In this essay I will be discussing three keywords; *rules, story* and *communicate* and the way in which these can be used to impart meaning and purpose onto pieces of graphic design. To do so I will be taking an overview of each keyword in the context of graphic design before analysing specific designers who utilise each of these words in their work. In doing so I hope to be able to draw a connection between these words that will help form my question for my Independent Project.

Rules

Fig.1- An exhibition poster for *Der Film* by Josef Müller-Brockmann

Graphic design has an interesting relationship with rules, with different practitioners holding to different values and ways of working, this makes it hard to pin down any essential rules of graphic design since they have all been broken or replaced at some point over the years. Why then do we use rules in graphic design? There is no concrete answer, but a lot of the

“golden” rules followed by the majority of designers today are considered so because when you’re working for a client, designs often need to be “clear, legible, and fit for purpose” (Taggert, 2022) in order to please them and produce designs that look professional. Rules such as limiting your colour palette, keeping text legible and making use of white space all serve to create clear, crisp designs that communicate effectively. Today, effective design often clarifies its message so that even a passer-by can understand it. But how have rules been implemented in the past?

To answer this I will take a look at the International Typographic Style, also known as Swiss Design. Emerging during the 1950s in Switzerland and Germany, this style operated on the belief that achieving order and clarity through design was the ideal (Meggs and Purvis , 2012, p.372). To do so, personal expression was discouraged in favour of a "more universal, scientific approach to design thinking” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.372) This was because these practitioners saw design as socially useful and the role of designers as more that of a conduit for the spread of information than an artist (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.372).

One of the pioneers of this style was Josef Müller-Brockmann, a Swiss-born designer who, after studying graphic design at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich, set up his own studio in the 1950s (Hollis, 1996). Inspired by the “order and refinement” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.381) achieved by followers of Swiss Design and Russian Constructivism, Brockmann’s work made use of strict grids that create compositions that have a mathematical, geometric structure and place importance on harmony and rhythm (graphéine, 2013). When implementing photography, he treated the image at hand as “an objective symbol, with neutral photographs gaining impact through scale and camera angle” (Meggs and Purvis,

2012, p.381). When asked why he was such a devout follower of these rules, Brockmann replied by saying that he believed that learning things such as the rules of legibility, information prioritisation and organisation by means of a grid were “among the tools a designer must master in order to complete his or her task in a rational and economic matter” (Müller-Brockmann, 1995). He prioritised the communication of information that allows the recipient to make their own judgement (Müller-Brockmann, 1995), believing that the subjective feelings of the designer and “propagandistic techniques of persuasion” an interference (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.381).

His belief that a designer’s work should possess “the clearly intelligible, objective, functional, and aesthetic quality of mathematical thinking” (Müller-Brockmann, 1981, p.63) is clear in his work. In his poster for the Der Film exhibition poster (Fig.1), despite using very few design elements, everything on the poster has purpose and demonstrates the “design harmony achieved by mathematical spatial division” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.383). He has separated the design into an invisible grid and manipulates the modules in order to systematize and clarify the information portrayed (Müller-Brockmann, 2009, p.63) which lends the information on the poster a “visual harmony” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.383). The white, red and grey text stands out on a black background from a distance and the word *Film* overlapping the word *der* is reminiscent of the overlapping and dissolving of images into one another as a cinematic technique (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.383). This clever, intentional and functional approach to design lends his work a sense of uniformity and recognisability without feeling stale or repetitive. It is clear that Brockmann’s use of his own set of rules is used to help him achieve what he believes is the ideal form of design. This has

parallels to the current day, where the “unbreakable” rules are those that help achieve what we believe to be optimal or ideal design.

Story

“I always try and evoke the essence of a story, summarize the fundamentals, not the details, to identify something with a sort of shorthand where you quickly see and understand”
-Saul Bass (1989, quoted in Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.383)

Often times graphic design is all about telling a story, this is because we as human beings love stories, love telling them, reading them and relating to them. Storytelling itself evokes emotions in us, and emotions make us act (Pony Insights, 2022). It is no wonder then that graphic designers seek to tell stories within their designs “in order to create a finished product that resonates with the audience” (Ortiz, 2020). The way we go about this can vary, in web design this could mean in the user’s journey through the website, but when designing a brand identity, it is important to understand the brand’s story in order to be able to translate that into an effective commercial design. One designer in particular who understood the importance of telling a story through design was Saul Bass.

