

The Digital Graphic Design Revolution of the Mid 1980s. Past Present and Future



Student Number: 2000761

BA (Hons) Graphic Design

Lecturer: Donna Williams

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Introduction

On January 24th 1984 Apple would unveil the first ever Macintosh computer. The new graphical user interface and mouse at the time gave users unparalleled accessibility and freedom when it came to the burgeoning world of digital technology. In the world of design this was groundbreaking.

Prior to digital design, more hands-on and time consuming methods were employed to create different designs, such as letter pressing and silk screening etc. “The personal computer has put kerning and leading options at the fingertips of many people who have never recognised the design potential of letterforms” (1) this statement is followed up a little later down the page by “certain sectors of the public are beginning to see that graphic designers, like architects, are in some measure responsible for a great deal of ugliness in the world” (2) **(Neuenschwander B. 1993 *Letterwork. Creative Letterforms in Graphic Design*. Phaidon Press Ltd. London)** Whilst I feel these statements are besmirching the accessibility that digital design offers, it does highlight the notion that the increased availability means people will be able to practise within the field of design with less discipline and understanding than was previously necessary.

With my previous rambling out of the way, this essay aims to focus on some of the early figureheads of digital design and their work. As they were some of the first in their field you could argue their work is some of the least derivative and most pure of its kind.

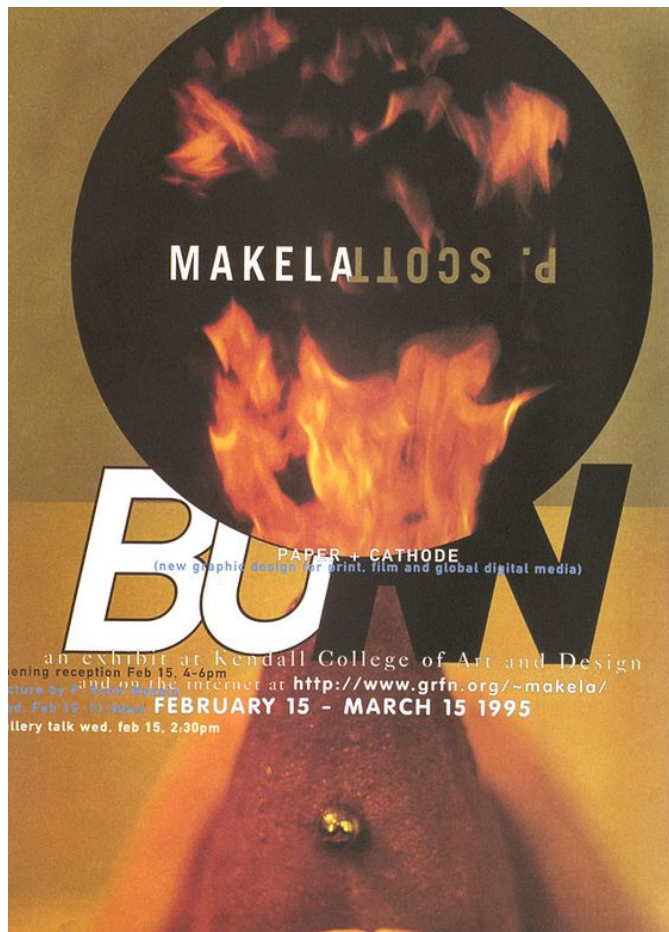
I would also like to preface this exploration by going into some detail about the Swiss/International design style. Stemming from a number of design movements in the early to mid 20th century the movement focuses on clean, more sans serif typography, and a focus on type itself and the shape of letterforms as opposed to more illustrious, excessive type and imagery. In 1923 Bauhaus, a German art school and pioneer of the International style touted the slogan “Art and technology, a new unity” (3) **Hollis R. 2006 *Swiss Graphic Design The Origins and Growth of an International Style, 1920-1965*. First Edition. Yale University Press.** Despite predating the digital design revolution by nearly roughly half a millennium I feel this slogan perfectly represents what came to be.

P.Scott Makela

Makela was one of the early digital design pioneers. Attending “Minneapolis College of Art and Design and was among the first people to explore digital programs such as Photoshop and Illustrator, creating a highly recognisable and idiosyncratic style, which was controversial at the time.” (4) **Ideas On Design: P. Scott Makela.**

<http://ideasondesign.net/speakers/speakers/p-scott-makela/> 22/11/21

As for his contribution to early digital design, it was exceptional.



