

Motopomo: The historical-theoretical background to contemporary graphic design practices

a
Dissertation
by

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MOTOPOMO: THE HISTORICAL-THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC DESIGN PRACTICES

1. Introduction

Motopomo – a phrase that conjures up imagery laden with symbolic meaning. Consider, as I do, for instance, a colossal electromechanical contraption, a monstrous machine filling an expanse further than the eye can see with various mechanical, electronic and digital components and gadgets that interact and combine as massive cogs and wheels with steam puffing and lights flashing and making various outdated hissing and clunking sounds in unison with modern, digital-age, electronic beeps and blips. Optical fibre cables, wire and old-fashioned chain and cable systems amalgamate in chaotic twists and turns to connect an array of mostly un-manned terminals, control panels and work-stations with levers and buttons, up-to-the-minute LCD touch- and video screens and pulleys amid a multitude of parts which inclusively constitutes a smorgasbord of old and new. This gigantic machine – seemingly anthropomorphic in the way in which its hissing breath and jerking movements gives it life as it mutates, multiplies and renews itself, growing additions as demands require – represents the mechanisms driving the contemporary age, postmodernity, with all its complexities, diversities and contradictions. Thus, the term *motopomo* suggests the idea of ‘the motor driving the postmodern’. At the same time, and more importantly perhaps in the context of this study, this invented expression also designates the journey from the modern to the postmodern era. Consequently, this vast imagined digi-electromechanical contraption that designates the complex workings of the contemporary era becomes the product of an ongoing cycle of construction, destruction, re-construction and deconstruction underway since the conception of modernity. As such, the concept *motopomo* denotes ‘modern to postmodern’ (*moderntopostmodern*).

This study proposes to illustrate that the twentieth century passage from modernity to postmodernity, with its induction of socio-cultural development and attitudinal change, exists as a fundamental means of informing the character of contemporary graphic design practice¹. Today, in contrast to the intentions of this study, many appraisals of graphic design work would seem to place too much emphasis on the analyses and evaluation of the stylistic character of creative practices and not enough on the theoretical, historical and attitudinal issues surrounding them. As such, this study attempts to reveal the meaning and moreover the relevance of philosophical, social, cultural and critical theory for contemporary², postmodern graphic design practices. This is done in order to provide graphic designers with a reflective awareness of the structure of the cultural context within which they work, and takes into account twentieth century cultural theory and twentieth century, western graphic design practice, within the framework of the passage from modernity to postmodernity.

It can be put forward that twentieth century modernism, specifically modern intellectual and creative practices and socio-cultural conceptions and developments, holds the key to providing a cultural, historical-theoretical context for contemporary graphic design. Although the origins of modernity can be placed before this, it is largely during the twentieth century that the modern has had significant impact on shaping graphic design practice. In addition and quite significant is the role that

¹ At the core of graphic design lies the concept of visual communication. A graphic designer visually organises signs, symbols, images and/or words in order to communicate to an audience. Today products of the profession include printed media such as trademarks, logos and corporate identities, also packaging and label design as well as informational graphics, including signage and exhibition design. Graphic design plays a key role in advertising and promotion, producing brochures, annual reports, newspaper and magazine adverts, direct mail promotions and billboards amongst others. Graphic designers are employed by publications in various guises, from niche market, short run magazines to international glossy fashion magazines. In addition graphic designers are currently increasingly involved in screen-based communication media including design for television, film and computer (Aynsley, 2001:6).

² I use this term here quite broadly to refer to the practice of graphic design roughly between the years 1980 and 2000.

modern conceptions of culture and society, politics and other developments have played in constituting a 'modern' world which contemporary postmodernism rebelled against, and at the same time, ironically, to which graphic design practice is indentured for its survival. Furthermore, although most design historians begin the account of graphic design history, referencing visual communication, with an account of prehistoric mark-making in the form of cave or rock paintings and then move on to the history of writing and printing and so forth, it is actually fairly recent that graphic design emerged as a profession. It was William Addison Dwiggins, an American typographer, who in 1922 first coined the term 'graphic design', in order to "distinguish between different kinds of design for printing" (Aynsley, 2001:6). Richard Hollis (1994:8) and Jeremy Aynsley (2001:8) both indicate that it was only in the middle of the twentieth century that the term graphic design came into general use to describe the practice as a professional and/or educational activity. Thus, most of the existence of graphic design as a profession has been contained within the twentieth century experience of the modern, excepting the last quarter, which roughly marks that of the postmodern. Lastly, yet significantly (albeit debatably), the contemporary *postmodern* practice of graphic design is in its comparatively early forming stages and moreover, in this form is very much shaped as *a reaction to, a result of, or even a continuation of 'past' modern conceptions*. In other words it is fairly unproblematic to conceive the significant shaping role of modern concepts in casting contemporary graphic design practice. It follows, paradoxically perhaps, that the past, the modern period, particularly the first three quarters of the twentieth century, holds the key to providing a heuristic context for and thus perhaps generating a better understanding of the contemporary, postmodern practice of graphic design.

Charles Jencks (1987:8) compares the growth of the postmodern movement to a twisting, organic shape, not unlike a tree, or a snake. Similarly, in addition to the gigantic digi-electromechanical contraption described earlier, the state of postmodernism can be related to a massive, torrential, debris-laden river. Evidently it would be difficult to describe what constitutes this vast, dynamically changing mass; preferable would be to trace and characterize the subsidiaries that flow into it, or the parts that constitute it (although this would in a way make it more complex of course).