Fig.2- A poster for the film *Anatomy of a Murder,* designed by Saul Bass

When he started work in the 1930s, film posters were dominated by what he called the "See, See, See approach" (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.8) which focused on advertising the film's most exciting or appealing parts. Bass was determined to change this. He took the Modernist concept of "pouring away the extraneous and decorative" (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.11) in order to cut to the emotional heart of the film, giving "form to feeling" (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.34). This minimal style helped him symbolise a film by "boiling it down into a basic, essential representation" (Solomon, 2013). One such example is his poster for the 1959 film 'Anatomy of a Murder' (Fig.2). The film, which centres around a murder trial, is mainly conveyed through the iconography of a human body, itself a pun on the word anatomy, aligning "the dissection of a human body with the dissection of a body of evidence in a court of law" (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.131). The separation of the body into seven different pieces represents "moral ambiguity and different points of view that never converge" (Scorsese, 1996, p.45) in the film. Even the typography, which is hand-rendered inconsistently, meaning every letter is different, reflects the different versions of events that are told by different people in the film (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.131). Saul Bass was an expert at imbuing the simplest of graphics with meaning that told their own visual story.

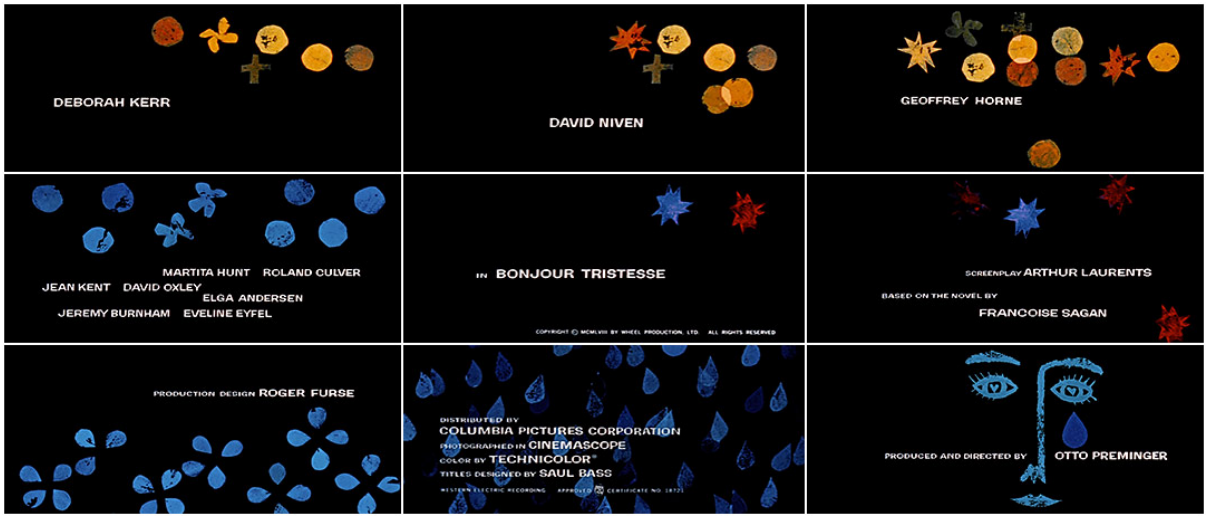

Fig.3- A collection of stills from the title sequence of the film *Bonjour Tristesse,* designed by Saul Bass

