

CRITICAL WAYFINDING

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The pyramids of Egypt are mythic monuments to the origin of Western culture, from architecture to the alphabet. These oversized tombstones have always fascinated the West; they are testaments to the surprising fact that a human society could actually design something that could last for five millennia.

At the edge of another millennium, a glass pyramid marks the entrance of a more modern form of tomb: an art museum in contemporary Paris. The grand concourse of the Louvre looks, sounds, smells, and feels like an airport, or a hotel lobby, or a department store. What reminds one that it's an art museum is the Mona Lisa—or rather backlit transparencies of the Mona Lisa—visible from across the broad hall in which visitors congregate. What links the Louvre to other public spaces—aside from its stadium-capacity entryway—is its use of pictorial symbols addressed to an international public.

Such icons participate in a broader phenomenon in the cultural landscape: the emergence of a hieroglyphics of communication, which overlays the contemporary experience of cities, buildings, products, and media with a code of repeatable, reduced icons, compacted chunks of information which collapse a verbal message into a visual mark. The expanding domain of this hieroglyphic speech poses subtle problems for designers in the next millennium: How can we create cross-cultural communication without flattening difference beneath the homogenizing force of a single dialect?

Perhaps these dubious achievements are what makes graphic design the black sheep of the design family. Graphic design lacks the spatial drama or presence of architecture and product design. Architectural criticism often contrasts the plenitude of architectural form with the one-dimensionality of “sign,” “communication,” “illustration,” “anecdote,” and “information”—the very modes of expression that graphic design traffics in.¹

Like an over-eager, pimply-faced younger sibling, graphic design is what architecture never wants to be: namely, packaging, ornament, frame, and sign. Architecture says, “Experience, Space, Tactility, Drama, Eternity”...while graphic design says, “Can I help you? Do I look okay? Buy me, read me, eat me, drink me!”

Yet graphic design is a frame which makes spaces, places, and objects legible. Graphic design continually mediates contact with the environment. Signs, arrows, instructions, “you are here” maps, advertisements, and other kinds of information set up the conditions in which experience takes place. And this process of wayfinding—the term used by environmental graphic designers—is increasingly more visual than

verbal. The semantic and visual reduction of international symbols—their concise generality—gives them their paradoxical status. They are simultaneously open and closed, vague and specific, ostensibly neutral and yet loaded with connotations and stylistic mannerisms.

Environmental signage is simultaneously there and not there—not really a “part of” the architecture, yet indispensable to its functions, its lived use. The signs that lead visitors to the Mona Lisa are like the frame around the painting: they direct attention to the object and yet are considered extrinsic to it. Graphic design—signage in particular—is largely a framing activity. Graphic design occupies the space between a product, building, or text, and its user. Graphic design is the margins of a book, the buttons of a boom box, the friendliness of a computer interface, or the paper wrapper on a tin can.

In common usage, the term “graphic” describes a high-contrast image: black against white, white against black. The silhouette is the dominant strategy behind the language of international pictures, suggesting an objective shadow of material reality, a schematic index of fact. The ideal of an international picture language has been part of modernist design since the 1920's, and reached the intensity of an obsession during the 1960's and 1970's. Sign systems, such as the Department of Transportation's 1974 symbol set, designed under the guidance of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, aspire to the semiotic consistency of a typeface.² The quest for uniform symbols for public information parallels the rise of coherent corporate identity programs and the emergence of an international consumer hieroglyphics.³

Such civic and commercial marks signal the challenges of cross-cultural communication in the next millennium. For as the globe is rendered increasingly accessible by communication technologies and forces of economic consolidation, it is at the same time segmented by diverse national, racial, and ethnic identities. The contradictory mandate of designers in the 21st century is to create visual scripts which can communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers without flattening diversity into caricature. Differences must be maintained to counter the domination of what Herbert Marcuse has called “one-dimensional man,” whose culture has been robbed of ambivalence and negativity in favor of a mass media capable of assimilating, and thus neutralizing, any form of cultural difference or dissent.⁴

International communication carries the dangers of homogeneity and hegemony alongside the hopeful promise of an integrated global village lined with universally legible street signs and uniformly available products. Designers working at the edge of the millennium are faced with the conflicting imperatives to both expand and contract these

formal languages: to reach a diverse public without succumbing to the dangers of assimilation. The one-world, one-language ideal of heroic modernism is an untenable solution for design in the next century.