In more theoretical terms, rather than becoming entangled in the complexities and seeming contradictions of the present, this study will attempt to make sense of it by understanding how and why the various concepts and practices that contribute to the contemporary postmodern condition came into being. In addition, one of the most accessible and commonly accepted characteristics of postmodernism is that its development signifies a certain reaction to, or departure from modernism. As such, an investigation into the factors that constitute and characterise the development from the modern (and even the premodern) era into the postmodern era – which could be likened to a genealogy of sorts – would provide a backdrop against which postmodernism can be better understood. In this way the process of describing postmodernity can become more than a superficial identification of common characteristics, but rather an understanding of why and how these characteristics have come about. As such, it is important to indicate that this study will focus more on modernism, as background to the contemporary postmodern graphic design, than on postmodernism itself.

In conclusion, this study, which takes the form of a series of independent essays, will attempt – via an investigation of the passage from twentieth century socio-cultural, intellectual and creative modernism to postmodernism – to create a backdrop against which the issues surrounding contemporary graphic design can be better understood. Primary amongst these issues is its embrace of pluralism, eclecticism and eccentricity; its disregard for boundaries set up by modernism, for instance between high and low or popular culture; its defiance of rules, defining attitudes and labels (even ostensibly harmless ones such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’); as well as its consumer directed focus, amongst many other issues. Focusing primarily on the era preceding the postmodern, i.e. the modern, the relevance of mainly the social, cultural, technological, industrial and economic features of this past era will be investigated. The implications that the socio-cultural features of the modern era have in terms of creative practices, especially graphic design practice, will be examined in order to reveal, amongst other issues, how the complex, diverse, modern ‘aesthetic’ has more to do with depth-oriented cultural and intellectual attitudes than it has to do with superficial styling and fashion. Of additional importance would be to provide an overview of the modern

graphic design movement (and to a lesser extent related creative practices) in the context of contemporaneous cultural and intellectual attitudes. The passage from modernism to postmodernism will trace its lineage: from modernism's early provenance in eighteenth century Enlightenment thinking, industrialisation and modernisation; and the emergence of the early modern avant-garde movements; to modernism's coming of age in the 'high' modern movements; and to its eventual maturation into the International Style and its assimilation into commercialism as well as its 'domestication' into museums; until its final (though not complete) demise in its battle with postmodernism. It may be revealed that many issues surrounding contemporary (postmodern) graphic design in many ways developed as a result of a confrontational attitude towards the later manifestation of modernism.

2. The postmodern as a complex phenomenon: An introduction

...no matter how awkward, problematic and uncertain the concept of postmodernism might appear to be, it is now so established as a way of thinking about our time and our 'condition' that it simply cannot be ignored. (Poynor, 2003:8)

Complex, heterogeneous, pluralist, incoherent, indeterminable and irrational are just some of the terms more frequently used to describe the time we are living in today, an age commonly referred to as *postmodernity*³. Postmodernity is not only characterised by complexity, but as a result of this complexity, it is also (understandably) rather difficult to identify coherent common traits or principles that can serve as basis for a collective characterisation of the age. Small wonder, then, that there seems to be so little agreement among theorists of the postmodern, on what constitutes this phenomenon. Accordingly Jencks (1987:9) responds, on the meaning of the term postmodernism, that there is "a general confusion which is not confined to the public"

³ Some theorists avoid the term postmodernity and refer to the present day as late-modernity or radical-modernity, while others, struck by a more profound sense of discontinuity, prefer to use the term postmodernity (Cahoon, 1995:1). As the latter seems to be the more mainstream approach, for the purposes of this study, it will be my approach also.

and that “one must see that its continual growth and movement mean that no definitive answer is possible – at least not until it stops moving”.

Unlike many other movements such as Pop Art, or International Style Architecture, postmodernism is not a cohesive, intellectual movement or school of thought; it does not always have exact goals or clear-cut perspectives; neither does it have a “single dominant theoretician or spokesperson”. Glenn Ward (2003:5) goes on to explain that this is because “virtually every discipline, from philosophy to cultural studies, from geography to art history” has adopted (and adapted) its own ideas about postmodernism, as such:

Each area has produced books and periodicals with their own particular angle on the topic, each has defined postmodernism in their own terms. In short, postmodernism has proliferated. Taken on board in so many different fields, where it can refer to so many different things, its meanings have multiplied, and the sheer volume of texts it has generated have tended to obscure, rather than clarify, what on earth it is all about. The problem is what postmodernism might mean in one discipline is not necessarily compatible with what it might mean in another.

So postmodernism now leads a complicated life

From the outset it is important to identify postmodernity chronologically as a socio-cultural condition that appeared around the end of the 1970s as a successor to the modern era. In more critical theoretical terms, one of the more accessible and commonly accepted characterisations of postmodernism refers to its development as a reaction to or departure from modernism, particularly with reference to modernism’s (and all the different modernisms’) attempts at stabilising, ordering, structuring and rationalizing the world in its (or their) own particular way. Following mainly Rick Poyner (2003) and David Harvey (1990), the primary characteristics of the postmodern include: evidence of rampant instability, pluralism, diversity and eclecticism apparent across many fields. *Postmodernity* signifies the breaking down of boundaries, including geographic boundaries, and those between ‘old’ and ‘new’ stylistic references, but especially those between high and low (or mass/popular) culture. Also evident is a fascination with the visual – with superficiality, ‘flatness’ and surfaces – particularly, but not only, as created by the pervasive omnipresence of

the media (or ‘mediated’) life-world. Changes in the ways human identities are conceived, defined and ‘constructed’ become apparent. A loss of belief in the modernist ideals of progress is also evident, ideals based on the eighteenth century Enlightenment promise of continuous human improvement regarding freedom at the level of politics as well as freedom from human dependence on nature. A breakdown of the belief that the world can be explained, understood, controlled and rationally ordered, through the application of modern ideological systems or metanarratives (grand-narratives) as Jean-François Lyotard (1984:31) termed them in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* becomes apparent. Herewith intense distrust of everything and anything that claims stable, absolute or universally applicable values or solutions is cultivated. Thus, in terms of cultural activity, Poyner (2003:11–12) indicates:

If modernism sought to create a better world, postmodernism – to the horror of many observers – appears to accept the world as it is... The dissolution of authoritative standards creates fluid conditions in which all appeals to universality, expertise, set ways of doing things and unbreakable rules looks increasingly dubious and untenable, at least in the cultural sphere. As many cultural critics have noted, the products of postmodern culture tend to be distinguished by such characteristics as fragmentation, impurity of form, depthlessness, indeterminacy, intertextuality, pluralism, eclecticism and the return to the vernacular. Originality, in the imperative modernist sense of ‘making it new’, ceases to be the goal; parody, pastiche and the ironic recycling of earlier forms proliferate. The postmodern object ‘problematizes’ meaning, offers multiple points of access and makes itself as open as possible to interpretation.

I would also like to include here an extract, albeit a long one, from the seminal text *What is Postmodernism?* by Jencks (1987:7), which elucidates the character of the postmodern. This piece appositely and eloquently answers the question that the title of the book poses. (Due to the length of the piece I conclude it in the notes section).

The Modern age, which sounds as if it would last forever, is fast becoming a thing of the past. Industrialisation is quickly giving way to Post-Industrialisation, factory labour, to home and office work and, in the arts, the Tradition of the New is leading to the combination of many traditions. Even those who still call themselves Modern artists and architects are looking backwards and sideways to decide which styles and values they will continue.

The Post-Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing. It's an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity. This is partly a consequence of what is called information explosion, the advent of organised knowledge, world communication and cybernetics. It is not only the rich who become collectors, eclectic travelers in time with a superabundance of choice, but almost every urban dweller. Pluralism, the 'ism' of our time, is both the great problem and the great opportunity: where Everyman becomes a Cosmopolite and Everywoman a Liberal Individual, confusion and anxiety become ruling states of mind and ersatz a common form of mass-culture. This is the price we pay for a Post-Modern Age, as heavy in its way as the monotony, dogmatism and poverty of the Modern epoch. But, in spite of many attempts in Iran and elsewhere, it is impossible to return to a previous culture and industrial form, impose a fundamentalist religion or even a Modernist orthodoxy. Once a world communication system and form of cybernetic production have emerged they create their own necessities and they are, barring a nuclear war, irreversible.

The challenge... is to choose and combine traditions selectively, to *eclect* (as the verb of eclecticism would have it) those aspects from the past and the present which appear most relevant for the job at hand. The resultant creation, if successful, will be a striking synthesis of traditions; if unsuccessful, a smorgasbord. Between inventive combinations and confused parody the Post-Modernist sails, often getting lost and coming to grief, but occasionally realizing the great promise of a plural culture with its many freedoms. Post-Modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence.⁴

⁴ Due to the length of this extract by Jencks (1985:7-8) I will conclude it here:

Its best works are characteristically double-coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism. Its hybrid style is opposed to the minimalism of Late-Modern ideology and all revivals which are based on exclusive dogma or taste.

This, at least is what I take Post-Modernism to be as a cultural movement and historical epoch. But, as the reader will discover, the word and concept have changed over fifty years and have only reached such clarification in the last ten. Seen as progressive in some quarters, it is damned as reactionary and nostalgic in other; supported for its social and technological realism, it is also accused of escapism. Even, at times, when it is being condemned for its schizophrenia this 'failing' is turned by its defenders into a virtue. Some writers define it negatively, concentrating on aspects of inflation, the runaway growth typified by a multiplying economy. But a critical reading of this evidence will show that fast-track production and consumption beset all areas of contemporary life and are not the monopoly of any movement.

3. Some conceptual and terminological clarifications

It would be expedient to make some clarifications early on in the process that are integral to the subject at hand. A common mistake that is made is to use critical concepts and periodising concepts interchangeably, for example to confuse *postmodernity* and *postmodernism* and likewise *modernity* and *modernism*. One refers to a time period or a condition and the other to a creative cultural response to the time or condition. Characterisations that look at the modern and the postmodern in terms of descriptions aimed at a specific time in history are termed periodising concepts. These can be identified by the *-ity* that appear at the end of periodising terms such as *premodernity*, *modernity* and *postmodernity*. Critical concepts, in contrast, easily identifiable by the *-ism* appearing at the end of such terms e.g. *modernism* and *postmodernism*, refer to creative or critical responses to a cultural condition of an age. David Lyon (1994:6) simplifies this when he explains, “as a rough analytic device it is worth distinguishing between *postmodernism*, when the accent is on the cultural, and *postmodernity*, when the emphasis is on the social”. Hence a related, important distinction that should be made is between the terms *society* and *culture*. Following Lawrence Cahoon (1995:2), *society* can be defined as “what social members are and do”, whereas *culture* can be defined as their (social members’) interpretation of the world, “embodied in words and artifacts”. Furthermore it is also common error, especially at the hand of creative practitioners, to reduce creative-critical as well as periodising concepts to simple stylistic descriptors. This has certainly been the case with the term *Deconstruction* in contemporary graphic design, where it is used to describe a stylistic trend, which is far removed from the original philosophical and literary context in which the term was originally coined and is broadly the sense in which it still being used by more critically or theoretically informed artists, architects and designers.