This is a poster Makela did to advertise an exhibition. The title of the exhibition “Paper + Cathode” itself is symbolic of the burgeoning digital era of design, “paper” representing the print aspect of the exhibition and “Cathode” the digital.

The varied use of typography of different weights and textures is very evocative of the Swiss design style. The use of photography lacks some coherency, instead the different textures and images being used to accentuate the typography. This is somewhat of a commonality with early digital design as previously photography and type were not so easily combined and manipulated but programmes like photoshop allowed for a much broader spectrum of experimentation.

Fig 1: Designed by P. Scott Makela. 1995

Website

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/37295503137756399/>

Date Accessed 22/11/21



Probably Makela's most recognisable work is that of his work on the cult classic, David Fincher movie Fight Club.

The font a “rave-flyer-inspired sans serif typeface” (5) **Art of the Title: Fightclub (1999).** Radatz B. (editors: Landekic L. Perkins W.) 2014.

<https://www.artofthetitle.com/title/fight-club/>.

24/11/21

The font being inspired by rave flyer design gives it a heavy air of postmodernism, The italic styling helps the font contrast the smaller credits and gives it a dynamic edge, The previous piece of Makela’s I featured also used italics for the main typographic centrepiece. Which contrasts the conventions of traditional compositional rules as generally italics are used sparingly to highlight certain areas of a body of text and not as the main focus.

This freedom with typography and fervent disregard for traditional compositional rules is commonplace in a lot of early digital design. Almost as if the new digital design landscape is to be unbounded by it’s analog predecessors.

Fig 2:Poster for David Fincher’s ‘Fight club’ 1999

<https://www.posterlounge.co.uk/p/712738.html>

Date Accessed: 24/11/21

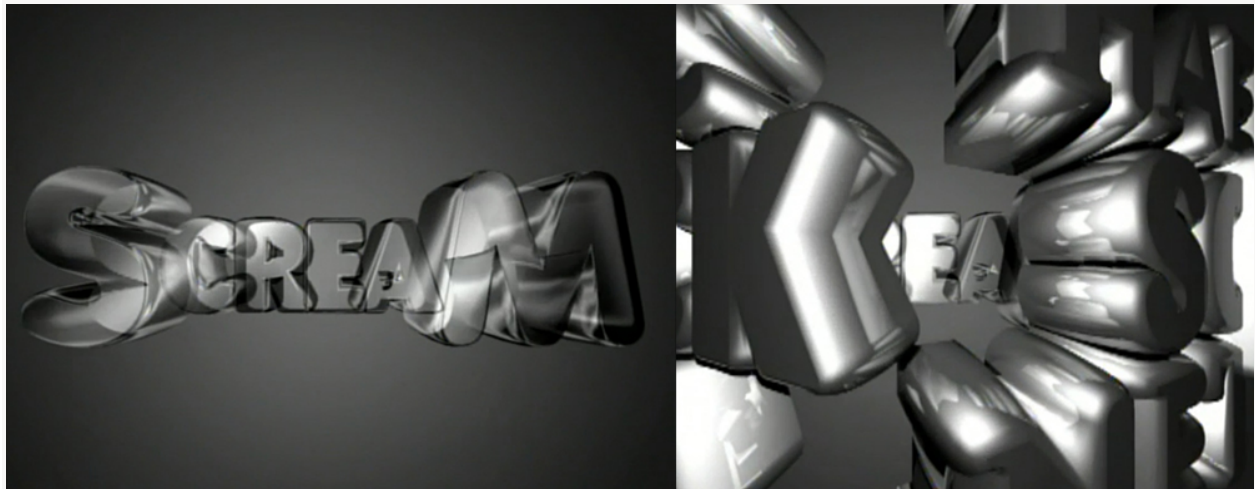


Fig 3: Visual from Michael Jacksons ‘Scream’ Music Video (1995)

<https://laukkonen.com/the-story-behind-my-logo-and-my-2-degrees-of-separation-from-michael-jackson/> Date accessed 27/11/21

