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Graphic design and mystification

Sven, the husband of my grandmother, regularly uses the tools of the graphic designer. He's a retired biology teacher but he does not shy away from graphic design. He organizes family images, family trees and interesting findings with headings and graphics on pages. He happily applies warped text, gradients, frames, shadows and dingbats. He prints these sheets and hands out to members of the family for special occasions.

If I were to ask Sven, how he came about making all of these decisions, he is not likely to explain that *"The slightly italicized font encapsulates relentless service innovation, resourceful spirit and an ongoing drive for operational excellence"*[1] or that *"The bold underline has been integrated into the composition as a visual representation of the strong foundation the family is built upon and as an elevating platform for the future"*[2] nor would he say that he *"juxtaposed* (grandmas face?) *to a contemporary figure in order to create a conceptual and visual imbalance"*[3]. Most likely, he would explain which tools he had been using and that he based his decisions on intuition and logic combined with pure excitement and inspiration. Sven feels no need to mystify the circumstances of his work. Perhaps more importantly, he isn't trained to do so.

In his 1946 article *Politics and the English language* George Orwell argues that the language we use is what shapes our reality. It reflects and affects the politics of our time. He writes: *Thought corrupts language, but language can also corrupt thought.* He refuses to accept the idea of language growing naturally, something he sees as a weak argument against questioning the misuse of language:

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.

Graphic Design is an unqualified profession in the sense that it can be practiced by amateurs and academically trained designers alike. This broad engagement means that

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1   The new visual identity of The Hong Kong Aircraft Engineering Company described on the blog The branding source and republished on designjargonbullshit.com
2   Description of the new logo for The ACC by branding blog Brand New ,republished on designjargonbullshit.com
3   Inarea Identity and Design Network on the identity of the Italian National Museum of Arts of the XXI Centurys, republished on designjargonbullshit.com

graphic design can do great things. Like natural speech, which is practiced by everyone except babies and animals, it can convince, illuminate and question as well as deceive, manipulate and confuse.

While studying and working in the field of graphic design I've come across (and been part of producing) a lot of mystifying speech about graphic design. At some point I even thought that it was what being a trained designer implied – wrapping your work in elaborate platitudes and empty metaphors in order to make the work process seem more refined or complex than it actually was. Or to blow-up the work. This might seem harmless at first, but when empty or mystifying speech take up too much space, there isn't much room for critical self-reflection or new approaches to the subject. The qualified jibberish creates a placeholder body of content where a truly interesting discussion could be taking place. But mystification is more serious than that, it's an efficient way of maintaining the status quo. This leads to the question: who benefits from this mystification?

It's not always easy to know exactly when mystification is taking place. Perhaps partially because we're quick to blame our own ignorance when a piece of information seem difficult to grasp. That's where the power of mystification lies. John Berger defines Mystification as *the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident[4].* The dictionary exemplifies mystification with how lawyers may mystify the legal system so that laymen find it unintelligible. Elizabeth Minnich[5] talks about mystified concepts being ideas and categories that are repeated so often that they are rarely challenged. It could be seen as a master suppression technique. A strategy where a dominant group tries to maintain their position by using social manipulation (Ås 1978), in this case by making something obscure that could be perfectly clear. It's a way of withholding information in order to maintain the power structure that you yourself benefit from.

In Ways of Seeing and in the context of art history, John Berger problematizes how when something is called Art, the way it is looked at, is affected by several assumptions about art. Assumptions concerning: Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste etc. These assumptions obscure history and hinder us from truly situating ourselves in the past. We're deprived of seeing the history that belongs to us. Berger argues that the ruling class

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4   Ways of Seeing, 1973
5   *Transforming Knowledge 1990*

benefits from this mystification of the past. It's in the interest of this privileged minority to create a past that justifies the present.

