

# “I know it when I see it”: Graphic violence, graphic sex, And now, graphic design

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First, I would like to thank the organizers and programmers of this conference, especially Dimitri Siegel, for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts here. Second, those of you who brought tomatoes may wish to take this opportunity to reach for them now... I wrote this paper not just in an effort to provoke an audience, but also to act as a call for awareness.

Graphic design is the new porn. Visual communication design is the accepted face of graphic design, because let's face it, graphic design has become obscene. “Graphic” is a dirty word, and graphic design needs to be regulated. It should be censored, roped off and hidden from young, impressionable minds. I am told that visual information must be denotative, I am not supposed to like the connotative excesses of the graphic. But I covet it. I get off on decoration, excessive forms, glorious textures, luscious color, bulging type, muscular, intertwined illustrations, and glistening varnishes. I am attracted to the flirtatious nature of graphic design. It refuses to commit to a message delivered in a singular manner and so its coquettishness attracts me all that much more. Let's face it, who can honestly admit that they haven't secretly been excited at the sight of a double hit of hot pink Pantone Fluorescent 805 *just because*? If graphic sex is too explicit, and graphic violence is too horrendous, when did graphic design warrant a triple-x rating to become so excessive that it needed to be re-labeled “visual communication design”?

Some may claim that one of the aspirations of Modernism was to bring a clarity of communication into the public realm and that today's re-labeling of graphic design to “visual communication design” is simply a closing outcome of that goal. But when the historical avant-garde sought to bring Modernism's tenets of clarity and transparency to society, they did so by using jarring visual effects—rotated grids, photomontage, expressive typography, overprinted colours and images—to communicate their goal. In short, they attempted to distinguish their work from the messages of advertising and consumption by using formal means that were strange and unfamiliar to a general public



of the 1920s. Yet I pause to wonder about a dearth of formal exploration today. In fact, the symbiotic relationship between formal exploration and its handmaiden communication is sorely lacking in the realm of “visual communication.”

I began this paper on what seems an irrational note, but in truth I am concerned that the discipline of graphic design is splitting into two distinct categories that are a reflection of more than just a matter of title. Soon, there will be a profession of “graphic design” and a separate profession of “visual communication design.” And ironically, while it aims to express ideas in visual form, when the emphasis of visual communication is its *logocentric* capacity, which is to say, its capacity for rational thought as the reflection of language, visual communication’s capacity to make images declines. At its most extreme, the difference between directions lies in the notion that visual communication design potentially reduces design to typesetting albeit with a revised title.

We have an identity crisis among university programs because of this confusion over the terms “graphic design” and “visual communication design.” It’s as if graphic design served no purpose and somehow “communication” rectifies that oversight. Somehow, in the 85+ years since William Addison Dwiggins named our discipline and separated it from the realm of craft to a way of thinking in its own right, graphic designers have not been communicating. Yet in the rush to justify “purpose” or functionality in the new landscape of the corporate-oriented educational model—one which has displaced the university as a fount of humanist endeavor—the trap of visual communication design is that without an allowance for the verbally unquantifiable, even excessive, aspects of graphic design, the work of visual communication design can lead to results that are staid, commodifiable and a reflection of facile thought. It is no small co-incidence that work produced with a singular emphasis on the denotative aspects of visual communication resembles the same outputs of marketing and advertising: Visual communication design may be selling a thought instead of toothpaste, but the products employed end up looking the same.

Additional proof of this bifurcation in the discipline is found in the fact that a number of schools that lead the discipline in the past—Art Center, Cranbrook, CalArts, Yale, RISD—continue to matriculate students with MFAs in Graphic Design (rarer still is the Master of Graphic Design degree, such as found at NC State), while many other schools—perhaps as a symptom of constrained budgets and a misplaced self-conscious guilt with respect to their state or provincial funding, are turning to matriculating MFAs in Visual Communication Design as a means to justify their existence.

But the split between graphic designers and visual communication designers is already here. I had the recent pleasure of visiting the school where I received my MFA, Cranbrook Academy of Art, and I was struck by the absolute fearlessness of the students and the work they were producing. There was not a shred of self doubt. The students had little concern about whether their work communicated or not (which it did), whether it engaged a broader public (which it did) or whether it was even design (which it was).

Instead, the students' work asked larger questions about what defines the discipline, how is the work part of the continuity of graphic design, and what does the work contribute to the production of knowledge about the world. The students took risks.

When I returned to Toronto and mentioned the unbridled optimism of the students to two of my fellow colleagues, they both thought it was great. But one colleague, who was sympathetic, nonetheless stated, "They can do that because they are training artists."

Huh? Again, somehow, there is the perception that designers whose work is graphically intensive and ambitious cannot function in the profession. Yet Cranbrook alumni, as well as the alumni of many other graphically-intensive programs, can be found among many of the leading creative agencies from Europe to North America to Japan.

Another colleague was equally buoyed by my excitement upon my return. But again, after I explained why I was so re-energized (because we tend to forget our earlier enthusiasms), my colleague related how dismaying it was that during our program's annual external assessor portfolio reviews for the graduating class, those students whose work was "'pretty,' but devoid of content" was lauded by the visiting assessors. But my response to that statement is why are the students whose work is supposedly so conceptually significant, so graphically weak and un compelling? Obviously, communicating the message is not fully sufficient to the making of design.

While it is always so much easier to justify the reasoning behind an action by appealing to function, aka "concept," aka "rationale," the appeal to function should *not* stop at the immediate, denotative message. The necessity to communicate a message is understood as the essential kernel to the work of visual communication design *and* graphic design. The difference lies in the approach to achieving that goal. The "graphic" challenges the viewer (and designer) because it communicates via connotative means *in addition to* the message delivered by its denotative counterpart. The connotative relies on intuition, mood, texture, colour, shape, et al. to generate a context which provides information. The connotative is "understood" but often not at the consciously verbal level. The connotative operates as feeling, as sensation, as atmosphere. The emphasis on the singularly immediate and digestible message, i.e. the denotative, is the "common sense" approach to action, but this anti-intellectual position has the secondary effect of nullifying the operations of visual exploration that have been a constant accompaniment to graphic design. Instead, today exploration and experimentation have been replaced with "concept" and "research." Which is not to say that previously, graphic explorations did not involve *concepts* and *research*, but the ground tread was of formal consequence. It had the added benefit expanding the possibilities of form while simultaneously fulfilling the needs of communication.

The splitting of "graphic" from "design" suggests that it was too excessive from the beginning. Like the film that displays too much skin or too much gore, the switch to visual communication design would have us believe that the graphic in design displays

a little too much of itself (*horrors!*). But rather than assume that the graphic is an impediment to content, that content is at the center and the graphic merely adorns content in an ornamental way, the graphic aspect of design highlights what graphic design does. This is to say that we should be recognizing that the “graphic nature” of graphic design occupies the center *as well*.