs that women had ever appeared in them. Ruben Pater (2016) highlights this difference between the Swedish version and the Saudi Arabian version in a chapter titled “Cover the Body,” illustrating the main point. This alteration demonstrates not only cultural differences and attitudes towards gender issues, but also the conscious or unconscious decision by designers and clients to align the final product with particular political or social norms. Interestingly, the same book refers to a similar method of ‘erasing’ unwanted political figures—individuals who had fallen from favour were removed from old photographs alongside Stalin or Kim Jong Un (Figure 2). This suggests that design can function as a powerful tool for creating and reshaping historical narratives, depending on who uses it and why.



Figure 1: The original version of the IKEA catalogue and the censored version circulated in Saudi Arabia (IKEA, 2010).



Figure 2: Photo editing (own image, 2025).

Hardt and Negri (2017) share this view, claiming that designers hold power because they partly control the messages being sent. Each design decision—even the choice to highlight something or omit it—carries a certain ideology. That is why every designer should be aware of the purpose behind their work. This is an ethical question faced by anyone working with visual language.

Therefore, design can never be entirely neutral, since it is bound by a particular goal, a client's requirements, or a designer's vision. Taking a responsible approach to any task and understanding its purpose can not only protect the designer from unwanted mistakes but also offer a chance to contribute to positive change in the world.

Another question addressed in this essay is how countries construct a desired image and how design assists in this process. In order to define the concept of a 'national

brand', I relied on the research of Keith Dinnie (2008), who examined the concept from different angles. He points out that it is a complex combination of visual aspects of a brand, such as the mark, colours, and fonts, together with emotional and historical aspects.

The concepts of national identity and national brand are related but have different meanings. As Dinnie emphasises, "National identity plays a key role in the branding of a country" (2008, p. 111). In other words, it is the nation's history, culture, food, people and commercial appeal that shape a nation's brand. Fan (2010) defines a national brand as the sum of all the perceptions of a nation in the world. From this, we can conclude that national identity is self-acceptance and the definition of values at the country level, and the national brand is the 'face' and image of the outside world.

According to Simon Anholt (2007), a leading authority on national identity management, a government that strengthens and develops a national brand can attract international investment, attract tourists and strengthen the country's status in the world. He also notes that every country has an image through actions and behaviour in the first place, not through direct marketing of the country. Anholt has launched the first analytical study that analyses how ordinary people perceive the brand images of countries - the Nation Brands Index. Investigating what makes some countries more attractive than others, he determined that people are driven by both objective and subjective reasons. There are exceptions, countries with a stable image that are not affected by changes and certain events, but for the image of most countries, the changes that take place in their country are essential. Ireland changed from an agricultural country in the 1960s to a 'Celtic Tiger' in the 1990s by promoting foreign direct investment. Japan has

demonstrated an export, design, technical and industrial miracle, changing attitudes towards its goods from mostly negative to respectful over the past 40 years. Now, certain goods are more expensive simply because they are perceived to be Japanese.

In this way, through technological progress or other achievements, the international community recognises the superiority of a particular industry rather than the country as a whole. Although I have not found a universal template for a nation's branding strategy, all the sources cited above argue that a whole range of actions and initiatives is required to build and promote a country's brand. Dinnie (2008) argues that a successful national brand must grow out of its people, reflecting the values of society and real assets.

Unique assets such as traditional clothing, prominent figures, literature, architecture, food, and landscapes are important components of a country's brand.

Another important element is the public's opinion of their own national brand. Each of the top 15 national brands puts itself at the top of the list in its self-rating. "If you don't believe in your own brand, it is unlikely that anyone else will" (Anholt, 2007, pp.56-58). Citizens united by a common language, traditions, symbols and narratives experience social cohesion and mutual solidarity (Fan, 2006). Thus, a national brand that reflects real values and is supported by citizens has a greater chance of success.

In general, we can summarise that a national brand is a coherent strategy for managing the image of a nation. For a deeper understanding, I will look at the formation (or rebuilding) of a national brand in the example of Poland.

After joining the European Union and two decades after the fall of communism, Poland faced the challenge of changing its international image. In many countries around the world, Poland was still not associated with anything in particular, and its reputation was

worse than it should have been after 25 years of transformation. This prompted the Polish Promotion Board to start building a new brand for the country. One of the main reasons for the rebranding was the desire to improve Poland's international image by demonstrating the 'dynamic changes' that have taken place in the country in recent decades (Jurkiewicz-Eckert, 2014).