> **Example of Mystification:** "He is a person of character. He is a tall man formed by rigor and exacting good taste. He is ageless. He acts as an agent of tranquility and is dressed like a priest in dark, apparently simple, yet superbly cut clothes, or on weekends, like a monk, in hooded sweatshirts over soft drawstring pajama pants. He is an arresting person with piercing all-seeing birdlike eyes that observe the world from behind intellectual, round-rimmed spectacles. For an instant, you might mistake him for a Swiss modernist designer of the last century, all red and white and angular. Yet he is completely the contrary, all white and red, with a softer edge." *- Li Edelkoort, A Dialect in Design Dissecting Kenya Hara, 2007"*

> **This piece of text is mystifying not only in the sense of complicating the designer role by making it appear unattainable and divine (Edelkoort compares the designer to a priest), but the author essentializes his appearance too. In Li Edelkoort's reality round rimmed glasses means you're an intellectual. She even manages to squeeze in a pre-supposed idea of good and bad taste. All in all, she describes a designer as a bird monk priest that doesn't age.**

Berger exemplifies mystification with a published study on the painter Frans Hals. His last two paintings were commissioned portrayals of Governors and Governesses of an Alms house for old paupers in seventeenth century Haarlem. The painter was over eighty years old, down and out and extremely poor at this time. He was on meager social welfare, which was administrated by the very same people that sat for him. The art historian denies that this would have influenced the portrayals. Instead he goes on analyzing the composition by using expressions like *Harmonius fusion, unforgettable contrast, powerful whites* etc. The art historian's deliberate disinterest in the lived experience leaves the reader with detached 'art appreciation' and the painting being considered merely as an object. The art historian robs the viewer of her own true experience of the art work by mystifying it.

> **Example of Mystification:** "I consider graphic design to be 'all things'. I think that the point of calling it graphic design will become nonsense, and that the obstacle of the name will be lost from now on. This means graphic design will become 'natural'. Graphic design is not a sublime thing, but probably has already reached the stage where it has transcended the wall which is not visible to all eyes, and has formed a
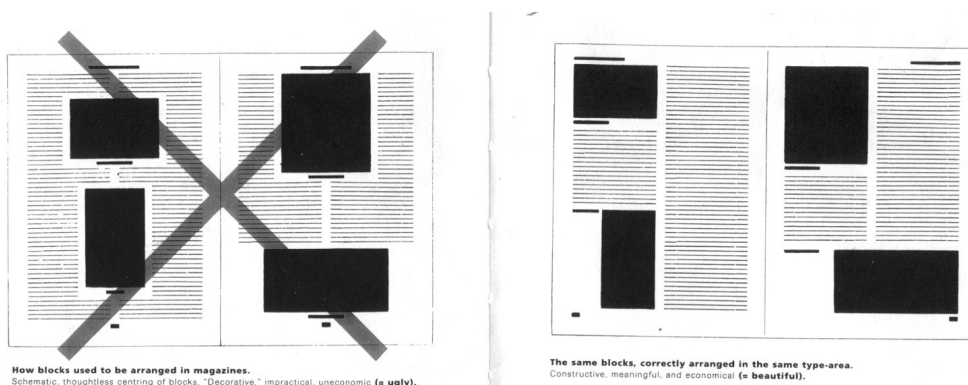
still newer form. And it will continue expanding from now on, because graphic design is 'all things'. " - *Ippei Gyoubu, Graphic Design Now, 2005*

The idea of graphic design being 'all things' seem like a tiresomely hopeless and irresponsible one. Almighty and celestial features are mixed with an idea of naturalness. It seems graphic design, according to Gyoubu, is a force that can't be controlled and therefore nobody can take responsibility for it either. This is mystification of the subject.

Berger moves on to present time and discusses the new status of original works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction of images. Works of art are being reproduced and spread constantly. He argues that mystification re-enters here. The work of art is seen as an object whose value depends on its rarity. This value is affirmed by the price tag it gets on the art market. But since art is seen as greater than regular commerce, the pricing is also motivated by the spiritual value of the work. Graphic designers do not produce unique works in this sense. In fact, the reproducibility of graphic design work and its relative lack of material value are a couple of its character features. But assumptions regarding Beauty, Truth, Genius, Civilization, Form, Status, Taste etc seem relevant to look at when it comes to design. Mystifying speech about design, often try to declare universal truths regarding these topics, even today.

