

Graphic Design as a communicative tool, is it truly art with a purpose?

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Independent Inquiry

Jordan Gittins

1700700

BA Graphic Design

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Module Supervisor: Mark Cocks

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, man has produced various methods to communicate with the world, expressing ideas, values and information. Graphic Design has a large base of formats in how it can communicate an idea and sometimes the motives behind the creation. It has been used to promote a message, sell, educate and also to gain control. This thesis will investigate whether Graphic Design can be seen as art with a purpose, as the role of a Graphic Designer is to communicate an idea using a variety of visual elements (type, shape, colour, composition etc) and then make them functional for the desired format (poster, newspapers etc). All of these considerations are based on the motives of the design and what audience is being targeted. Graphic Design is essentially everywhere and used in everyday life, as is advertising, in which in many cases goes unnoticed by the general population, stimulating a subconscious response to the information being displayed to them. This is without necessarily acknowledging the design itself.

We receive the information through the visual elements and can quickly understand the purpose of the idea, what the design is communicating, what values perhaps are being shown, even possibly understanding a theme or a story.

This dissertation will aim to explore how Graphic Design is used as a communicative tool and discovering its importance and impact, as well as how graphic design is combined within advertising to target an audience. Delving into the theorised functions of design that have been vastly discussed through the years, the investigation will sink into the origins and purpose of advertising, focusing on how it can influence the masses as well as examples of its use, turning its attention into how it correlates with advertising. This will be followed by exploring how Graphic Design can be used to share a message, advancing towards the social impact it can have on society, ranging through propaganda to modern day product selling. In addition, this dissertation will explore how Graphic Design is used to instruct and control many aspects of society. All features of this dissertation will contain supporting evidence throughout, displaying how it is used and also why it is used as a communicative tool. Not only will these themes be explored during this dissertation, but also how Graphic Design has evolved to achieve these methods of communication.

CHAPTER ONE

To understand how graphic design is used, we need to first understand what it is. Graphic Communication in its simplest form is a visual language, through the decades it has helped to convey socio-political, cultural and educational issues, as well as government and institutional objectives; its purpose is to visually explain to a wide audience. (Moodle.etcportal.org, n.d.) Today, Graphic Communication takes on a very modern definition, but the practise dates back to the prehistoric era, pictographs painted on cave walls were created for the purpose of visually communicating, eventually progressing to the illustration of language; Graphic Communication is something we have continued to practise and has sustained it's need in our society. Richard Hollis (1994) regards Graphic Design as 'the business of making or choosing marks and arranging them on a surface to convey an idea' (Hollis 1994, 7).