The final piece of Makela’s work I would like to look at is the typography visual he did for Michael Jackson’s ‘Scream’ music video. I would class this style as distinctly Y2K. the Y2K style is a blanket term to describe a design style that spans the late 90’s and early 2000’s. “Synthetic or metallic-looking materials, inflatable furniture, moon-boot footwear and alien-inspired hairstyles were just a few signposts of the spirit of the age.” (6) **Alexander L. The Guardian. The Y2K aesthetic: who knew the look of the year 2000 would endure?**

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/19/year-2000-y2k-millennium-design-aesthetic> . 27/11/21

I feel Makela managed to capture this essence expertly in this impactful yet rather simple typeface. It has that suitably ‘synthetic material’ appearance that was so prevalent at the time. This sort of rendering was only possible because of digital design and I’d go as far as to say the whole Y2K aesthetic/style is thanks to the digital design revolution of the decade prior.

David Carson

David Carson is a name synonymous with early digital design. His instantly recognisable style informed a generation of designers and their practise. He developed his affinity for design later on in life, already having a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology. "He touched upon graphic designing briefly while attending a two-week commercial designing class at the University of Arizona, in 1980. Subsequently, he attended the Oregon College of Commercial Art to study graphic designing and a three-week workshop in Switzerland as a part of his degree." (7)

Famous Graphic Designers: David Carson. Famous Graphic Designers.org .

<https://www.famousgraphicdesigners.org/david-carson> 28/11/21

I would go so far to infer the fact that Carson started on design slightly later on in life gave him a different approach to the medium. For example, As his background was not traditionally based in design he was able to conjure artwork and design pieces that he found visually effective and stimulating and not what the status quo expected from designers at the time. "He eschewed order in favor of a noisy, expressive approach to typography that, detractors famously claimed, compromised legibility." (8) **Lanks B. The Father of Grunge Typography Calls Out Lazy Design. Medium: Magenta.**

<https://magenta.as/the-father-of-grunge-typography-calls-out-lazy-design-daae470a685a>
28/11/21



Fig 4: Audi Advertisement (2013) Designed by David Carson.

<http://www.davidcarsondesign.com/t/clients/audi/> Date Accessed (28/11/21)

This is an advertisement piece that Carson did for Audi back in 2013. While it is more contemporary than a lot of his more famous work I feel it does well to showcase a lot of his famous design techniques. First of all, the use of italic type faces instead of standard, I noticed this with Scott Makela's work initially but it is a motif across a lot of early digital designers work. Despite it not being an original technique by 2013 it's still an effective method of contrasting the normative, just by slanting the standard typeface. The second motif is the use of sans serif type, harkening back to Swiss/International design style.

Carson also uses mixed media in a lot of his work. In this piece the backing looks like some sort of watercolour or acrylic then layers the digital assets on top i.e. the type and the images.

The combination of the two very disparate mediums makes the advert very striking.

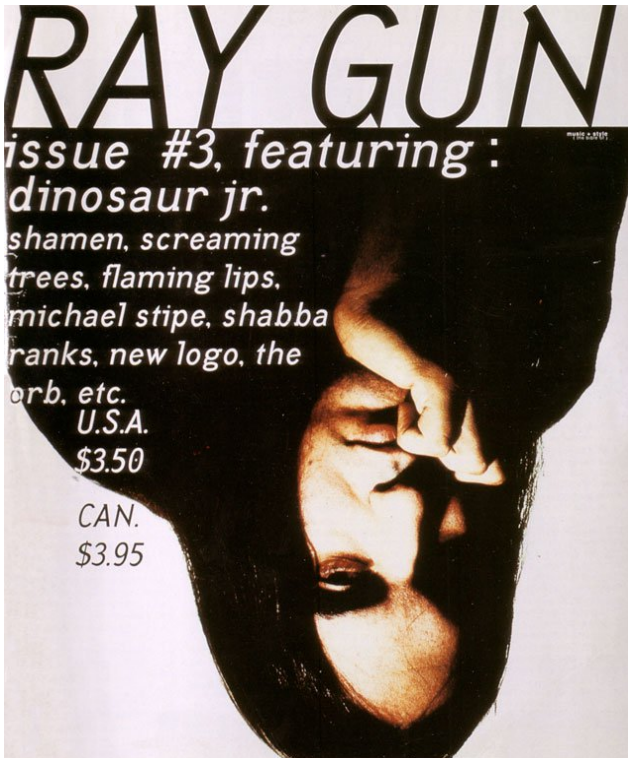


Here is a piece that Carson designed for the August 2012 issue of SURFportugal and another example of a technique that Carson likes to employ in a lot of his work. That being layering of different elements with varying opacity. This is another example of a technique that was only doable with such ease thanks to digital design.