Example of Mystification: "The value of an object is not measured by its origin, but by its approach to perfection of form, the highest and purest design." *- Jan Tschichold, The New Typography, 1928*

How blocks used to be arranged in magazines.
Schematic, thoughtless centring of blocks. "Decorative," impractical, uneconomic (= ugly).

The same blocks, correctly arranged in the same type-area.
Constructive, meaningful, and economical (= beautiful).

Images from *The New Typography* where Tschichold clearly instructs the reader how to make an "ugly" or "beautiful" layout.

Like many modernists Jan Tschichold generously used the words *perfection*

and *pure* in connection to *design*. There's an assumed *highest* form of design so we must assume that there's a *lowest* too and there's a *purest* so we can only imagine there's a *tainted* type of design. The sentence is in passive form to underline that it's an objective truth and not a personal conviction. The design he describes seem to exist on a level that's almost unattainable. It is worth mentioning that Tschichold himself later on dismissed these ideas.

Divine proportions in calligraphy and the golden ratio come to mind when thinking about design and mystification from a historical perspective. Ideas of divinity, purity and beauty still seem to live on and have been perverted and repacked in several forms throughout time. Within the design world these are surprisingly unquestioned values. Phrases concerning these topics are often used in mystifying speech.
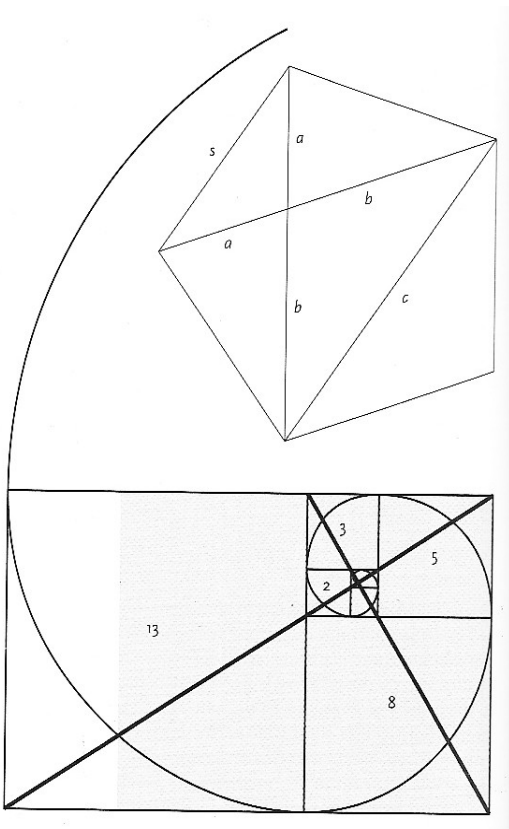
Example of Mystification: "The proportions of a page are like intervals in music. In a given context, some are consonant, others dissonant. Some are familiar; some are also inescapable, because of their presence in the structures of the natural as well as the man-made world. Some proportions also seem particularly linked to living things." - *Robert Bringhurst, The Elements of Typographic Style Paperback, 2002*

The readability discussion that took place in the 90's questioned this idea of natural harmony (and if anything, it is chaos that has been found in nature since the ecology boom in the 70's). Humans are curious and adaptive creatures who can accept and embrace all imaginable page layouts. This does not rule out that these ideas can be used as tools or inspiration.

In the 2013 article "Circumnavigating and crushing", the artist group Mycket (Katarina Bonnevier, Mariana Alves and Thérèse Kristiansson) and the graphic designers of Bang Magazine[6] (Alexandra Falagara and Brita Lindvall) reflect back on their design education

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6   Bang is a Swedish Feminist publication

and the presence of modernist ideals and mystification in the tutoring:

"BANG: When I trained to be a graphic designer there was never any explanation to why things had to look the way they had to look. Everything was evaluated on bases I never quite understood. Lots of terminology was thrown about, and we were all expected to understand it. "Balanced" was one of those words. I remember staring at the blocks of text floating on the page, trying to understand how I ought to move them in order for them to reach their equilibrium. I mean, where is the centre of balance?