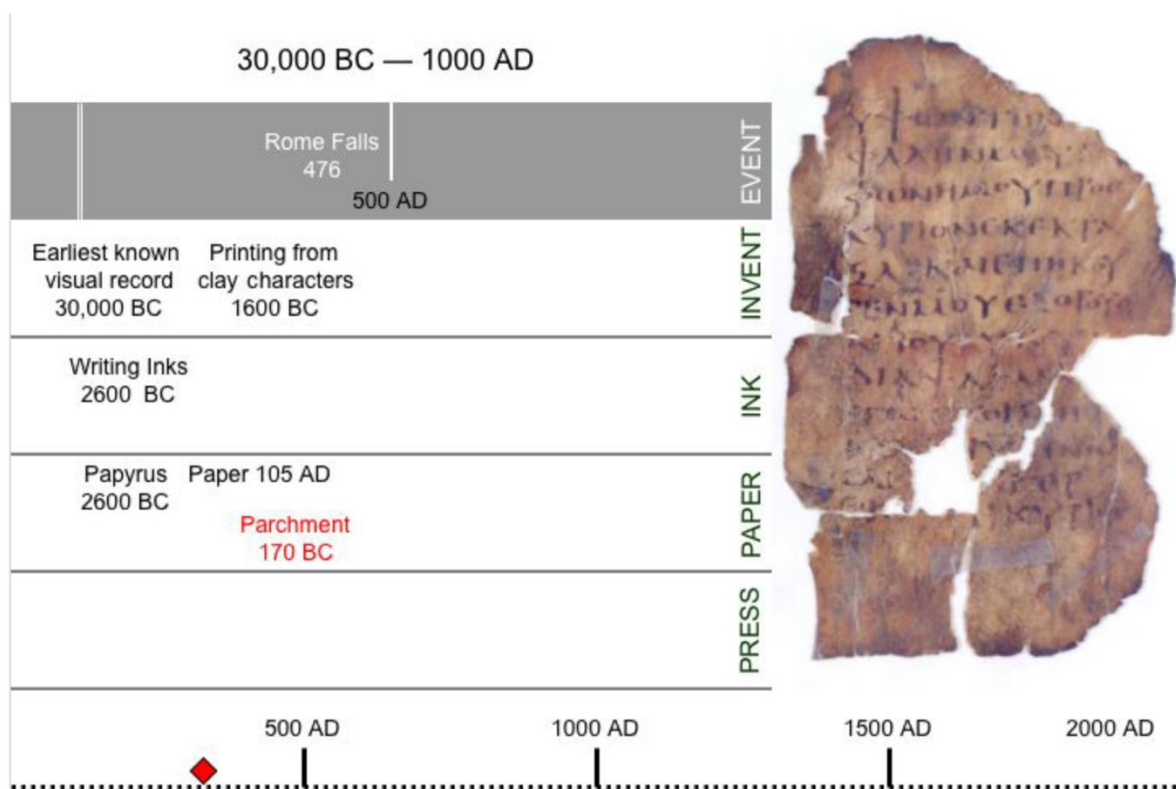


Figure 1, first records of calligraphy and written language, (Moodle.etcportal.org, n.d.).

When separated, the term "Graphic" refers to a visual of any format, whether that be in a piece of literature or on a computer screen, graphic refers to the creation of a visual.

"Graphic" in graphic design is derived from the ancient Greek word "graphein" which

translates to “mark-making”, essentially becoming the term for written and drawn marks. Later the word “design” was integrated into the English language, its original heritage is from the Renaissance French word “desiner” and later Italian word “disegno” meaning drawing, planning, sketching and designing. (Barnard,2005, pg.10). Attached to communication the two forms are very powerful, such that Frascara states;

Graphic design has existed long enough for its role in society easily understood. However, unlike architecture, literature, or fine arts, it has developed without much theoretical reflection. has evolved into a sophisticated practice in a piecemeal fashion, with scattered efforts aimed at the development of subareas, such as posters or books, but without either the critical apparatus literature or the discussion present in architecture. (Frascara, 1998, 18).

Tibor Kalman coined an extremely broad definition of Graphic Design, stating that graphic design is not only its own form of art but also a way of communicating through words and images. (Kalman, 1991, 51) He strived to clarify that graphic design is not limited to high or low culture, this statement however truthful, consequently means that his definition includes Graphic Design with traditional art, even though they could not be any further apart. Art is the production of a single image, whereas Graphic Design often becomes mass produced, making Kalman’s definition quite inaccurate (Kalman, 1991). Kalman and Hollis meet a crossroads in their definitions, Kalman regards Graphic Design as a form of art, integrated into high and low culture, whereas Hollis regards Graphic Design as having more of a production mentality.

While the question of how graphics and art correlate is another matter, it is a point that leads to clarify and define what Graphic Design is. Marshall Arisman (2000) in his account ‘Is There a Fine Art to Illustration?’ arranges illustration, graphic design and advertising into a hierarchy of ‘purity’.

1. Fine Art is pure
2. Illustration is the beginning of selling out
3. Graphic design is commercial art
4. Advertising is selling – period

(Arisman 2000, 3)

From this we can assume that graphic design and advertising have a far higher function than that of Fine Art and Illustration, as mentioned earlier, art is primarily the production of a single image, but graphic design and advertising lead to a far broader reach; from an initial idea through to a widespread campaign. To understand graphic design and therefore graphic communication we must first understand its purpose, the four definitions that will be outlined below are derived from both an unpublished lecture given by Richard Tyler at what was previously known as Leeds Polytechnic (unknown source, also listed as unknown source in Bernard's writings) as well as the elaboration given by Malcolm Bernard (2005) in his '*Graphic Design as Communication*'.

Function 1: Information

Being able to inform an audience is what drives the cause behind design and advertising, the role of graphic design here is to educate and inform, similar to Hollis' definitions. An example of information as a function can be seen everywhere, from logos to shop fronts to packaging, being able to communicate a logo hence forth educates the audience on what that company's purpose or services are.