It is important, even if complex and seemingly contradictory, to understand that although *postmodernity* refers to the contemporary condition of society and/or culture; it does not necessarily mean that that condition is ‘thoroughly’ postmodern in the sense of a homogeneity of sorts. Although the terminology can be misleading, as

the word postmodernity is used in an overarching way to describe the current condition as postmodern, it is important to remember that there are aspects of the modern, postmodern and even premodern that coexist together with other *isms* to make up this contemporary condition. Yet, at the same time, it is this inclusive nature of postmodernity that gives it its pluralist, heterogeneous character and that constitutes this condition as *thoroughly* heterogeneous and thus postmodern. Differently put, the most striking feature of contemporary life is its inclusive and thus complex, pluralistic and heterogeneous nature. Moments of the premodern, the modern, the postmodern and others are randomly interspersed in everyday life. Yet we most commonly (and perhaps in a sense misleadingly) use the term postmodernity, which places emphasis on 'only' the postmodern, marginalizing all others, to describe this contemporary life experience. The irony is that even though we use the term postmodernity to describe something that incorporates so much more, it is precisely this feature of inclusivity that makes this condition so utterly postmodern.

Theoretical characterisations are crucial in making sense of the subject at hand and as philosophical perspectives or theoretical viewpoints they are part of what is called intellectual culture. It is important to consider that as such they tell only part of the story and should not be treated as if they were determinative for culture and society in general. As Cahoon (1995:3) points out, "philosophical history is only one part of intellectual history, which is only one part of social history; whatever inferences can be made between philosophical and general history are highly mediated". However objective, critically and academically informed such theoretical characterisations might be they should not be regarded as exclusively determining in the process of building an understanding of the given subject. Just as social members respond to their cultural condition in different ways, so also do theorists. Depending on their particular perspective and consequent approach, theorists may be characterised as modern, postmodern, poststructural or something else. They may agree or disagree and their theories may differ and even contradict one another. This should not dilute the value of theoretical material, but rather serve to enhance the understanding of cultural and societal issues as not something that can be defined and pinned down by isolated or simplistic, encompassing definitions, but rather as something to be

understood as a finely woven network of phenomena, concepts and ideas that reciprocally interact with and sometimes against one another.

On the other hand, while it is certainly quite postmodern to succumb to “the relativistic belief in the arbitrariness of any and all theoretical, scientific or philosophical perspectives”, it is not a method that would be appropriate here. My approach is pluralistic and is founded on the acknowledgment that “no single perspective is exhaustive or exclusively ‘true’ i.e. that various approaches may illuminate different aspects of social cultural ‘reality’” (Olivier, personal communication, May 14, 2004). At the same time I do not believe that all of these perspectives are equal in theoretical or epistemic terms. Some are evidently more appropriate, illustrative and/or instructive than others when placed in context with issues regarding contemporary culture or society. In an attempt not to complicate the issue at hand, while simultaneously acknowledging its multifacetedness, I have chosen to use primarily mainstream periodising characterisations that are quite accessible and that tend to work towards generally accepted and mutually reinforcing depictions of the characterisations at hand. As such, only the more widely accepted and used concepts, for example modern, postmodern and poststructuralist will be discussed in more detail.

Lastly, apart from the variety of social and cultural phenomena that need to be taken into account, there are also intricate reciprocal persuasions at play between these phenomena and historical factors. It is important to distinguish between economic, industrial, scientific, technological, political and military practices which part-constitute *social phenomena*, while creative cultural practices (*cultural phenomena*) include art, architecture, design, music, literature, critical theory and philosophy. A further distinction can be made between *intellectual culture* such as artistic, literary, philosophical, and musical practices and *non-intellectual culture*, which includes mass (popular) culture and local or folk culture. An exhaustive overview of all the social and cultural phenomena would be extraneous to the purposes of this study. A survey of the interplay between mainly social, economic, industrial and creative factors should provide a necessary foundation from which to work. Accepted

characterisations of common historical epochs will be used to structure a surface on which to map out more complex cultural and/or philosophical periodising concepts, critical concepts, as well as the social and cultural implications in terms of graphic design practice.

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Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design

1. Introduction

There are many different reactions to the social and/or cultural condition that we are living in today – some resist the status quo in favour of past modernisms or even ‘premodernisms’, while others celebrate the present condition and seek to further it. In postmodernity the response to the current social condition, is – on two opposing ends – to either join-in, or react against; the former constituting the postmodern and the latter, mainly the modern. These opposing generalizations certainly cannot do justice to the intricacies that exist in reality, as there are several other and infinitely more complex responses to the contemporary cultural condition. For instance, In *The Ten Modernisms*, Lawrence Cahoon (1995:14) identifies responses that resist the (postmodern) status quo, which include, amongst others, *antemodernism*, *nonmodernism*, *contramodernism*, *retromodernism*, and *orthomodernism*.

Some examples of contemporary postmodern phenomena, as cited by Walter Anderson (1996:1), which celebrate the present diverse, pluralistic and unstable condition include: a Christmas display in a department store in Tokyo featuring “Santa Claus Nailed to a cross” (Shweder cited in Anderson, 1996:1) and also “techno-yoik”, which is the mixing of the traditional chanting of the Lapps of Northern Finland, called “yoiking”, with hard rock music and developed into “electronic augmented form” (Rockwell cited in Anderson, 1996:1). These examples of contemporary postmodernisms indicate a crossing of cultural barriers – a pluralistic, eccentric approach, inclusive rather than exclusive, which disregards origin or context. Contrastingly, at the same time as these postmodernisms occur, we also see attempts to return to previous modes of experience – attempts to revert to modern or even premodern forms. Evidence of this is perceptible in the ideologies of fundamentalist religions, manifest in the principles of high Islam. I once again turn to

Anderson (1996:9), who describes the current state of belief systems in terms of two opposing positions – the postmodern, eclectic approach and its counterpart, this fundamentalist resistance (albeit mostly in the minority):

In the [postmodern] world of religion... people are overhauling doctrines right and left... This may mean ordaining gays, creating ecological rituals, declaring God to be female or going ahead and making up a whole new religion. It may also mean quietly and privately deciding to override certain teachings such as prohibitions against birth control. Other religions are similarly troubled: there are Islamic futurists and feminists, new variations of Hinduism and Buddhism – and, in each religion, fundamentalists who are desperately striving to keep the old faith.