MYCKET: There are many words like that going around, like mystified concepts (In Transforming Knowledge, Elizabeth Minnich defines mystified concepts as ideas and categories so frequently used that they are rarely challenged.) that one is expected to know the meaning of. I learned to interpret which aesthetic expressions were being encouraged and rewarded: thin dimensions, light colours, so-called natural materials, preferably moulded wood veneer, as thin as possible and easily stacked. The modernist expressions and shapes were never debated; they were simply justified by being practical, functional and democratic."

John Berger talks about mystification as a way of increasing the value of fine art on the art market. In the case of applied art, one can only speculate whether it's the designer role itself that needs to be elevated through mystification, or the products we produce. Perhaps both. Since graphic design can be practiced by anyone, mystification could be a method of giving it value. Considering the purpose of a lot of graphic design it is fair to say that graphic designers should be master mystifiers. Meaning, the scope of a lot of graphic design seem to be to mystify a product or topic by adding thick layers of myth to it in order to convince an audience. This way of working could very well influence the language used by graphic designers. Back to Orwell: *Thought corrupts language, but language can also corrupt thought.* In saying this, it is also fair to contemplate whether this would be an actual issue or simply a distinctive feature of the subject that should be embraced, studied and developed.

> **Example of Mystification:** "To design is to "build" a structure with an image inside the mind of the recipient. In this case, the materials are not only external stimulation but also massive amounts of memories awakened by stimulation. Designing

highlights subtle differences between recalled memories and reality" - *Kenya Hara, Designing Design, 2007*

This writing could be justified as inspired wordings, or poetry even. The general mystification is so extensive it almost demystifies itself. Here, the designer enters the mind of the recipient and builds up a structure using his/her memories and blurs the line between reality and these memories. It is a sermon written by a priest who can understand the minds of his congregation better than themselves. It is another example of singling out the designer as having divine powers.