The information provided may be very basic, that this place is a shop or a pub and not a private house, for example. (Bernard 2005, 14)

Information is a massive purpose of graphic design, it is what tells you to keep on the right side of the train station steps, what turning to take during a car journey even down to the gendered delegation of toilets, information is everywhere and almost always created by a designer.

Function 2: Persuasion

Perhaps the most important function in the world of consumerism and capitalism, being able to persuade an audience to invest or purchase a product or idea is a very powerful tool, this lends its hand heavily to propaganda which will be discussed later. This point of purpose is often argued, but a graphic designer always produces something to persuade, whether that be through the designer or client's wishes, the aim is to appeal, to persuade you to purchase a can

of Coca cola or creating an advert that encourages you to purchase that new pair of Adidas, even if the individual couldn't afford them, the desire is planted. In the same way that an audience is persuaded to purchase items, the aim is also to persuade that a company is caring and efficient just from looking at the logo (Bernard 2005).

Function 3: Decoration

This function is one of aesthetics, this one, apart from the lecture given by Richard Tyler, is often seen as a lesser factor in the grand scheme of graphic design; however fundamentally this is how design ties together, in the UK you recognise a motorway through the use of the blue and tourist attractions are specified by an illustration and a brown background. Hence forth, contrary to Hollis' definition, decoration is of great importance. This is also true in corporate branding, as much as you may recognise the font of a well-known brand, if Ford were to suddenly have a red logo, you would question the authenticity of the brand as opposed to the widely known Ford blue.

Function 4: Magic

Perhaps the most whimsical sounding of the four functions, the magical function aims to explain two factors that graphic design does. Firstly is the point that Jaques Aumont makes in his 1997 *'The Image'* stating that symbolic images somehow grant access to the 'sphere of the sacred' (1997, 55), then secondly is a point made by Tibor Kalman (1991) when he states that graphic design is mostly making something appear differently to what it actually is. Design brings ideals forward that would otherwise not have been known to an audience, for example, when Aumont described how symbolic images give access to the realm of the divine he is in fact stating how gods are made present through images such as murals in places of worship, or statues of the Greek gods (Bernard 2005, 16). This is where we see Kalmans grouping of graphic design with the likes of traditional art. Bernard describes that this ideal of Kalmans has a secular function, stating that;

"If this were not true, then we would not keep pictures or photographs of our loved ones in our wallets or on our desks and walls. Nor would we feel distinctly uncomfortable at

the prospect of sticking a needle in the photograph of our mother, right in the eye"
(Bernard 2005, 16).

Secondly, and perhaps the most controversial, is the magical ability to make an image appear as something that it is not, thus ties in with the function to persuade. Just as we all perceive colour differently, and even when given the same subject to study, no two painters will create the same piece of art, even if placed in the exact same positions. This ability to create a smoke screen and make something appear as what it is not, this ability to allude an audience is what gives graphic design its 'magical' function.

Now that we understand graphic design, its origins and purpose, we can discuss what is perhaps the sibling of Graphic Communication, propaganda. Propaganda poses the same strengths as its counterpart, but was fundamentally born from graphics, propaganda has been used throughout the ages to socially encourage or persuade the masses, its peak in popularity was during World Wars I and II, from recruiting to painting the dramatic image of the enemy, this form of visual communication proved highly effective. Whatever the cause, Governments needed to keep their respective nations feeling empowered and inspired, to keep fighting and striving for victory. Often, Governments made use of war bonds, loans and savings as well as recruiting soldiers and encouraging the conservation of food and fuel; of course, to persuade all of these initiatives, propaganda was fed into the public eye, and it worked (*Schenker, 2018*).

CHAPTER TWO



Figure 2, We Want You poster, (Amhistory.si.edu, n.d.)