The Polish government engaged a well-known British designer and brand strategy specialist, Wally Olins, to develop the brand. In 2003, Olins' consulting company *Saffron* launched the first phase of the national branding programme for Poland. The task of Olins' team was to create an effective national brand based on a recognisable reality and to try to coordinate the various existing promotional efforts. As a result of numerous studies and surveys, Olins discovered that the Polish national character has distinct ambiguities and contradictions, and these "creative tensions" became the basis for a unique brand idea (Olins, 2006).

The public was involved in the selection of the logo. Anyone could take part in a public online vote on Facebook (Surowiec and Kania-Lundholm, 2017). Figure 3 shows proposed design options.



Figure 3: Polska. Spring into new. You decide! (Facebook, 2014).



Figure 4: Polska nation-brand logo (online image, 2014).

Figure 4 shows the final design of the logo: "Polska. Spring into New". In 2014, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the restoration of democracy, the Polish government presented a unified national logo and slogan. The logo features a stylised red spring composed of geometric stripes, fitted into a schematic outline of Poland. This graphic symbol was created by Wally Olins' team as a visualisation of the concept of "creative tension" — the spring symbolises accumulated energy, dynamism, and the potential for forward movement within Polish society. The brand slogan, "POLSKA. Spring into New," accompanies the logo and encourages openness to change and new opportunities (Council for Promotion of Poland, 2014). The English word "spring" carries several meanings: a coil, season, and leap, alluding to the Polish spring of change. The visual minimalism of the logo makes it suitable both for governmental agencies and for business export purposes (Jurkiewicz-Eckert, 2014, p. 279).

The presentation of the new brand was accompanied by a video featuring the famous photographer Chris Niedenthal telling the success story of modern Poland, a country of skyscrapers, stadiums and talented young people (TV campaign promoting Poland, 2014).

A branding programme is much more than the implementation of a design. Olins (2006) foresaw the need to create big events that attract attention.

The solution involved Seasons of Polish Culture abroad, campaigns under the "Polska" brand, and the promotion of cinema, design, and gastronomy. This demonstrated the direction of priority development and various ways to tell the world about Poland, promoting the country through culture (Jurkiewicz-Eckert, 2014). According to Surowiec and Kania-Lundholm (2017), cultural approaches to nation branding can be effective at the national and global levels in the context of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

Poland undertook a large-scale and long-term national branding project, striving to find its modern identity and present itself to the world. This allowed Poland to use the brand as an intangible asset to achieve its foreign policy and economic goals.

Design is essential and plays a key role in many fields, but I want to explore its power and the significant impact a designer can achieve when wielding this tool.

Richard van der Laken (2015), founder of the annual *What Design Can Do* conference, states:

Every self-respecting designer should do something. [...] Demonstrate the power of design. Designers can do more than make things pretty. Design is more than perfume, aesthetics and trends.

Design can influence people's lives as much as politics or science. A striking example is the British campaign *AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance* in 1986. Let's look at how design shaped its shocking visual language, why it worked, what advantages and disadvantages it had, and what legacy it left. We will also compare it with modern initiatives to see how the message has changed.

At the height of the global AIDS epidemic, the UK government turned to design and advertising to convey a simple but vital message: ignorance kills. At the time, little was known about the disease, and there was no cure. The creative team of TBWA, the agency approached by the government, deliberately chose a 'shock therapy' approach to stop the spread of the virus. They deliberately decided to scare people so that they would pay attention to the problem. It is impossible to explain medical details in 40 seconds of TV advertising, so the video was supposed to impress the viewer so much that he or she would then carefully read the leaflet received in the mail (Jonze, 2017).

The video, titled 'Monolith', began with a volcanic explosion and a black monolith with the word 'AIDS' engraved on it. The modern typography emphasised that this was something new. This monolith was falling, turning into a tombstone with white lilies, a symbol of death. Figure 5 shows the final shot, with a close-up of a black-and-white brochure with the headline *AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance* (Jonze, 2017). Viewers were urged to read the leaflet. The visual elements were minimalistic but powerful: stark landscapes, gloomy colours, sharp editing and funeral motifs created an atmosphere of fear and imminent threat. The designers used an abstract threat symbol instead of depicting 'at-risk groups': the deadly disease threatened everyone, not just the 'small groups' (Mitchell, 2017).



Figure 5: Aids awareness campaign (online image, 2015).