The simultaneous expansion and contraction of markets for products and media has encouraged the compression of messages. Visual, verbal, and aural texts—transmitted through print, television, film, radio, computers, products, and exhibitions—are increasingly reduced to a code of repeatable icons, or what we call a hieroglyphics of communication. These hieroglyphics punctuate daily life with a pattern of generalized, repeatable signs, marks which signal ownership or information.

Historically, hieroglyphs occupy the space between pictures and writing; it is the passage connecting the concrete depiction of objects with the abstract, mechanical coding of the alphabet. The hieroglyph marks the clash between the soft, continuous, flowing substance of visual experience and the hard, polarized, digitized articulations of writing. The power of the phonetic alphabet, in contrast with the older forms of the ideogram, lay in its ability to ignore the “ideas” or “meaning” of a language, and to represent only its material side—its sounds—disconnected from the objects and ideas that a language refers to. The alphabet, unlike the hieroglyphic, is blind: it is a neutral grid, an automated device capable of converting any word into a graphic mark, regardless of its referent.⁵

The alphabet claims to represent only the outside of a given language—its exterior envelope—rather than its interior content.⁶ The hieroglyphic script is the checkpoint between the mechanical abstraction of the alphabet and the vivid particularity of the image. In hieroglyphics, the specificity of pictures embeds itself in the schematic abstraction of the typographic sign. Through repetition and conventionalization, the picture enters the realm of writing. The soft becomes hard, the fluid becomes fixed, the concrete becomes abstract. In between these two extremes stands the hieroglyph, a rebus which is both silent and spoken, a full-bodied depiction of an idea and a standardized abstraction.

Modern communication has returned to the transitional medium of hieroglyph-writing. The logotype, the corporate symbol, and the international pictogram combine the generality of the typographic mark with the specificity of pictures. In corporate identity the image becomes the “personality” behind a mass-produced product, a sign of uniqueness stamped into an intrinsically multiple object. The fictional character “Betty Crocker,” for example, is regularly updated by her image managers, who have enabled her features to slowly evolve over the decades while keeping her identity—her status as a proprietary symbol—intact. She is at once naturalistic and schematic, changing and fixed, a rendered portrait and a conventionalized mark.

How does the return of the hieroglyph affect everyday life? Writers from diverse ideological positions have described ways in which the media that supposedly “records” events have come to play a central role in shaping those events—sometimes initiating the event in the

first place. From Daniel Boorstin’s “pseudo-event” to Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” to Stuart Ewen’s *All Consuming Images*, critics of culture have noted that representation has come to inhabit reality, not content to document it after the fact.⁷ This by-now familiar critique has attacked network television, mass-market publishing, advertising, and Hollywood film for substituting an endless stream of superficial images for the lost fullness of experience.

This diaphanous veil of commercial imagery is punctuated with a pattern of hieroglyphics, signs which are neither strictly image nor text but occupy a middle-ground between them. Such signs, whether generated in the name of private commerce or public information, are attempts to anchor or regulate the ongoing barrage of pictures and products. Like digital rocks in an analog stream, hieroglyphics guide the flow of communication by directing the interpretation of events, the consumption of goods, or the navigation of public spaces.