Most propaganda was very direct, designed with the intention to leave onlookers certain of their decisions, repeatedly using symbols such as the upright clenched fist that was a symbol of power and unity. One of the most famous, and now the most generic, seen above in Figure 2, is the American “We want you” poster, this was deployed to encourage men to enlist into the U.S. army, and it attested to be very effective. The body language used is visually

gripping, although it may not be thought at first, pointing at an individual is commonly perceived to be rude, therefore your attention is immediately gripped by the characters stern expression and intimidating gesture. As this poster was aimed at men, it could be disputed that the character conjured a child-like fear of the father figure, or more so instilled that feeling of discipline, whilst also combining the nations colours to create an association with the American flag creating a link in the mind of patriarchy and unity.

Social influence via propaganda was and still is a phenomenon, a term known as “Heroic realism” refers to when art is used in or for propaganda, often characterised due to the use of realism and the depiction of public figures as symbols for a cause (En.wikipedia.org, n.d.) An example of what was considered “heroic” art was visuals used for the Nazis, seen as idealism rather than realism, Adolf Hitler depicted a perfect world with a perfect race.

Heroic realism designs were used to propagate the revolution in the Soviet Union during Lenin's time. Lenin doubted that the illiterate population would understand what abstract visual images were intended to communicate. He also thought that artists, such as constructivists and productivists, may have had a hidden agenda against the government. Movements such as Cubism were denounced as bourgeois and criticized for its failure to draw on the heritage of art and for rejecting the beautiful on the grounds that it was "old", whereas proletarian culture had to draw on what was learned in the prior times. The artists countered such thinking, however, by saying that the advanced art represented the advanced political ideas. (En.wikipedia.org, n.d.)



Figure 3, There's Still a Place for you poster (Jordan C, n.d.)

Figure 3 (above) (Jordan, n.d.) is another great example of graphic design and propaganda; if you were to simply take the text of this poster and lay it out, aligned but black and white, not only would it not catch the attention of its target audience but it would not inspire. A big part of advertising is personalisation, making the individual see themselves as what is portrayed in front of them, here we see men stood in perfect form, a sense of unity is mustered through the perfectly worn uniforms, furthermore, the sign that holds a reserved spot alludes the audience to thinking 'There's space for me' the sense of wanting to belong is huge from this piece, as well as the you being heavily stressed as though pointing an individual out in a crowd.

Graphic design proved a vital tool during the Russian Revolution, artists created imagery for the Agitational-Propaganda Section of the Central Committee of the Communist party, these were considered fundamental for spreading the message to the working classes. And thus, constructivism was born, design was seen as having more of a functionality, flat colours, blunt but catchy slogans, geometric shapes and diagonal lines combined to produce bold images that are now regarded as timeless works of art (Williams, 2010).

Seemingly, graphic design has had a sinister past in terms of its use, Hitler dedicated two chapters of Mein Kampf to use of propaganda and employed Joseph Goebbels as propaganda minister. Hitler insisted that 'visual presentation was of fundamental importance' and hence forth one of the most menacing characters in history was able to utilise one of, if not the most powerful form of persuasion, as well as a corporate identity that is still remembered today (Williams, 2010).

All this considered, propaganda is not just political, in his "Propaganda Prints" Colin Moore suggests that "propaganda is any type of targeted information with a purpose which benefits the sender not the receiver" (Moore, 2010), this would suggest that the advertising we experience today is also propaganda, yet we regard propaganda in a negative light due to its harsh ability to persuade, yet in reality we are exposed to it every day. Marketing and advertising have matured significantly to what we experience today, the use of propaganda solidified the power of an image when combined with the right message, they are influential tools to manipulate our emotions. However, propaganda may even be truthful, but it's the government and designers who choose to display only one side of the story whilst leaving out potential negatives that would negatively impact their cause.

CHAPTER THREE

In his novel “Adland A Global History of Advertising copy” Mark Tungate (2007) discusses how the origins of advertising can be traced back to as early as the Romans with early examples of advertising having been found in the ruins of Pompeii, one of which was a sign promoting a brothel.

“It’s safe to say that advertising has been around for as long as there have been goods to sell and a medium to talk them up – from the crier in the street to the handbill tacked to a tree. Advertising took a leap forward, of course, with the appearance of the printing press and movable type – an invention generally credited to German former goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg in 1447” (Tungate 2007, 10)

Another significant character in the birth of advertising was Théophraste Renaudot, originally from London, Renaudot studied medicine in Paris and became a qualified doctor by the age of twenty, however he was considered too young to practise medicine, it was after this that he travelled to Switzerland, England, Germany and Italy. When he returned home, he encountered Cardinal Richelieu, this friendship led to Renaudot becoming the official doctor to Louis XIII, which even now can be considered as a monumental achievement; however he began to reflect on his experience of the poverty he had witnessed whilst in Paris which eventually led him to found the Île de la Cité, what he called a ‘bureau des addresses et des rencontres’ – a recruitment office and notice board for the jobless (Tungate 2007, 11).

