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‘World Disasters and the Impact of Graphic Design’

Humanity has been through many tragedies throughout the course of history, from natural such as Hurricane Katrina in the Southeast areas of the United States, August 2005, or human-caused disasters like World War 2 (WW2). These cataclysms not only affected the government and civilians, but it influenced artists, designers, and other creative mediums, whether directly or indirectly. Spanish artist, Pablo Picasso, illustrated this with his work *Guernica*, a painting inspired by a destroyed town from a bombing of April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War (Attlee, 2017, p.1), depicting the horrors.



Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso. *Guernica*, 1937. [Oil paint on canvas]. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Source: museoreinasofia.es

Graphic design has been no exception to the impacts of the world and as an opinion, shows the lives and ways of thinking of the earlier generation and how the public responded during that

era. This essay will be discussing how three chosen disasters has affected graphic design artists and their works, analysing and interpreting the feelings conveyed by the public of that time.

The chosen points of history for this essay are the attacks on the American World Trade Center on September 11th, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine in April 1986 and the start of the Russian Revolution of March 1917.

These were chosen out of interest as from a personal view, compared to, as for an example, WW1 and WW2, because it would be interesting to see how the specific disasters influenced their native country personally than single it to just the UK.

On September 11, 2001, in the United States, two planes had crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan, New York, the Pentagon in Arlington Virginia and in an empty field in the state of Pennsylvania, as a deliberate attack from an extremist terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, by hijacking four commercial airplanes. The towers collapsed and there were around 2,996 casualties as a result all together from the three states that had been attacked. (9/11 Memorial & Museum, 2023). The event shocked the whole of the USA, even going as far as the entire world, as it was the deadliest attack that struck the country. It wasn't even the first time the towers had been victims on an attack, as of February 1993, terrorists from the same group detonated a van under one of the towers, leading to six deaths and "thousands were injured" stated by the 9/11 Memorial & Museum (2023). To counter the chance of future airplane hijacking, the U.S government had spent a copious amount of money to transportation security for baggage check equipment, pat-downs and other methods (Brian Michael Jenkins

and Godges, 2011, p.153) as to avoid any more instances of plane hijacking. The discrimination of the Muslim community got worse after as well, in a summary report by Christopher Allen and Jørgen S. Nielsen (2002), those who identified as Muslim, “especially Muslim women” as the report states, and anyone who were perceived as Muslim or of Arabic decent were more likely targets of verbal harassment and hate. The report also says that Mosques and Islamic building were more susceptible to vandalism (p.7).

The tragedy affected the entertainment industry as well from games to movies, one example in the field of graphic design, the American satire magazine, Mad (Written as MAD), published by DC Comics and WarnerMedia, had to change issue #411's cover last minute as it had depicted their mascot jumping over a dead body in a marathon and issued an apology, explaining the whole ordeal of changing the cover so suddenly on the website (MAD Magazine, 2011) .

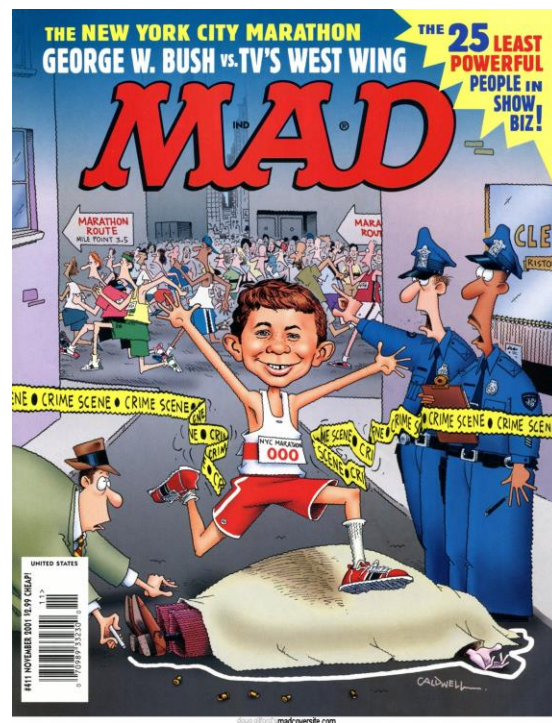


Fig. 2. Norman Mingo, Nadina Simon. MAD #411, 2001.