Baudrillard has critiqued the function of signs in contemporary media, arguing that they have organized reality into a reductive pattern of oppositions. Baudrillard describes how the symbolic plentitude of a concept is emptied when it becomes instrumental, when it is strictly coordinated against its semantic opposite. Baudrillard’s example is the sun, which for non-industrialized cultures is a concept approached with considerable ambivalence: it is a source of destruction as well as growth. To this he contrasts the vacation sun of the tourist economy, which is “a completely positive sun,...source of happiness and euphoria, and as such...is significantly opposed to non-sun (rain, cold, bad weather).” The vacation sun results from a semiological reduction: the ambivalence of the sun is lost when opposed to the idea of non-sun. This yes/no, on/off operation of the sign is what Baudrillard describes as “semiological organization”: the process through which signs are given a cultural value.⁸

A comparable pattern of semiological difference governs the cultural boundaries of sexual identity, a phenomenon inadvertently expressed in the official U.S. Department of Transportation travel symbols. The difference between male and female bathrooms is signified by the addition of a cultural mark to the generic human form: the fin-like extrusions representing the woman’s dress. Rather than express the difference between male and female lavatories with an anatomical representation, as in these signs proposed by *National Lampoon* in the mid-1970’s, the DOT design committee stayed with the already-conventional device of the fin-like party dress.

The semiotic pattern male/female disappears in other signs in the DOT system, however, where the male figure represents humanity in general, just as the word “man” becomes a generic title in many verbal contexts. The supposedly neutral pattern of linguistic oppositions breaks down in this particular sign, which happens to depict a service relationship between an employee and a consumer. The DOT sign system thus unwittingly brings home the fact that sexual relationships

are determined not solely by biological fact, but also by culture customs, images, and structures of power.

The symbols used in commerce, information graphics, and environmental signage draw upon and reinforce dominant cultural ideas. With the rise of television journalism in the 1960's, pictograms became an important element of news graphics, where they provide symbolic logotypes for issues or events. In the television industry, such symbols are called "over-the-shoulders," referring to their ubiquitous location in the void behind a talking head. Over-the-shoulders draw upon a stock vocabulary of flags, maps, hearts, doves, and olive branches. "Over-the-shoulders" became visually more complex with the introduction of the Paint Box system in the 1980's; conceptually, however, they are virtually unchanged.

The idea of pictorial logos for news stories crossed over into print media in the late 1970's, when Nigel Holmes and Walter Bernard revamped Time to make it more competitive with television. Such logos continue to provide news events with a corporate identity. The 1970's also witnessed the renaissance of pictorial information graphics, or what Edward Tufte has called "chartoons," in which numbers are projected into entertainingly figurative scenarios.⁹ A pictographic chart from Time[?] showing an Arab "over a barrel" belies the supposed objectivity of journalistic statistics by resorting to racist caricature. The ethnic stereotype is itself a kind of hieroglyphic form, consisting of a set of conventionalized, exaggerated features.

The hieroglyph has also found its way into the verbal features of broadcast news. The ascendancy of the "sound byte" as the basic unit of News Speech reflects the media's increasing reliance on condensed chunks of information in favor of extended, linear discourse. The term "sound byte" couples the immateriality of speech with the materiality of a product—a bite-sized portion, a compacted blip of information.

The replacement of linear discourse with visual and verbal hieroglyphs in the news media is exemplified by the newspaper USA Today, which favors illustrations over text and serves up its articles in TV-sized portions. USA Today's "snapshot series" presents pictorial statistics on mass habits, supporting the publication's desire to be everybody's hometown paper by celebrating the uniformity of taste and canonizing the myth of a national consensus on such issues as how eggs should be prepared.¹⁰ USA Today came of age in the 1980's, a decade which was also fascinated with bringing comic books to life. In films such as Roger Rabbit, live-action cinema was merged with the flat, caricatured aesthetic of the cartoon, laying an opaque hieroglyphics over the depth of the filmic image.