SHV Think Book 1996–1896, commissioned by SHV Holdings (SHV is a dutch trading company, founded in 1896) designed by Irma Boom, 1996. A case of deliberately using mystification as a format?
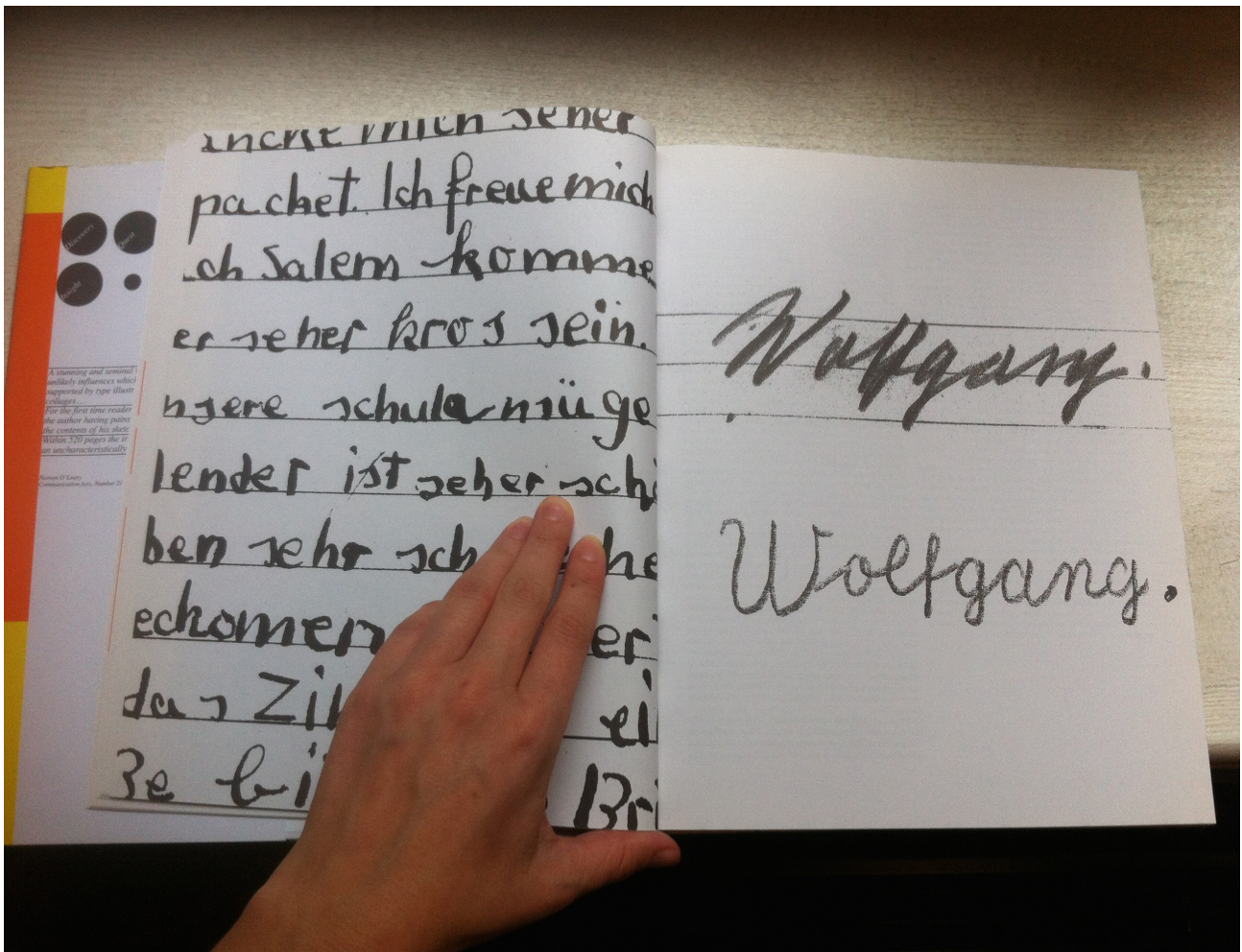
Zoomed in images of the handwriting of Wolfgang Weingart in *Wolfgang Weingart: My Way to Typography, 2000.*

It is also worth considering whether the subject graphic design is suffering from a sort of inferiority complex, perhaps due to being a fairly young subject with a not so developed theoretical backbone. In her 1992 article "On Overcoming Modernism", Lorraine Wild discusses the confusion or sense of loss that the dismissal of modernism implied. Dismissing modernism means dismissing universal truths and in combination with the development of technology that made the tools of graphic design accessible to all, the basis of the subject was perhaps shaken:

We know, intuitively, that our personal struggle with idealism and pragmatism is affected by the values we bring to our work and the context in which we create it. The uncertainty of values in contemporary graphic design practice and the discourse that surrounds it now (and probably will through the '90s), has led to a notion that there has been a loss of consensus as to what constitutes 'good' design. The shifting nature and context of our activity as graphic designers is now often described in terms of loss. What we have

definitely lost is the ability to lean on the principles of Modernism to regain that consensus. This presents a conceptual challenge to graphic designers, because the ideals of Modernism, especially those having to do with universality, objectivity, timelessness, 'problem-solving' and social values, have been the wobbly base upon which the professional identity of the graphic design community has traditionally rested.

This loss of a "founding father" could partially explain mystification. Grasping for ideas that used to define the subject, repacking and repeating them as a sort of validation. It could also explain the reoccurring mystifying speech that borrows from or reaches towards other, more established fields of study like architecture, fine arts, philosophy, music etc.