Source: madcoversite.com

New York, January 2002, a non-profit gallery space, *Exit Art*, created an exhibition called *Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks*. It displayed the turmoil that depicted what the public felt a year after the terrorist attack, with 2,443 pieces of work displayed across the gallery varying from paintings, photos, writings and graphic design. (Library of Congress, no. date.)



Fig. 3. Exit Art. *Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks*, 2002. [Photograph]. Exit Art, New York.

Source: loc.gov

One of the given pieces, *After the Screaming* by Marc Yankus, gives an intense insight into what seeing the tragedy. The words on the print reading “I felt nothing. It was like watching a movie.” (2001), really expresses the helplessness, the horror and fear of seeing the attack, to be unable to believe that it really is happening.

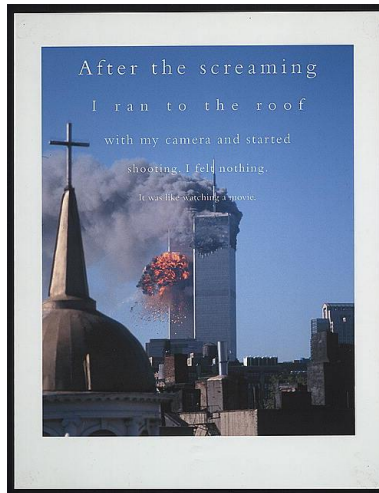


Fig. 4. Yankus, Marc. *After the Screaming...*, 2001. [Photograph print]. Exit Art, New York.

Source: loc.gov

During the reign of the Soviet Union, nuclear power was in development to be used as both a weapon and energy source for the Slavic countries that were under its rule. A nuclear power plant had been built in the village Chernobyl, Ukraine in 1977. Throughout, the Soviet Union didn't have proper know how powerful and deadly of such energy, but engineers were forced to make do with the knowledge they did have at the time under the orders of the USSR, even if was hastily made (Marcia Amidon Lusted, 2011, p.18). A couple of years later, the reactor would be inspected by professionals and noticed the lack of fireproofing, the manager of the Chernobyl project, Viktor Bryukhanov, explained that getting such resistant materials was difficult. The inspectors allowed this mistake, even common for these to happen at the time. (p. 21). April 26, the technicians were informed that the reactor's power was too low via printout, the supervisor and one of the engineers at the time, while Bryukhanov was away, Anatoly Dyatlov, had ordered that the work continue instead of shutting it down, causing the reactor to have weaker water-cooling

(p.37). Suddenly, the reactor's heat rapidly rose and to try and counteract it, Dyatlov had ordered all the control rods to be dumped into the core, but because of the weak water-cooling from the previous low reactor power, the water vaporized at once, and the reactor became 100 times more powerful, resulting in the infamous meltdown (p. 39).



Fig. 5. Gamma-Rapho. *Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station After the Explosion on April 26, 1986.* [Photograph].

Source: npr.org

The aftermath caused radiation that would spread about “150,000 square kilometres in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine”, according to an article by the International Atomic Energy Agency (2016). Firefighters and clean-up arrived at the scene but later died 3 months after due to the radioactive fallout. The town living near the explosion had a population of 49, 360 and the

residents had to evacuate within 36 hours, later 67,000 more people had to be evacuated in later months (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2016). People during that time of constant evacuation and the looming danger of radiation sickness, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety were reported and a general despair amongst the population that more people resorted to the use of alcohol, tobacco or sexual deeds (2005).