The modernist ideal of the sharp, crisp graphic symbol is giving way to a logic which favors the folding of signs into experience. This softening of the edges between signs and reality reflects the ongoing conquest of the real by the abstract, the will to impose a legible pattern

or symbol over the amorphous mass of experience. The grafting of hieroglyphic signs onto the fullness of experience—to bring the sign to life and into life—is seen in numerous advertising campaigns. Absolut projects its product silhouette into various settings with its endlessly transformed bottle, while other ads merge the corporate hieroglyph with naturalistic settings and live-action drama. We either see living objects becoming signs, or we see corporate symbols acting as life-size elements in the landscape.

Architecture also increasingly participates in the phenomenon of the hieroglyph. Numerous office towers have come to function like graphic logos for a corporation, their silhouettes serving as massive commercial signs across the script of urban skylines, such as San Francisco's TransAmerica pyramid or New York's Citicorp building.

The expansion of global advertising strategies has been another agent in the internationalization of the public landscape. Initiated in the mid-80's by British firms such as Saatchi and Saatchi, global advertising relies on images and messages that function across diverse markets. An early example is a series of Coca-Cola ads called the Mean Joe Greene Series, which features American, Brazilian, Argentinean, and Thai sports stars, each giving a youngster a football jersey in gratitude for a Coke. Such "universal" narratives of heroism and identification are considered general and durable enough to cross cultural contexts. Global strategies increasingly preoccupy advertisers, who wish to centrally control their worldwide identity rather than entrust their marketing to local firms.

The success of this centralization depends upon the pairing of sufficiently general messages with equally generic imagery. The production of a single ad to run across different national markets has created a demand for a new "everyperson"—or "everyconsumer"—a full-bodied, full-color corollary to the international man of airport signage. It has created a need for what a marketing director at Coca-Cola described as a "global teenager": "There is global media now, like MTV. And there is a global teenager. The same kid you see at the Ginza in Tokyo is in Piccadilly Square in London, in Pushkin Square, at Notre Dame."¹¹

Of course, Coca-Cola and MTV have a vested interest in the concept of a universal teenager and, furthermore, Tokyo, London, and Moscow hardly fulfill the definition of "globalness." Yet the projection of a globally consistent consumer—through advertising, marketing, and packaging—increasingly will inform the public representation of cultural identity.

For example, the international marketing of Frosted Flakes uses a young man whose racial, ethnic, and national identity are uncertain. His generic good looks allow him to function as a logotypical consumer in American, Latin American, and European contexts. Tony the Tiger presents another approach within global advertising: the cartoon mascot/spokesperson who escapes questions of cultural identity

entirely. The cartoon/mascot is a speaking, acting logo—a proprietary beast of burden who is trademark and spokesperson rolled into one.

The economic and bureaucratic advantage of global campaigns is that advertisers can approach divergent audiences as a unified market, as in the United Colors of Benetton campaign. In contrast to Frosted Flakes, Benetton has constructed a global market not by blurring cultural difference but by incorporating cultural difference as its theme or trademark. While Frosted Flakes attempts to override racial and cultural specificity, the Benetton campaign makes a fashion statement about cultural difference.

The possibility of a “world culture” in the next millennium brings with it the same anxieties that attended the postwar uniformity of American culture. The loss of individuality and the sense of placelessness in American suburbia can be extrapolated to a worldwide context. Mass media, internationalized markets, and tourism suggest a future “world culture” of stunning sameness.

Internationalization, especially as expressed in the U.S. Department of Transportation symbols, has been viewed as a democratizing force that facilitates intercultural communication and contributes to an ecology of information through an economy of signs. What many instances of internationalization show, however, is a hegemonic relationship between the officially sanctioned “language of internationalism” and the specific cultural contexts which they inhabit. The sign for “women’s toilet” in a Saudi Arabian university has been modified by the addition of the silhouette of a veil, since the long dress depicted could just as easily signify the traditional robes worn by Muslim men. The use of pictorial symbols is, in itself, problematic for Muslim religious codes, which discourage representations of the body.