The idea of conveying a film "within the framework of a single, reductive statement" (Bass, 1996, p.13) was a daring one in the 1950s but his work on film posters led to the opportunity to design his trailblazing title sequences. Previously projected onto the curtain and considered unimportant, Bass believed that much like an overture in a symphony, a title sequence should set the mood for the film, create an atmosphere, and turn complex ideas into "radically simple forms" that offer "a set of clues, a sort of hermeneutic key to deeper meanings under the surface of the movie" (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.107). For example, his title sequence for the 1958 film 'Bonjour Tristesse' (Fig.3) provides a preview of the film's narrative, the lost innocence of youth and the sadness that adulthood can bring. The sequence starts with the appearance of bright, colourful abstract forms that are quick in tempo, portraying the happiness and naivety of the main character at the beginning of the film. These forms then start to get more sombre in colour, turning blue and purple. These now flower-like forms start to break up and form petals that rain down across the screen before all but one dissolves to form the tear on the form of a woman's face, which hints

towards the tragedy that occurs by the end of the film. Through just the title sequence we are fed subtle clues to the story that become more apparent once the film is done.

Bass is also notable for his work on corporate identities, helping to “shape the idea” (Glover, 1990, p.20) of what they could be. Whenever he went about designing a corporate identity, no matter the size of the client he always tried to “grasp the essence of what a company was about in order to represent it to itself and the public” (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.283). This involved learning the client’s business thoroughly and interviewing key personnel, this would help them form objectives from which to base and judge the outcome of the work (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, pp.284-285). Bass stressed that it was important to look for the essence of the company and represent them in an impactful yet timeless manner (Bass and Kirkham, 2011, p.285). In trying to show the brand’s story through design, Bass managed to design dozens of recognisable and long-lasting corporate identities, some of which have even lasted until today.

Communicate

Fig.4- A poster for the Rural Electrification Administration, designed by Lester Beall

Good graphic design is often considered that which communicates its message to the viewer in a “fast and efficient way” (Yalanska, 2022). When assembling your design it is important to consider how the different visual elements of your design will harmonise and communicate your message in much the same way a writer or speaker might choose their words (Toda, 2017). This is because every design element you use has some sort of meaning or symbolism that communicates something beyond the use of words (Yalanska, 2022). This means that, as graphic designers, we must pay close attention to the colours, forms, typography and composition of our designs in order to clarify rather than confuse. In order to take a closer look at how clear and effective communication through design is achieved I will be discussing American graphic designer Lester Beall.

A designer most productive during the 1930s-40s, Beall was largely self-taught as a graphic designer. Despite this, he helped to make graphic design in America “a distinct and respected profession” (Remington, 2001, p.79). Inspired by the works of European avant-garde artists and designers like Herbert Bayer and Moholy-Nagy (Remington, 1997), Beall’s work combined flat planes of colour, photography and elementary signs like arrows to seek “visual contrast and a high level of informational content” (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.351). Beall believed that, in order for a design to properly communicate its message, designers should think beyond the static, commercial message and seek out an emotional reaction that “harnesses the power of human instinct” (Remington, 2001, p.75). Beall used this approach to produce design solutions that felt fresh, innovative and bold yet appropriate for

application in business and industry (Remington, 2001, p.75), which was crucial in Depression era America.

Some of Beall's most famous work comes from his work with the Rural Electrification Administration, an agency tasked with bringing electricity to America's more rural areas and completing the electrification of the country, giving them the ability to provide basic amenities such as heat, light and water to those areas (Remington, 1997). Since the rural population of America were mostly illiterate or semi-literate, Beall "reduced pro-electrification messages to elemental signs" (Meggs and Purvis, 2012, p.351) in his poster designs. The simple, flat, unfussy design of these posters communicated effectively to an audience with minimal reading skills (Remington, 1997). This boldness of message came from his use of bold graphics and restrained typography (Golec, 2013, p.401). In one of these posters (Fig. 4) we see the familiar imagery of a faucet, meaning that anyone who grew up in a farm with an outhouse instantly knew what it meant (Reif, 1996). The crisp design of the posters reinforced the idea that electricity "made things cleaner" (Reif, 1996), and their minimal style helped to clarify this message. Another technique he regularly employed in these posters were aphorisms such as "now I'm satisfied" and "things look better" which feel relatable and imply a sense of satisfaction and convenience.