In the Summer of 2019, a creative company by the name of *Banda Design Agency* decided to have 20 graphic designers from their Ukrainian offices to visit the site and take a tour, taking inspiration from HBO's 2019 historical drama, *Chernobyl*, stated in an article by Julian Hayda (2021). Inspired by the tour, the company wanted to create a visual branding because "People associate Ukraine with war and corruption" and that "there is a lot to learn from the rebirth of Chernobyl", later stating there's more to it as written in the article. What further convinced the company was that, after leaving the site, they had visited a couple of shops on the side of the road selling related merch to the site, such as "glow-in-the-dark-condoms" and "canned air" from previously mentioned site, which an employee being quoted in the article "It was painful to see such disrespect". The Banda Agency rebranded Chernobyl as a black octagon that would gradually become nothing as the years went by, all the way to the year 2064.

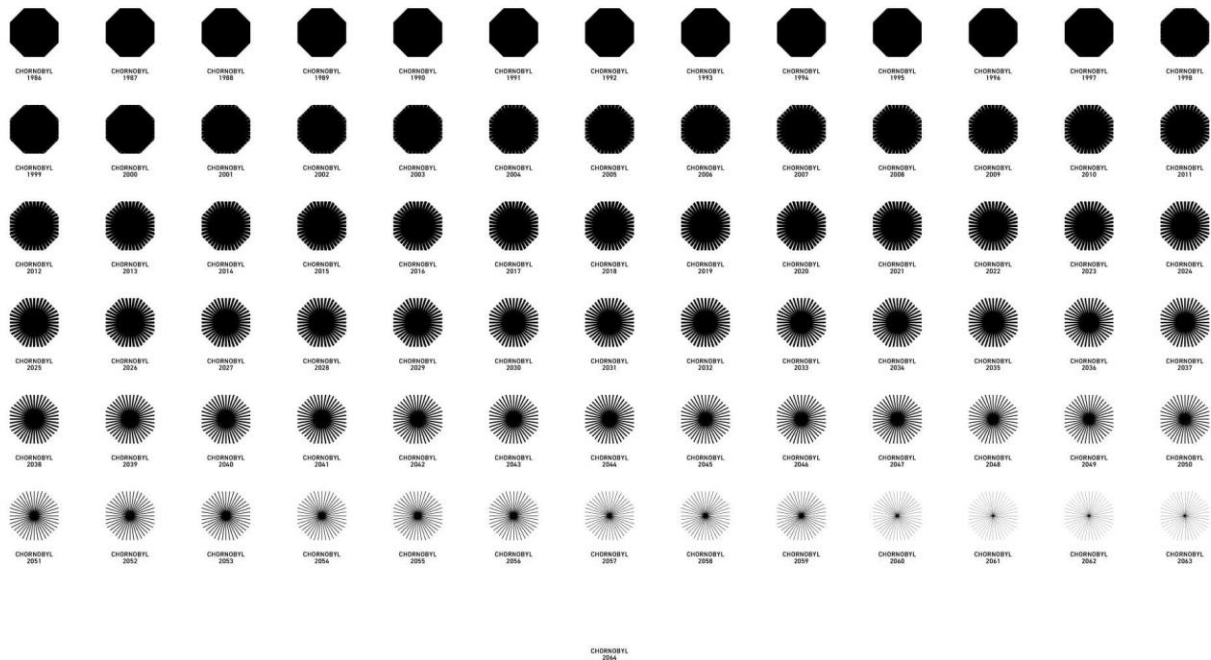


Fig. 6. Banda Design Agency. *Chernobyl Official Logo, 2022* [Graphic Print].

Source: thebulletin.org

Reasons why the black octagon shape was chosen to model after the nuclear reactor core from a top-down perspective. Later written, the agency explained the thought behind it, with the pure octagon representing the initial disaster, but as it progresses, pieces of it get removed until “The logo for 2064 is a white void.”, further describing that the logo is invisible and not gone, “like radiation” and that Chernobyl is “ever-present in the lives of those affected”. From a personal perspective, it really emphasis how much the event changed the country and should not be forgotten in an empowering way with its boldness. Once the Ukraine government were made aware of the company’s proposal of the logo, they accepted it. the deputy head of the State Agency on Exclusion Zone Management in the article, Maksym Shevchuk, hopes that the

logo change will change people's perspective, looking at it from a more hopeful perspective and to teach those who are uneducated about the subject, later stated in the article.