In creative practices this dual approach is also evident. Graphic designs often appear as superficial, pluralist, consumer-driven styling that celebrates the postmodern, or alternatively, on the other end of the scale, they emerge as rationalist, reductive, neutrally planned designs that resist the status quo in favour of past modernist approaches. The work of two designers who were present at the *Seventh International Design Indaba*, an Annual Design conference held in Cape Town in March 2004, comes to mind, namely that of Alexander Gelman and Karim Rashid. The simple, clean, more modernist approach, as evident in the reductive, flat-coloured, graphic designs of Gelman⁵, stands in strong contrast to the eclectic, multi-faceted, colorful and more offbeat, postmodern approach, as evident in the product (and other) design work of Rashid. (Appendix A, pages 179-180 showcases some examples of work from these two designers.)

The postmodern ‘join in’ and the modern ‘react against’ approaches resurface here in the work of Gelman and Rashid to demarcate the outer edges of two opposing extremes that hold within them all that goes between: a vast, ever-changing, often-recycled, vigorous and eclectic mass of creative styling and ideas. This contemporary, postmodern assortment of sometimes countervailing social and cultural practices

⁵ It is interesting to note that Alexander Gelman’s work is placed under the heading *New Simplicity*, also *Neo-Modern*, in *Graphic Style: From Victorian to Postmodern* and is described as a counter style to contemporary graphic design by Heller & Chwast (2000:255).

exists on the one hand, in the purist hope of regaining the experience of an earlier era, or on the other hand, as ironic, eccentric appropriations and amalgams of socio-cultural practices. Within this postmodern 'pastiche'⁶ as such, the question arises: *how did contemporary society and culture get to this point, where there is (already) a 'reaction to' this present so-called 'postmodern' cultural condition?*

Throughout history human conflict plays out in the form of uprisings, revolutions and wars, while new systems of rule or government are developed to control, administer and order people. Technological innovation, apart from developing new tools and new ways of doing things, generates major economic and social change, and can alter the course of history decisively⁷. Natural disasters and geographic settings alter the balance of power; changing ideas about belief, faith and religion manipulate life and what entertains and is fashionable; or the stylish reinvents itself with the seasons. Rather than a simple linear action-reaction mode, in terms of the way in which situations and subsequent actions interrelate and effect change – a complex web comes to mind. Pulsating waves radiate out and on impact, scatter and ricochet off in new directions, each moment of contact generating new wave-sets, leaving nothing in their complex web-like paths unaffected. The types of socio-cultural changes as mentioned above and more significantly, the ways in which people react to them, are uppermost amongst that which constitutes any historical epoch and may be understood in terms of the 'web' metaphor employed here, in order to do justice to the complexity of the present situation and its historical-cultural genesis.

In light of this evident complexity present in the analysis of an historic age, the question posed earlier is one not easily answered. (Or rather, the answer will most certainly necessitate generalisation and will most likely not do justice to the intricacies that exist in reality.) Nevertheless, the issue that is central to this essay, and

⁶ In a postmodern context, this term has been coined by Fredric Jameson (1985:111-125) in an article entitled *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*.

⁷ My brother, Mr. W. Schünemann, who has recently completed his masters in geography and economics in Aachen, Germany, shifted my attention to the fact that technological innovation plays a, if not the, primary role in shaping the history of a society.

one which will attempt to answer the question raised earlier, is to provide an understanding of the postmodern condition via an analysis of the preceding modern era. In what follows, various periodising and critical characterisations by leading theorists will be employed to describe the passage from the modern (sometimes even the premodern) to postmodern times. As such, ensuing discussions will place emphasis on the socio-cultural aspects of the modern era including technological developments, modernisation, secularisation and themes framing Enlightenment⁸ thinking amongst others. These observations could serve as a socio-cultural backdrop that may in turn facilitate a greater understanding of the development of creative modernisms. (See *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern 'graphic design'*, page 41.)

2. Modernity: Social and cultural ideas and practices

2.1 Modernity

By mere reference to the *post* prefix, the word postmodernity undeniably points to a relationship, albeit 'disjoint', with the past era, namely modernity. It is easy to see that the word postmodern does not define itself by describing what it is, but rather by what it is not – by “what it has *just-now ceased to be*” (Toulmin cited in Anderson, 1996:3). By implication we are living in a world that is no longer modern and in order to find out what that means we need to understand what it means to be modern.

In simple periodising terms, the end of *premodernity* can be placed around the year 1400, *modernity* – from its inception to its demise, approximately between 1400 and 1968 and *postmodernity* roughly from then up until the present day. (Appendix B,

⁸ The term, the Enlightenment, which will be discussed in detail later in the document, is synonymous with the modern as it refers to a time period within modernity (Enlightenment and New Enlightenment c.1700-1900, see Appendix B page 181). Moreover it also refers to a conscious endeavour entitled, the Enlightenment Project, which unites individuals working across a range of disciplines with like-minded goals of continuous forward-thinking progress through the rational development and utilisation of science, technology and liberal social and political systems.

page 181, breaks this timeline down into further detail.) A timeline technique, although necessary in order to create a frame of reference from within which to map-out detail, can be misleading as it creates the impression of instantaneity and does not adequately express the complex overlapping, indefinite and often gradual nature of societal and cultural change. Nevertheless, it does serve to provide a very important framework for Anderson's periodising descriptions that follow.