Fig 5: SURFPortugal spread (2012) Designed by David Carson

<http://www.davidcarsondesign.com/t/2012/07/30/surfportugal/> Date accessed 28/11/21

Again Carson employs a lot of collage in this spread. The way he layers these crisp high definition images with highly distorted and noisy shots over them creates such a jarring contrast that the eye is instantly drawn to the piece. The main body of text employs a sans serif font in both standard and italic variations. This technique of using large amounts of italic is something I have touched on numerous times already but I'd like to note how often it comes up in Carson's work.



Ray Gun is David Carson's Alternative music magazine, and a great showcase for a lot of his design motifs. Here is an early issue for example. That use of italic again very prevalent, however the design is a bit more stripped back than his later work. Less distorted imagery, far less cluttered composition and a slightly more conventional layout. However you can see how this would have stood out at the time. Usually magazines are plastered with smaller images, lots of text, maybe some advertisements. This piece from Carson is a beautiful example of how subtle can still stand out. I would also like to note this font, not only being italic, also has slightly unconventional serifs on different parts of the font. And jagged feet, ascenders and descenders on the title "Ray Gun".

Fig 6: Ray Gun front cover (1993) designed by David Carson

<http://kimedenasmedia.blogspot.com/2015/10/david-carson-raygun.html> Date accessed 28/11/21



This issue of Raygun highlights Carson's flare for type design. While I am unsure as to if he designed the typefaces used I am a massive fan of the way he has manipulated the smaller, serif type. The removal of certain pieces of each letter form makes the type come across as some sort of agent glyph or alien language, while still being somewhat legible, you could also argue this compromised the legibility of the type but given that Carson has a habit of actively engaging with type as more of its own piece of art or imagery and has done since his very early designs this kind of rejection of normative typographical functions is to be expected. It's near impossible to find one cover of Ray Gun that resembles another. Carson has done well to craft a unique identity for the cover of every issue, whilst also incorporating the style or aesthetic of the artist being featured on the cover into the actual design itself.

Fig 7: Ray Gun Cover (1998) designed by David Carson.

<https://www.compulsivecontents.com/detail-event/david-carson-the-messy-type/> Date Accessed 28/11/21

April Greiman

Considered one of the earliest users for digital software, Greiman “attended the Kansas City Art Institute studying graphic design. Then during the early '70s, she enrolled at the Basel School of Design (then Allgemeine Kunstgewerbeschule Basel) under the supervision of two renowned masters of that period—Armin Hofmann and Wolfgang Weingart. This is also where she developed her interest in International Style” (9). **Opus. Celebrating women in design: April Greiman.** <https://opusdesign.us/wordcount/celebrating-women-in-design-april-greiman/> 29/11/21

This knowledge and practice of the International style is very prominent in early digital designers as it would have still been fairly contemporary when they were learning their craft. This is why we see a lot of it's aesthetic turn up in early digital design, which subsequently fed the whole digital design movement and you can still see lots of beautiful contemporary use of the Swiss/International Style today.

Greiman was a pioneer of the ‘New Wave’ Design movement. This style, also coined “Swiss Punk” took the building blocks of the International Style and flipped it on it's head. Eskewing traditional grid based systems and arrangements and instead following the path of creative expression more freely.

From early on in her design journey Greiman was straying from the path of traditional designers at the time of the mac, saying in an interview “I got so tired of some of the famous men who were also on the board saying things like this, “This is the end of everything,” and that the Mac is crap and they'll just stick with their pencil.” (10) **M. Miller. Eye On Design Magazine. 2019. Don't Call April Greiman the “Queen of New Wave”.** 29/11/21

<https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/april-greiman-is-still-ahead-of-the-curve/>



This piece is a cover Greiman designed for Wet Magazine. Probably one of Greiman's most famous pieces, it encapsulates the essence of her brand of New Wave design perfectly. While the previous two artists I have looked at did occasionally indulge in some more vibrant work a lot of it was more visceral or bleak than this. Greiman offers a refreshing alternative to digital design. Utilizing lots of bright colors, saturated or color shifted images, shape and aspects of collage.