According to a BBC Panorama article (2005), the video was recognisable, and a large proportion of viewers changed their behaviour after realising the risks. Statistics confirmed the success of the measures: the number of new AIDS cases in Britain fell by about a third in the late 1980s, and the level of other sexually transmitted diseases dropped to a decade-long low. Britain managed to avoid an explosive growth of the epidemic. The campaign's design saved many lives by getting people to practice safer sex and avoid risky behaviours.

But design with such power also came at a price. The image of the 'tombstone' reinforced the association 'AIDS = Death'. People who found out about their status felt doomed. Although it helped to stop the epidemic at the time, in the long run, the dark image of AIDS contributed to the stigmatisation of the disease (Placing Public, 2018).

British public opinion polls record an alarmingly high level of outdated perceptions about AIDS. In 2017, Terrence Higgins Trust relaunched its communication under the

slogan 'Can't Pass It On'. As shown in Figure 6, instead of tombstones, it features warm photos of real couples and a bright pink octagon with the message 'CAN'T PASS IT ON'. The goal is to dispel fear and spread the U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) formula. The new design has completely changed the emotional code; it does not intimidate everyone healthy, but supports those living with the virus, and at the same time enlightens others through real stories (THT, 2017).

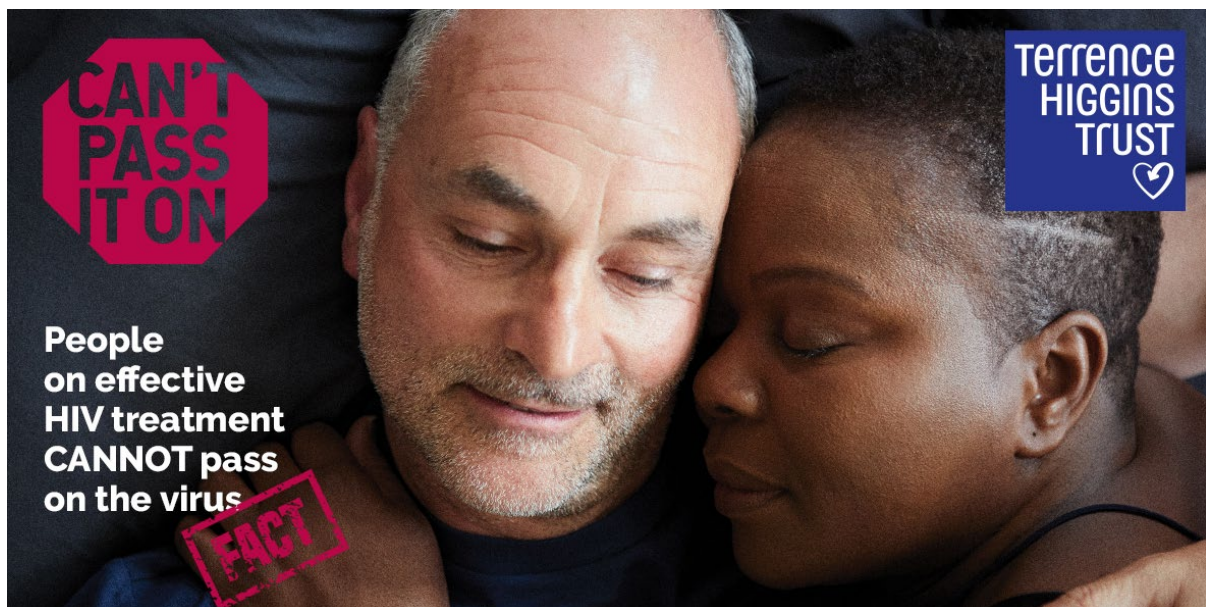


Figure 6: Can't Pass It On (online image, 2017).

The 1987 advert was accurate at the time and has undoubtedly saved countless lives. But today, incredible progress in AIDS treatment means you can live a long, healthy life with AIDS (THT, 2022). By responding to the needs of the present, design continues to change the world: from the stone tombstone of the past to the bright faces and hope of today. Both strategies demonstrate different facets of the same power. Design shapes our perception of illness and health, fear and hope - and ultimately, it can help save health and even life.

This example once again confirms the idea that was voiced at the beginning of this essay - design is a powerful tool that can not only reflect reality but also shape and change it. A designer can change the lives of individuals or even nations for the better.

The main thing is to remember responsibility, understand the purpose and strive to serve the public good. While exploring these concepts, I discovered many answers, but I also faced new questions. How can design shape social consciousness, strengthen national identity, and unite diverse groups within a society without creating exclusion?

My research question is: “How can design counterbalance globalisation by strengthening national identity without estranging any segment of the population?”

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