Anderson (1996:6) describes the passage from premodernity, to modernity, to postmodernity in terms of society's experience (and subsequent reaction to that experience) of universality. He explains that in premodernity, people have an experience of universality, but no concept of it, in modernity people have a concept of universality, but no experience of it and in postmodernity people realize that the very concept of universality is pointless (Anderson 1996:6), thus:

People in premodern, traditional societies have an experience of universality but no concept of it. They could get through their days and lives without encountering other people with entirely different worldviews – and, consequently, they didn't have to worry a lot about how to deal with pluralism. People in modern civilisation have had a concept of universality – based on the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant would figure out how to get everybody on the same page – but no experience of it. Instead, every war, every trade mission, every migration brought more culture shocks. Now, in the postmodern era, the very concept of universality is, as the deconstructionists say, “put into question”... Postmodernity, then, is the age of over-exposure to otherness – because, in travelling, you put yourself into a different reality; because, as a result of immigration, a different reality comes to you; because, with no physical movement at all, only the relentless and ever-increasing flow of information, cultures interpenetrate. It becomes harder and harder to live out a life within the premodern condition of an undisturbed traditional society or even within the modern condition of a strong and well-organized belief system.

So, the modern era is characterised by diversity, flux and instability, and accordingly, by various attempts at arresting or stabilising this condition of flux. Postmodernity, in turn, then emerges when modernism's various stabilising attempts have proven fruitless, even dangerous, in light of the various modern endeavours – Communism, Nazism and even apartheid, for instance – that aspired towards universal order, stability and control. In the face of this great 'failure' of modernism, postmodernity

‘gives up’ on trying to fight against exposure to the flux, instability and diversity and seeks instead to celebrate difference and individuality. And so, the diversity and flux – which originated with the move out of premodern cultures with the great explorers and the crusades, and expanded later with industrialisation and its relentless pursuit for modernisation, and eventually exploded to extreme levels towards the end of the twentieth century with the emergence of globalisation, world travel, and mass communication at unprecedented scale, originally opposed by modernism – now reigns supreme in the postmodern era.

2.2 Modernism

Richard Weston (1996:7) writes that to be *modern* is to be “up to date”, a populist description, very much aligned with an everyday understanding of the term, but certainly one that is too reductive in the context of intellectual history. Weston (1996:7) accordingly clarifies that to be a *modernist* is “an affirmation of faith in the tradition of the new”. Going back in history, the word modern is derived from the Latin ‘modernus’, used in the fifth century to differentiate between the pagan Roman past and the Christian present (Jauss, 1982:46-8 cited in Habermas, 1985:3). Throughout history the tense to and fro pendulum movement between old and new can be noted, ironically though, with the ‘new’ always incorporating some kind of revision of antiquity. “That is to say, the term “modern” appeared and reappeared exactly during those periods in Europe when the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a new relationship to the ancients – whenever, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation” (Habermas, 1985:4).

It is only during the French Enlightenment in the middle to late eighteenth century that the term modern was first used in a way that is in harmony with our current, more theoretical understanding of it, in a way that attempts to replace the backward looking tradition with one of looking forward. It was here that the philosophers of the time resolved a dispute between the *anciens* and *modernes* in favour of the latter, thereby declaring “modern, postmedieval civilisation, based supremely on Reason”, superior. (Lyon, 1994:19). Out of this, the Enlightenment Project, which formed the

cornerstone of ‘modern’ ideology (or different ideologies of the modern) and which will be discussed in more detail later in the document, developed as a conscious endeavour. For now it will suffice to say, that Enlightenment thinkers, freed from all historical, backward-looking ties, put their faith in reason and modern science to provide an idealized sense of perfectibility and progress. Jürgen Habermas (1985:4) puts it this way:

The spell which the classics of the ancient world cast upon the spirit of later times was first dissolved with the ideals of the French Enlightenment. Specifically, the idea of being “modern” by looking back to the ancients changed with the belief, inspired by modern science, in the infinite progress of knowledge and in the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment.

2.3 Modernisation

Another popular understanding of the term modern, aligned with Weston’s (1996:7) notion of “being up to date”, is derived from the process of technological modernisation that took place during the industrial revolution around the nineteenth century. Modernisation – which includes technological innovation, economic growth, industrialisation and urbanisation – is central to the development of the concept of the modern. Yet, this is a one of many parts of the final equation. The term modern is often inaccurately used in a way that tends to reduce the concept of the modern to the process of modernisation. David Lyon (1994:20) describes how the word *modernisation* is frequently used to sum up the social and political processes associated with technology-led growth, but how the term *modernity*, as the collective consequence of those processes, was not really prevalent until the 1970s. Charles Harrison (1997:6), expanding on the meaning of ‘modernism’, indicates that in general usage the term applies to “the property or quality of being up to date” and yet “it tends to also imply a type of position or attitude – one characterised by specific forms of response towards both modernisation and modernity”⁹.

⁹ Note that this use of the term, *modernism*, if not precisely in-line with the earlier distinction that I had made between modernism and modernity, but that this kind of deviation from the norm strengthens the argument that there is not always consensus amongst theorists.

So, what is missing from many attempts at recounting the modern, is the cultural aspect – the “position or attitude”, or the “forms of response” which Harrison calls attention to. An understanding of how the process of modernisation contributes to the transformation in the way people understand and experience the world is part of what constitutes the modern. Although it is incorrect to think that the term modern can be reduced to modernisation, the significance of the modernising process in shaping and perhaps ultimately constituting much of the modern era can never be underestimated. It will be shown in a later essay how the veneration of technological industrialisation, and subsequent modernisation, led to the development of a machine aesthetic, which dominated much of the twentieth century modern art and design. (See *Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design*, page 96.)