> **Example of Mystification:** "The creation of a strong cohesion between impressions expressed through printed and digital media demands of a graphic designer a substantial supply of cultural equipment. It places the designer in the vicarious position of director, conductor and composer…" - *UNA Design, Graphic Design Now, 2005*
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> **This is a clear case of pretentious diction. The quote seems to describe the work of a graphic designer as requiring skills. Both technical skills and common knowledge. And this is why the designer is no longer a designer but a director, conductor and composer. The need for skills equals elevating the designer to something else. Something qualified.**

In *The grand unified theory of nothing: design, the cult of science, and the lure of big ideas*, Randy Nakamura problematizes this ambition to "travel upwards".

"...the social status of design has always been up for grabs... Being neither fine art nor vernacular art, but sampling, appropriating, and utilizing both domains, design occupies an area Pierre Bourdieu calls the "sphere of the legitimizable," the zone between high and low culture that is constantly being contested, reconfigured, and challenged. This is design as a middlebrow cultural practice. What is fascinating about contemporary design practice is the attempt by its practitioners to raise design above its middlebrow pedigree to a "higher realm"..."

This involves borrowing from or being associated with other disciplines and "real" sciences.

Nakamura challenges this lack of faith in design. He even suggests that it could be interesting to imagine the roles being reversed, that "the sciences" would want to learn or borrow from design culture.

Example of Mystification: "…what the texts collected here have in common is an interest in the book as a material space for critical self-reflection and exchange"
- *The form of the book book, 2009*

Book designers sometimes like to talk about the book as a space or an architectural structure. Perhaps inferiority complex plays a part here. Architecture with its technically and artistically advanced features, seldom has its legitimacy questioned.
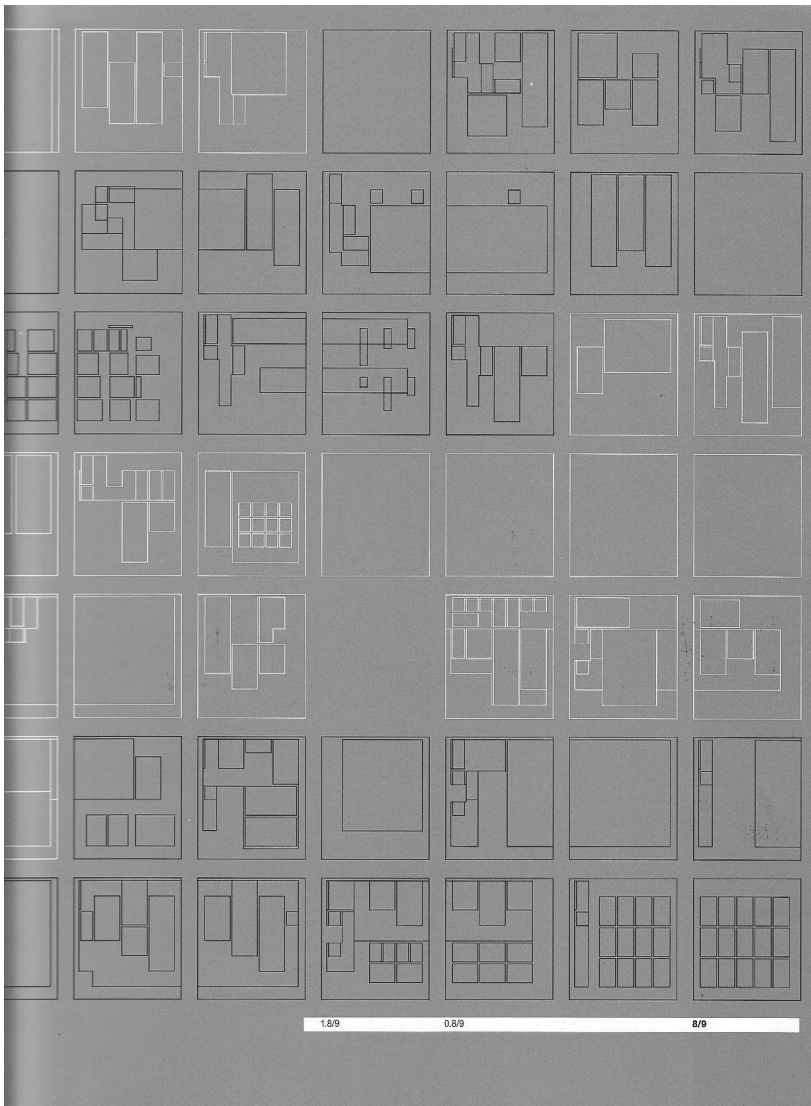
A page in The Designer and the Grid, showing different ways of using a grid in a layout.