Consider also the poorly conceived sign that has been used on San Diego freeways to alert drivers to Mexican immigrants who run across the freeway trying to avoid the customs checkpoints. The image of the family in that sign was interpreted by Spanish-speaking people as a directive to “cross here.” Thus the very audience most in danger was misled by a sign directed at drivers, rather than pedestrians.

Modern hieroglyphs crystallize through simplification and repetition: by offering schematic icons for film genres, news events, or corporate messages, the hieroglyph visually categorizes experience into tidy packages, often reducing it to a flattened cliché. One of the chief functions of graphic design is to generate such tidy icons. But are designers only in the business of purveying dominant ideologies and pandering to the reduced attention spans of contemporary audiences? Could the code of repetitive symbols and schemes that provides the bulk of our visual diet be used for something more than passive instruction or the caricature of complex ideas into univocal statements? If graphic design provides an interface between people and products, could it not also provide an

interface between people and culture? We call this utopian project for design in the next millennium “critical wayfinding,” or the construction of interfaces which serve not to package corporate messages, but rather to provide alternate routes of access to media and information.

For example, one of the chief inventors of international pictograms was Otto Neurath, a Viennese philosopher and social scientist who pioneered the use of pictorial symbols in the 1920’s and 1930’s as a means of public, cross-cultural education. Although his pictograms are remembered now as the ubiquitous signage found in train stations, airports, and art museums, in his own lifetime he used them to display social statistics in a visually accessible way.

Designers working in the critical spirit of Otto Neurath today include Dennis Livingston, a Baltimore-based activist designer who uses pictorial symbols to track distribution of wealth across the categories of race, sex, profession, and family organization. His chart of Social Stratification allows readers to see vertical paths running upward through the economic heap, expressing the fact that for many people social identity is formed more by profession (e.g., office work vs. factory work) than by income.

A billboard-sized poster created by Michael Lebron, a New York-based artist and designer, uses the language of advertising and information design to compare the amount of money spent preventing terrorist attacks on international airplane travel to the amount of money spent preventing the death of poor children across the globe. A 1988 billboard designed by Sheila de Bretteville and the Brooklyn 7 entitled Can-U-Read-Me? uses a combination of pictures, letters, and symbols to encourage people to learn to read. By showing non-readers how much they already know just by living in a literate culture, this hieroglyphic billboard helps to demystify literacy and thus to make it more accessible.

In a more comic vein, the designers of Spy Magazine in the 1980’s created a mode of information graphics which derails the intellectual paternalism of mainstream news media and explores instead the messy subconscious of the information age. The tongue-in-cheek yet meticulously archival style of Spy’s news graphics, invented by Stephen Doyle and Alex Isley in the mid-80’s, is an example of design that works within yet against the dominant codes of the media.

These examples, taken from both the context of activist design and the commercial media, indicate some paths that designers could pursue at the edge of the millennium. Graphic design, as the interface between people and products, information, and environments, has the potential to interpret, revise, and critique the world as well as to simplify and condense it. The notion that design should be transparent, and that we are simply legibility- and problem-solvers, offers a recessive and reactive role for design that is ultimately disempowering.

Notes

1. Kenneth Frampton questions the legitimacy of “communication” as an architectural value in his essay “Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in Hal Foster, ed., *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 16-30.
2. On the history and theory of international pictograms, see Ellen Lupton, “Reading Isotype,” in Victor Margolin, ed., *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
3. On corporate identity, see Maud Lavin, “Design in the Service of Commerce,” in Mildred Friedman, ed., *Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History* (Minneapolis and New York: Walker Art Center and Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 126-143.
4. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
5. I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).
6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1974), 30-44.
7. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983); Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
8. Jean Baudrillard, “Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction,” in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 88-101.
9. Edward Tufte, *Envisioning Information* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990).
10. J. Abbott Miller, “USA Today: Learning from Las Vegas,” *Print* XLIV:VI (December 1991): 90-97.
11. Peter S. Sealey, Senior Vice President and Director of Global Marketing for Coca-Cola, quoted in *The New York Times* (November 18, 1991).