This establishment offered work, the trade of goods, as well as the making of public announcements. In addition to his already impressive career history, in 1631 Renaudot created the first French newspaper, which he called La Gazette (inspired by the currency he’d discovered in Italy, the gazetta) henceforth he became the first French journalist. Overseas in the UK, the first advertising agent was William Tayler, who opened an institution in London’s Warwick Square in 1786. The firm was known as Tayler & Newton, and it was essentially an advertising sales representative for printers, many of whom had launched newspapers to promote their trade (Tungate 2007, 11).

Although Renaudot and Tayler initiated the beginnings of advertising, it only truly began to grow during the industrial revolution which was heavily propelled by the rise of the newspaper. Advances in technology meant consumer goods could be produced not only faster but on a much bigger scale compared to that of human labour, this mass of products encouraged manufacturers to begin promoting their goods on a national scale. In order to fortify their products into the lives of consumers, they branded their products and of course, began to advertise.

With the creation of the printing press in 1447, it offered a whole new world to artists, and hence forth anyone looking to mass produce a message (Angelo, 2016). Eventually progressing to utilising the mediums of radio and television, as technology progressed so did the reach of advertising; the first TV advert appeared in 1941 in America, during a segment before a football match, viewers were shown an advertisement for Bulova clocks and watches.

“Characters were built around products to create a semblance of connection between viewers and brands (though this idea of a consumer connection didn’t become a priority until later), and famous faces were brought in to sell everything from washing machines to cigarettes.” (Angelo, 2016).

As Angelo states, it was not until much later that advertising companies began to target an audience using the technique of creating a personal connection between a character and the viewer, graphic design uses visual imagery to connect with the viewer and this translates to advertising, using a designed persona that not only embodies the product but also morals of the target audience. A very memorable example of this is the Gorilla from the 2007 Cadbury advert, this advert was aired after a disaster surrounding the brand that led to 40 cases of salmonella exposure due to a leaking pipe in the company’s Marlbrook factory which led to a product recall costing the company over £20 million (News.bbc.co.uk, 2007).

The brand was not mentioned once during this advert, the only correlation between the drumming gorilla and Cadbury was its trademark purple in the background, it proved effective as it became a sensation and set up a wild conversation amongst the public,

Cadbury regained the trust of the public and solidified its place as an iconic brand, a whole salmonella scandal was forgotten simply through an advert. Here we can see the massive impact of design in the minds of the public, the advert was sensationalised and immediately recognised as Cadbury, all because of its symbolic purple.

We absorb information through our five senses; these senses enable our minds to understand our surroundings and we can often isolate each sense to help us understand further, if you are unsure what jacket to wear, you simply step outside and feel the temperature, this is much how we go about understanding our everyday lives. Our senses cooperate to help us form perceptions and henceforth prompt emotions. As we progress through life we start to build a library of experiences, which we recall upon to help us make quick informed decisions. With this information and behaviour, graphic designers and advertising specialists are able to station products, services, entertainment and even culture to gain maximum engagement.

Design is everywhere, from the sign that tells you to turn left or the advertisement that alludes you into a shop, from websites to books and even prescriptions, design has been carefully executed for a purpose, without design we would struggle to navigate through our ever increasing busy lives, commuters know how to get to their destination via a tube map, children learn their alphabet through visuals. Design is used to communicate; it can aid in understanding our behaviour and demographics as well as having the power to persuade and determine our decision-making procedure. (Nelson, 2016)

Anywhere that you read language in written form, you are seeing fonts and typography that has been carefully laced together, graphic design influences and reinforces our brand loyalty to the products we buy, as well as the places that we frequent to shop and eat. The visual language, tone of voice, imagery, colours and use of typography have all been carefully crafted so that it reaches the consumer in a specific order whilst influencing certain senses. This is boosted even more so through advertising, by being able to engage a consumer with an advert on TV or on the internet can paint an ideal image to gradually encourage the consumption of products. (Nelson, 2016)