Example of Mystification: ”I am interested in the creation of effective systems which facilitate the consistent composition of graphic elements within a space, this method of working usually demands the definition of a universal grid structure, the repetitive use of basic units of measurement and the reduction of graphic elements to their simplest visual forms.” - *Dave Shaw, The designer and the grid, 2002*

The grid, like the book, is getting extensively mystified by designers. This layout tool made up out of evenly distributed vertical and horizontal lines appear to have supernaturalistic and/or extremely complex scientific theories backing up its existence. What this designer means to say in this quote is basically "I like to use a grid to organize graphics". ***Systems, space, universal, structure, the repetitive use of basic units of measurement.*** **It seems like the simpler the technology the more advanced the mystification.**

Another possible explanation could be that this speech is not so much ill-intended mystification as it is the result of a general indifference within the field. Perhaps caused by the industry and marketplace dictating the rules of the design world. The nineties, while embracing the emergence of the personal computer and the internet, sparked a lively design discourse connected to ideas about the merits of this new technology. In ”Towards critical autonomy, or can graphic design save itself?” Andrew Blauvelt discusses how this debate slowly subsided towards the end of the nineties and (healthy) tensions eased as the marketplace and academy accepted a state of style eclecticism. Blauvelt underlines how this pluralism rules out any critical edge and is replaced with a sort of picking and choosing between styles and aesthetics, all according to the logic of the marketplace.

”Lacking the specificity of a medium, graphic design tends to be identified more through its varied products than any sense of social practice.Thus graphic design is reduced to its commodity form—simply a choice of vehicles for delivering a message: ad, billboard, book, brochure, typeface, website, and so on. Implicit in this reductive understanding is the denial of graphic design as a social practice and with it the possibility of disciplinary autonomy.”

This indicates that it is in the interest of the market system to maintain graphic designers that are willing to produce these products rather than spend time on developing ideas about some sort of autonomous practice. This should be incentive enough for promoting mystification of the subject. When reading descriptions of graphic design programs it is

striking how many of them are dictated by the industry. Not to say that the industry itself has bad intentions or isn't where most graphic designers will and want to end up, but the purpose of academia has traditionally been to develop new ideas and ways of thinking in order to redefine the industry, rather than the other way around.

"The Official Undergraduate Degree in Graphic Design trains students to be creative professionals with the technical and innovative knowledge to develop successful projects for the current market. During the last two years of the program, students will be trained in a future profession, specializing in the area of their choice, with a methodology that is specific to that profession. " - Description of Undergraduate Degree in Graphic Design, IED – Istituto Europeo di Design Madrid

In some cases mystification is harmless or need to simply be understood in the context of the place and time that it was produced (as in the case of Warde and Tschichold) and surely mystification can be a fun trick or figure of rhetoric. But as a general rule, mystification is malicious because its intention is to deceive. It is produced from a non-critical position and it is a symptom of a malfunctioning system. The way we look at knowledge is perhaps key here. If the knowledge system of graphic design is defined by a homogenous elite and it remains unchallenged because it is constantly referred to as design authority, these repetitions make up the mystified concepts that ultimately hinder "alternative" thinking (Minnich 1990). *Bang* and *Mycket* again about the "rules" inherited from modernism that they were taught in design school:

BANG: Oh, I want to move on from design school, but it is as if the memories multiply once one starts looking back. It is hard to let go of something that has been so thoroughly ingrained over such a long period of time.