Greiman opts for cleaner more sans serif fonts which is no doubt an expression of her International Design routes. This sort of intricate pattern work and shape layering is made so much easier with the advent of digital design. The fact Greiman was such an early

pioneer of digital design work means that the sky was the limit when it came to potential experimentation, which subsequently led to her work having a lot of variety.

Fig 8: WET Magazine cover designed by April Greiman.

<https://readymag.com/designstories/april-greiman/> Date Accessed 30/11/21

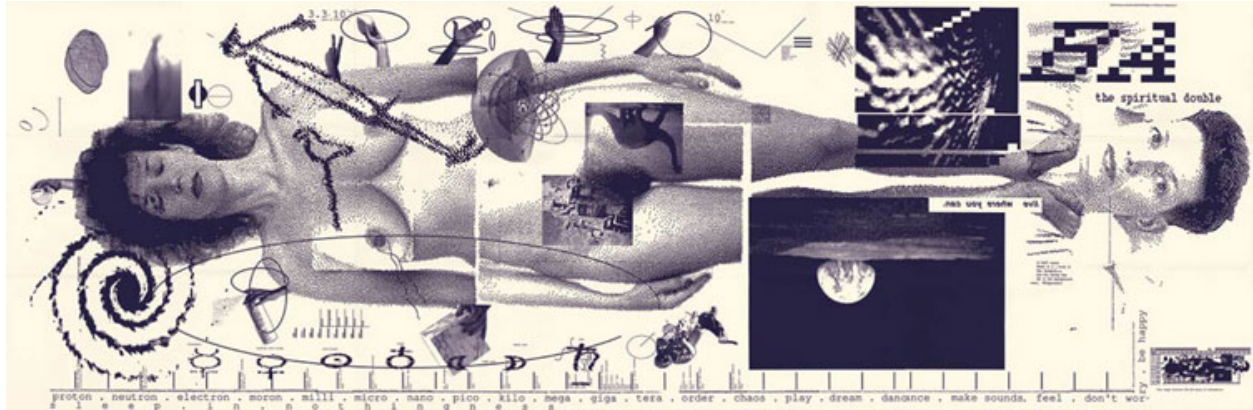


Fig 9: Full Body Shot piece designed by April Greiman

<https://gabrielchetcuti.wordpress.com/2013/12/16/wolfgang-weingart-april-greiman-the-influence-of-the-new-wave/> Date accessed 30/11/21

This piece titled “Full Body Shot” is one of Greiman’s earlier works. It’s probably the most famous example of her early experimentation with digital design and uses a plethora of techniques. For example there is a lot of multilayering in this piece. Again this is a technique we see a lot in early digital design, also particularly prevalent in Carson’s work. I feel despite embracing digital design they still try to mimic analogue techniques, for instance in this piece despite the collage being digital, they don’t stray too far from the traditional style of analogue collage.

In a video interview at AGI Open Paris Greiman said “If you have a good idea there aren't any boundaries, you know. You can express it in a variety of ways.” (11) **Design Indaba. (2018)**

April Greiman: "If you have a good idea there aren't any boundaries."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWH2ouWJd4c> . 30/11/21

I feel like this open mindset towards the use of digital is what propelled Greiman and designers alike to the forefront of their field. At the end of the day technology will always change and evolve and it’s up to creatives to try and adapt or risk being swallowed in a sea of redundancy.

Conclusion

To conclude, I feel that the digital design revolution was a necessity in the creative industry. In many fields these kinds of drastic changes occur that divide the community and often function as a filter that separates those willing to adapt and change from those who are not. Today the design and creative possibilities are virtually infinite thanks to the advent of digital design, which would not have advanced at the same pace, if not at all, thanks to the few artists who dared to push the envelope with unique and unbiased creative approaches towards new mediums.

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<https://www.artofthetitle.com/title/fight-club/>.24/11/21
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