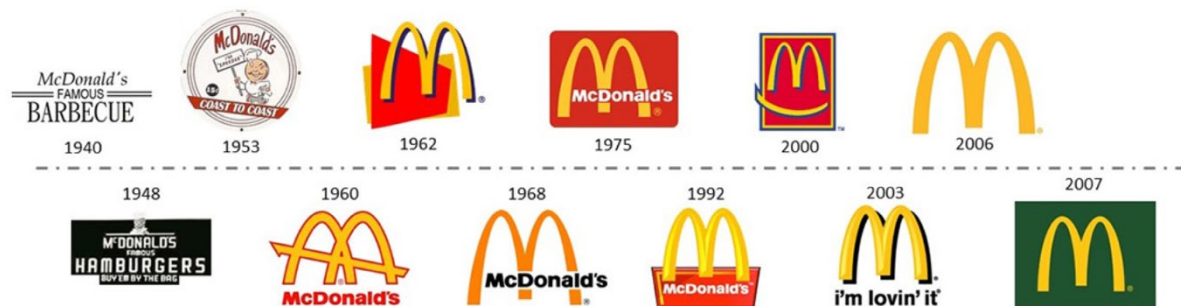


Figure 4; the evolution of McDonalds (Web Design Ledger, 2016)

Arguably one of the largest food chains in the world, McDonalds is an iconic brand with an extremely dedicated market, as show in Figure 4, the brands name is consistently seen in the corporate identity up until the year 2000. This illustrates how over time, the power of graphic design and exposing consumers over and over eventually led to the dropping of the brand name from the logo, even zoomed in at a high level, it is highly likely that consumers would recognise the brand just through the significant yellow colour used in the iconic “M”.

The effects of graphic design are both unconscious and subconscious, this could often be seen negatively due to the visual design having influence of our subconscious to which we have no control of. Two examples, the Cadbury purple and McDonald’s yellow, demonstrate the undoubted power of colour in graphic design and advertising, according to the way our senses perceive the world, colour is the most prominent, closely followed by shapes, symbols, and lastly words. Colour is what aids brand recognition from consumers, as stated previously, it would not be well received if McDonald’s were to suddenly become pink and would mean having to build and regain trust again with its audience (Black, 2013).

In her “The Societal influence of Graphic Design” Cassandra Reese (2016) remarks that
“Designers have the ability to make choices that affect how other human beings live their lives” (Reese 2016, 5)

Previously, perhaps pre-digital age, the role of graphic designers was much simpler, their objective was to create the designs seen on packaging or print advertisements such as posters, simply only operating on a pure aesthetic basis and then to focus on the marketability of products with the aid of advertising agencies. However, in today’s society, designers have to be very aware of social trends, their ethical implications, and reproduce

and communicate cultural messages through their designs (Fox & Grant 1992, 77). The responsibilities of the designer have increased massively from how they originally began, perhaps now with more responsibility than that of advertising agencies as it is down to the designer to make visual decisions that will communicate with the public.

Social relevance is of the highest priority today, people crave the need to relate to one another and the material world around us, a designer must either create or represent this connection through various mediums, this has led to the term “social designer”, this applies to the professionals who recognise the needs of the consumer market and creates a solution through identifying how we will emotionally interact and react with the design in front of us. To attain good social design, the design should appeal to the basic needs of the target audience and their human rights, which today much of the public are very familiar with due to the presence of social media. A good instance would be a furniture company promising it’s consumers with the comfort and effectiveness of their products, whilst presenting images of people that are positive, sinking into a large sofa whilst laughing with a perfectly presented family dynamic.

It is imperative that designers today understand cultural relations in graphic elements, as well as understanding key social issues and current events happening around the world. Colour is powerful and can have many mental links carried with them depending on the culture; hence a colour must not only be culturally appropriate but also specifically chosen for this audience. Many colours are extremely significant amongst many cultures; colour can provoke certain feelings therefore they should be used wisely (Fox & Grant 1992, 80).