The first effects of modernisation were felt during the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century in England, then in France and later throughout most of Europe. Radical technological change took place at a rapid rate, revolutionising production industries such as pottery and textiles, building industries, transport industries, power industries and communication industries amongst others. This process of modernisation altered the world in unprecedented and irreversible ways, from the level of high science, commerce and industry, right down to the more seemingly mundane aspects of everyday life. Much of what we take for granted today was unthinkable to individuals living in these times. Electricity, telephones, motorised transport, radio, even tinned food and so on, fundamentally changed the way people went about their daily lives.

Weston (1996:11) recounts a number of important scientific discoveries and industrial breakthroughs during the nineteenth century. These include: the publication of John Dalton’s atomic theory in 1808, the laying of the foundation of modern chemistry by Humphry Davy and likewise, the laying of the foundation of modern electromagnetism by Michael Faraday. Also included is the publication of *Principles of Geology* by Charles Lyell in 1830, which established the enormity of geological time and the uniformity of geological change and which, together with Charles Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859, challenged the biblical

account of creation. Later, in the early twentieth century science advanced rapidly and innovations included: the establishment of genetics in 1900; the establishment of Freud's psychoanalysis (c. 1900); the "discovery of uranium and radium radioactivity by Becquerel and the Curies (1897–9); Rutherford's revolutionary new model of the atom... (1911); Max Planck's quantum theory of energy (1900) revised by Niels Bohr and Rutherford (1913)" and "Einstein's Special and General theories of Relativity (1905 and 1916)" (Appignanesi, et al, 2003:11).¹⁰

The phenomenon of mass media and mass-entertainment also has its origins at the turn of the century and includes: "advertising and mass circulation newspapers (1890s); the gramophone (1877)"; the Lumière brothers' cinematography and Marconi's wireless telegraph (1895); "Marconi's first radio wave transmission (1901)" and the establishment of the "first movie theatre, the Pittsburgh Nickelodeon (1905)" (Appignanesi, et al, 2003:11).

George Stephenson built the world's first railway in Northeast England, which opened in 1825. Transportation is revolutionised by the development of the motorcar in 1885 and the aeroplane in 1903. (Meggs, 1998:231). And a host of new machine tools were invented during the 1920s – including the circular saw, the passenger lift and the modern type of tin can for preserving food, which together with the invention of the world's first production line by Isambard Brunel signalled the arrival of the machine age (Weston, 1996:11). And so, a host of new technologies arrive at the turn of the twentieth century, which dramatically revolutionised the way people experienced life.

So massive was the impact of technology on modern society and culture, that when faced with the challenge of finding a unique way to represent the era – a unique way to be remembered by future generations – the machine was generally agreed upon as the icon for modern times. This, for example, can be seen in the machine aesthetic

¹⁰ It is important to note that the development of many of later scientific theories, for example Einstein's new ideas regarding time and space and Planck's conception of quantum theory, amongst others served to disillusion many regarding the "rational mechanisms of Classical science" and was instrumental in the development of the postmodern (Ward, 2003:60).

notable in some strands of modern art, in many modern design movements and especially in modern architecture. Weston (1996:25) highlights commentary by modern thinkers in the passage that follows, which reflects the elevated status of the machine as an aesthetic motif in modern society and culture:

It was a machine aesthetic for the first machine age, the philosophical foundations for which had been laid in the mid-eighteenth century, when the first rumblings of the Industrial Revolution were heard in England. 'That Utility is one of the principle sources of beauty has been observed by everybody', noted Adam Smith in 1759, adding that the machine's fitness for purpose rendered 'the very thought and contemplation of it agreeable'. Two years later Henry Home (the future Lord Kames) observed that 'no single property recommends the machine more than its simplicity, not solely for better answering its purpose, but by appearing in itself more beautiful.'

Modernity after 1848 was very much an urban phenomenon that "existed in a restless, but intricate relationship with the experience of explosive urban growth... strong rural-to-urban migration, industrialisation, mechanization, massive reorderings of built environments and politically based urban movements" (Harvey, 1990:25). Ultimately though, it is the effect that this process of modernisation had in terms of the way people thought, felt and acted that constituted modernity and modernism. Differently put, "modernisation as economic activity evoked different (creative) responses over and above the fact that it 'constructed' the condition of modernity" (B. Olivier, personal communication, Augustus 17, 2004). As David Harvey (1990:25) indicates, "the pressing need to confront the psychological, sociological, technical, organizational and political problems of massive urbanization was one of the seed-beds in which modernist movements flourished". Likewise, immense scientific and technological invention and innovation during this time contributed to the transformation of the way in which people understood and experienced the world. Lyon (1996:21) relates modernity's technological achievement (and the legacy it has left to us today) as follows:

...profound social changes are involved in each of these innovations. The routines of everyday life are altered, for instance, when we no longer have to rely on face-to-face relationships in order to communicate. Our social relations become stretched over time and space, connected by tissues of TV

signals and fibre-optic cables. More and more we do things at a distance. The little paths we trace between dawn and dusk are quite different if timetable, clocks and computers, rather than seasons, sunrise and nightfall, frame our coming and going. Even 'dawn and dusk' are less meaningful concepts when activities can continue uninterrupted by the loss of natural light. Artificial electric light simply takes over.