MYCKET: If form and design are to help us make things happen the way we want them to, these rules are not helping. They limit my actions and my will, because they are not accommodating. Nothing is allowed to stand out. This is counterproductive in relation to my life!

BANG: They told me I had to learn how to do things the right way before I could do them

the "wrong" way. That stuck with me for years. It's just ridiculous, as if you would have to learn to fuck guys first, even though you know you want to fuck girls.

Example of Mystification: "...you will find that almost all the virtues of the perfect wine-glass have a parallel in typography. There is the long, thin stem that obviates fingerprints on the bowl. Why? Because no cloud must come between your eyes and the fiery heart of the liquid. Are not the margins on book pages similarly meant to obviate the necessity of fingering the type-page? Again: the glass is colourless or at the most only faintly tinged in the bowl, because the connoisseur judges wine partly by its colour and is impatient of anything that alters it. There are a thousand mannerisms in typography that are as impudent and arbitrary as putting port in tumblers of red or green glass!" - *Beatrice Warde, The Crystal Goblet, 1932*

Warde's article promotes clarity in design, typography more specifically. Ironically its language is fairly ornamental. The author uses wine and wine goblets as metaphors for typography and pages. This seems contradictory since wine is a subject that strongly relies on mystification and prestige, it also has strong connotations to class. It's an unfortunate metaphor that hints the social status of graphic designers.

Speculating in who could possibly gain from mystification, and keeping Orwell in mind as well as the faces of modernism, it seems worthwhile to look at the social structures within the design field. There's an inherent problem with representation when it comes to graphic design. The designer community has a self-image as progressive and equal but is too homogenous to understand its own limitations. The same goes for design education[7]. One can draw a parallel to postcolonial studies, the voice of the western intellectuals occupy the speaking platform that they argue should be held by the "subaltern" that the very same theorists wish to liberate. (Spivak 1988). The misallocation of power in society as a whole is reflected, perhaps even exaggerated in the world of graphic design (Fagerström 2013). Even though it has been argued that the designer role itself is fairly free from e.g gender stereotyping (Vienne 2002) women are still a minority in top managerial positions within the design field and perhaps more importantly the norm for a designer is still to be a white man. Being in design school, the references made by both students and teachers are predominantly white male designers. This affirms the prevailing ideas of who a designer is

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7   In 2005, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education reviewed the art departments, and this review showed that recruitment for higher education within the arts is very narrow; students from working-class backgrounds are greatly underrepresented. Meanwhile, students from white-collar homes are overrepresented. With the 2011 tuition fee reform (non-european students would have to pay tuition fee), applications from non-European countries also went down by 80 %.

and what he looks like, where he's from and what he makes. These attributes correspond with the attributes of those in power. Ultimately, this means that those who have no incentive for questioning the status quo are the very same ones that hold the tools for doing so. Needless to say this should lead to stagnation as far as democratizing the design field goes.

Considering possible strategies of demystification I come to think of Berthold Brecht. He explored the theatre as a forum for political ideas. He developed the theory and practice of the so called "epic theatre". This idea suggested that the theatre should not be a place where the spectator was lured to identify emotionally with the characters on stage. Instead, the theatre should provoke self-reflection and critical thinking - meaning, the artificiality of the situation should be emphasized rather than mystified. One of the key techniques to perform such theatre was the so called Alienation effect. This technique could involve a brightly lit stage, fully visible rearranging of the set and actors addressing the audience, looking directly into their eyes.

Even though this theory specifically deals with theatre, it comes back to me as an idea that can be applied to graphic design practice. If anything because graphic design is loud as hell and can be as persuasive as I imagine the theatre once was. This loudness implies that graphic design should provoke critical thinking and raise questions rather than manipulate and bamboozle. One prerequisite for doing that is to be clear about the conditions in which graphic design operates. Or, dare I say, graphic design might as well be dismissed as far as social practice goes.

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