This rule of appropriate use must be applied across all mediums, including that of shapes and symbols, as we progress it is becoming increasingly difficult to communicate visually without causing offence to a particular party, being socially aware has become more imperative than it has ever been in our society. A very current topic today is sustainability and climate change, here is where we truly begin to see graphic design as art with a purpose, diagrams illustrated to tell you what you can and can’t recycle were orchestrated by designers, including colour coding systems to visually aid the audience. As mentioned, sustainability and the environment are part of a designer’s social responsibility, although they may act as a

middleman between manufacturers, they are able to contribute to the effects of the surrounding world. This is heavily implemented by making environmentally-conscious decisions while designing, the constant churning of natural resources, combined with massive energy consumption and pollution, is causing the environment to degrade rapidly. As individuals who help to create products that require a mass of resources, most of which are unsustainable, designers are responsible for minimizing their ecological footprint and making conscious decisions that reduce the impact on our environment (NCERT 2011, 11).

CONCLUSION

Is graphic design art with a purpose? Yes. There is no doubt that the work of graphic designers and advertisers alike is everywhere, drowning our senses in subliminal messages and cultural messaging that we are constantly exposed to, much of this leads us to make decisions from which political party we vote for to which direction at the train station we walk. The impact can be easily seen in society and culture through how they communicate ideas and portray people, issues, and events, it is something that we are blind to yet at the same time so aware of, Kalman regards graphic design as a form of traditional art whereas Hollis refers it more to a means of mass production, but in truth graphic design is both. It's authenticity as art could be widely debated, you would not hold a magazine in the same regard as the Mona Lisa, yet a magazine can create more of an emotional impact and response that oil on canvas ever could, surely this should hold graphic design in the same high regard as traditional art culture.

Design reflects society and it, in turn, reflects graphic design; as such, design can be used to make a positive difference in the world. Much as the world may be run by governments and politicians, above those are graphic designers, a government would be nothing without its websites, modern propaganda, leaflets, much so the public would struggle to vote for a leader without the visual aid of hopeful designs, having the ability to sway a man into deciding to join the army and fight for his country is an comprehensible power, yet we do not notice it.

Not only politics, but graphic design has the power to represent minorities in ways that would otherwise be impossible, a campaign created to emotionally move you and rally an audience to support a cause, a significant example of this would be the Kissing with Pride campaign by Absolut Vodka from 2018, this year celebrated fifty years since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales, however it is still illegal in many places across the globe, to bring light to this issue Absolut partnered with LGBT charities and created a series of close up shots of same-sex kisses, overlapped by the silhouette of the iconic vodka bottle in the colours of the pride flag. The individuals that featured in the

campaign were from countries where the embrace could result in prison or worse and the brand created a campaign to salute theirs and many others for kissing with pride.

Designers also have the almost impossible task being environmentally conscious and sustainable, the decisions made could aid in the reductions of landfills and plastics in the oceans, simply from cleverly orchestrated campaigns that emotionally register with the audience and leave a memorable mark. As designers adopt practises that massively reduce the impact on our environment, they also then encourage thousands more to do the same.

Graphic design employs words and images for communicating by means of visual language, if you were to take away design from society completely things would begin to unravel and communication would become ever more difficult, we revolve our world around this medium without even being fully aware of its power and status. With the subtraction of graphic design, we would only be able to send and receive information through word of mouth in such a case where the original message would eventually become diluted. Graphic design also creates a world of accessibility for those with disabilities, whether it is visual, auditory, mobile or mental, designing for accessibility has a huge significance to enable us to get messages to as many people as possible and through this we also increase inclusivity amongst society which in turn creates a wider branch for those who need that additional aid. Within the modern world we now inhabit, it is easier than ever to distribute messages to people of all walks of life, there are so many ways that graphic designers interact with the world that surrounds them, attempting to create a positive impact through visual communication, appealing to the senses and emotions of the public. Although you may not see as many pieces of graphic design hanging on a museum wall, graphic design creates a mass wave of revolution throughout the world, connecting and engaging a network of individuals that indefinitely allows us as a society to take leaps in progress towards common goals such as attempting to slow down the rapid effects of climate change or increase the supply of water to poverty stricken locations. Design can reach from one end of the world to the other, enabling us to make interpersonal connections with one another through language and creativity, it will continually to be a pillar of strength that will only continue to grow in demand and force, making graphic design, art with a purpose.

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