In the 1910s, Russia had become increasingly tired of the ever-growing failing leadership as the monarchy of Nicholas II ruled, after Alexander III became deceased during a time of need and change (Rex A. Wade, 2017, p.1). While the middle and upper class were mostly stable, being consisting of lawyers, landowners and bankers, 80% of Russia's population were still lower-class people, who still believed in the ways of agriculture, that were neglected of their needs to expand and survive (Alan Wood, 2004, p.23). The negligence of the lower-class lead to a majority to be illiterate compared to their wealthier counterparts (p.24). World War 1 was detrimental to the country, with an overwhelming mass of people immigrating in to take shelter (S. A. Smith, 2002, p.8) and a great shortage of food and resources (History.com Editors, 2024). The Russian Revolution, also known as the 'February Revolution', began on March 8th, 1917. Citizens of Russia all gathered on the streets, demanding to be liberated from the monarchy, mainly consisting of industrial workers, who went on strike and started striking back against their supervisors and bosses (S. A. Smith, 2002, p.16). Lower-class citizens saw the movement and responding positively, joining in the demand for equality, as they themselves were struggling with little land to use as they were mainly owned by wealthy landowners who denied the opposing class (p.31). People marched in the streets of Petrograd, demanding for their equality and the army did not take light of the situation, firing into the streets, but it did not stop the protests (History.com Editors, 2024). With the army faltering, Nicholas had finally stepped down from the throne, ending the monarch's reign.

Russian society would change dramatically in society, politically and in entertainment, especially with the new industrial shift after World War 1. Through artistic mediums, designers would celebrate the revolution through prints, such as posters and in commercial advertisements, to make it universally understandable. (Alla Rosenfeld and Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1999, p.15). Because of this easier understanding through posters and adverts, the more promotional material, the more products sold, and more money made. This helped raise the production of books by 50% with better quality (p.18). Not only was the economy slowly growing, but Russian artists were gradually adapting to a new style, focusing on more modern and scientific instead of the past, medieval and fantasy design such as the English Art Nouveau (p.21). After officially rising to power in 1922 (John C. Dewdney, Robert Conquest, Richard E. Pipes and Martin McCauley, 2018), the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (More known as the Soviet Union or abbreviated to the USSR), had finally been established and helped designers and artist discover a new style of artwork. One of the many factors were the bold use of the primary colours, red, yellow and blue, red being the most significant as, according to a page by the Royal Academy of Arts institution, it was associated with the working class and revolution. An explanation for the use of the limited colour choice was because of how expensive coloured ink was during that period (2017). Kazimir Malevich was a Russian advent-garde artist, advent-garde meaning advanced guard/vanguard in French, used to describe “innovative approaches and pushing boundaries, according to the Tate Museum website (2017). Malevich’s works used primarily of geometric shapes and limited colours to reflect the industrial era, which created the art form known as Constructivism (Steven Heller, 2017).



Fig. 7. Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematism*, 1915. [Oil on Canvas]. The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Source: [tate.org](https://www.tate.org)

His artwork would be influential outside of the country, as it would later inspire the famous Modernism era of art.

Malevich's works would help inspire and rise the style of "Agitation art" or "Agitprop" as it is called, as stated in the same Royal Academy article, the propaganda works that had become what is the forefront of Russian graphic design. This style of propaganda and graphics was encouraged that the Society of Young Artists, a group of artists during the revolution created in 1919, were created to further spread graphic works for the working class to use for inspiration and further spread the message of the rising Soviet Union after Nicholas II's resignation from the throne.

In conclusion, disasters have had such a massive impact on graphic design, from showing the great change of Russia from the many revolutions and the changing industry, keeping the tragedies of Chernobyl cemented in history, how it still affects the country of Ukraine even in the present and even in the end, humanising it for further generations, and how much of the modern world changed after 9/11 outside politically and how it affected countries outside of America. If asked whether graphic design and, in general, art has been impacted by wars, major events and such, the conclusive answer would be, yes. Graphic design helps viewers take a glimpse of how the public viewed the moments during those periods of history, and to a greater extent, are artifacts of history, to help educate people of the newer generations.

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