Through these posters, Beall was able to prove that the language of communication was ever-changing, and not bound to "timeworn cliches and literal conventions" (Remington, 1997) and the distinct look and "architectonic clarity" (Remington, 1997) of his work has continued to inspire graphic designers ever since.

*Need to inquire further about the conclusion

List of figures

Figure 1, Josef Müller-Brockmann Der Film 1960. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/4882 (Accessed: 7 April 2022)

Figure 2, Saul Bass Poster for the film Anatomy of a Murder directed by Otto Preminger 1959. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/4824 (Accessed: 11 April 2022)

Figure 3, Bonjour Tristesse 1958. Available at: https://www.artofthetitle.com/title/bonjour-tristesse/ (Accessed: April 11 2022)

Figure 4, Kester Beall Running Water- Rural Electrification Administration 1937. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/5745 (Accessed: 23 April, 2022)

Bibliography

Bass, J. and Kirkham, P. (2011) *Saul Bass: A Life in Film and Design.* London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd

Bass, S. (1996) 'Saul, can you make me a title?'. Interview by Pamela Haskin, *Film Quarterly,* 50(1), pp.10-17.

Glover, K. (1990) 'Saul Bass Is a Designing Man', *Los Angeles Business Journal,* 12(36), p.20.

Golec, M. J. (2013) 'Graphic Visualisation and Visuality in Lester Beall's Rural Electrification Posters, 1937', *Journal of Design History,* 26(4), pp.401-415.

Graphéine (2013) *Josef Müller-Brockmann "swiss style".* Available at: https://www.grapheine.com/en/graphic-design-en/graphic-designer-muller-brockmann-swiss-style (Accessed: 7 April, 2022)

Hollis, R. (1996) 'Clearly a designer His office became a Mecca for admirers. Arriving at Zurich station partisans of modernist design were instantly set down in a graphic world cleansed by him', *The Guardian,* 12th September, p.13.

Meggs, P.B. and Purvis, A.W. (2012) *Meggs' History of Graphic Design.* 5th edn. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Müller, Brockmann, J. (2009) 'Grid and Design Philosophy' in Armstrong, H. (ed.) *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press, p.63.

Müller-Brockmann, J. (1995) 'Reputations: Josef Müller-Brockmann'. Interview by Yvonne Schwemer-Scheddin, *Eye* 19(5).

Ortiz, A. (2020) *How Graphic Designers Tell Stories with Design.* Available at: https://theartcareerproject.com/graphic-designers-stories-design/ (Accessed: 10 April, 2022)

Pony Insights (2022) *How to Tell a Story with Design.* Available at: https://pony.studio/design-for-growth/how-to-tell-a-story-with-design (Accessed: 10 April, 2022)

Reif, R. (1996) 'A Designer Whose Specialty Was the Sunny Side', *New York Times,* November 3rd, p.45.

Remington, R. R. (2001) 'Lester Beall: A Creative Genius of the Simple Truth', in Heller, S. and Balance, G. (ed.) *Graphic Design History.* New York: Allworth Press.

Remington, R. R. (1997) 'Space, time and content', *Eye* 24(6).

Scorsese, M. (1996) 'Saul Bass: Anatomy of a Synthesist' *New York Times Magazine,* 29th December, p.45.

Solomon, B. (2013) *Saul Bass: Anatomy of a Poster.* Available at: https://scene360.com/design/49712/saul-bass-anatomy-of-a-poster/ (Accessed: 10 April, 2022)

Taggert, E. (2022) *Graphic Design Rules That Are Made to Be Broken.* Available at: https://www.vectornator.io/blog/graphic-design-rules (Accessed: 7 April, 2022)

Toda, A. (2017) *Design is Communication* [blog]. Available at: https://medium.theuxblog.com/design-is-communication-e371ad9042a3 (Accessed: 18 April, 2022)

Yalanska, M. (2022) *Graphic Design. Communication Beyond Words* [blog]. Available at: https://blog.tubikstudio.com/graphic-design-communication-beyond-words/ (Accessed: 18 April, 2022)