Geopolitical events, modernisation – technological, economic, industrial and urban – and other socio-historical transformations all play a part in shaping the cultural responses that in turn constitute cultural epochs. What is significant and shared in all the issues that have been considered thus far, especially modern industrialisation, and the modern forward thinking effort of 'being up to date', is the experience of and exposure to relentless instability, 'unrest' and endless change. This can be summed up well by the phrase "creative destruction" which Harvey (1990:16–17) uses to explain how the modern seeks to destroy all ties with tradition and with the authority of the past in general, in order to build the modern era anew. As a result of this, the modern becomes caught in a self-perpetuating, destructive cycle, as "the only way to represent eternal truths is through a process of destruction that is liable in the end, to be itself destructive of those truths" (Harvey, 1990:16).

It is modernisation though, that can be charged as the main culprit in reproducing this state of flux. Modernisation ensures that we are up to date with the latest technological innovations and puts into practice the most current ideas regarding the achievement of maximum efficiency and productivity (Ward, 2003:11). It is, however, an endless process, as "no sooner is an innovation put into service than it is modified or replaced by a newer, better model", thus creating an accelerating treadmill dynamic of rapid and constant change. Lyon (1994:22), in similar fashion, indicates that as modernisation speeds up progress in one part of the production process it consequently creates a bottleneck in another and of necessity, one innovation is spawned after another. The modern experience is infused with a sense of ephemerality, fragmentation and change, a state of flux generally undisputed and supported in the writing of Marx, Baudelaire, Berman and others (Harvey, 1990:10). Marx (cited in Weston, 1996:13) in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 so famously states, "all that is solid melts into air" or in context:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

2.4 Secularisation

Two periodising characterisations, by David Lyon (1996) and Lloyd Kramer¹¹ (2002) respectively, are important here in showing how modernity emerged as a largely secular society. The emergence of this new secularity, together with the loss of backward-looking traditions as ‘unifying’ or ‘stabilising’ forces in the transition from a premodern to modern society, paves the way for new ‘stabilising’ forces to emerge as evident, amongst others, in many features of Enlightenment thinking. Lyon (1996:5–6) provides the first characterisation, which historically delineates three stages that are significant here, namely providence, progress and nihilism. Lyon (1996:5–6) surveys the development from the first stage, *providence*, which refers to “God’s care for the world after its creation”, to the second, namely *progress*. This second stage is the modern conception of progress, whereby “emphasising the role of reason and downplaying divine intervention” a secular alternative to providence is provided, as “the certainty of our senses supplanted certainty in God’s laws and paved the ways for the rise of modern scientific world-views”. The last development signals a shift to the postmodern – a shift to *nihilism*, signalling a loss of faith in progress, as Lyon indicates (1996:6):

Faith in progress flickered following a Second World War only to be revived artificially by massive scientific and technological development and an unprecedented consumer boom. But the damage was done. Colonialism crumbled as political independence was granted to state after state. The downside of industrialisation becomes fearfully apparent in the degradation of

¹¹ Dr. Lloyd Kramer is the presenter for a lecture series on DVD entitled *European Thought and Culture in the 20th Century*. In referencing this source, I make use of the two books containing the printed lecture transcripts and course outlines which are available from the publishers.

the environment, the depletion of unrennewable resources, and the deterioration of the ozone layer.

In similar fashion, Kramer (2002:13–15) traces two contrasting strands of thought in Western cultural tradition, namely the concept of *reason* and that of *revelation*. In an attempt at understanding the world they live in and their role in it, the ancient Greeks, essentially, through the work of Aristotle, developed “the philosophical understanding of reason” (Kramer, 2002:13).¹² This approach placed emphasis on the rational pursuit of knowledge through systematic observation and the study of nature, including the human body and the material world. In contrast, the ancient Hebrews “developed the idea of monotheism”. Through a reliance on the unique human ability to ‘communicate with God’, they gave special attention to spiritual issues, thus divine revelation was seen as the path to ultimate truth. The two approaches met during the Middle Ages, through the work of important thinkers such as Saint Thomas Aquinas, which led to the conception of a medieval Christianity based on the joining of reason and faith. However this theological synthesis progressively started breaking down with the Renaissance, Reformation, Counter Reformation, and Scientific Revolution. Ultimately the eighteenth century Enlightenment Project, synonymous with modernity, convincingly swung the balance in favour of the rational (-ist) approach, as the following passage (Kramer, 2002:14) indicates:

And during this period, roughly from the late 16th early 17th century to the 18th century, many intellectuals in Europe lost the belief that theology or divine intervention could lead to secure truth... they could see that this new science offered the appealing model of an observable, universal law of nature

Enlightenment thought embraced the classical belief in reason and science as “the only secure path to truth” (Kramer, 2002:14) and gained additional support “as intellectuals accepted the new evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, and it spread

¹² As an aside, Prof. B. Olivier (personal communication, July 16, 2004) brought to my attention two other strands of Western contemporary culture that has roots in ancient culture. The first, as mentioned previously, is the Greek philosophical understanding of Reason. The other component of the Western cultural model is technical ingenuity as developed by the Romans.

into social theory as it influenced what became known as logical positivism – the new scientific positivism – of social theorists such as August Comte” (Kramer, 2002:15). However, the spiritual approach had not been completely vanquished by the rational, as is evident in the Romantic critique of the Enlightenment and other oppositional voices speaking out against the Modern rationalist-empiricist approach. In light of these descriptions by Lyon and Kramer, Anderson’s (1996:6) earlier perception of modern society as having a concept of universality but no experience of it (see page 23) also becomes pertinent here in generating an appreciation of how cultural modernity, as a reaction to secular conditions of the time, originated. Constant exposure to ‘otherness’ in modern society and the ensuing counter induction – an attempt at securing stability, at arresting the flux – play an important role in furthering, albeit in reciprocal fashion, the modern concept of the Enlightenment. It is important to show (as intimated earlier) that, rather than simple linear action-reaction modes, complex reciprocal influences are at play here. As an example, the Enlightenment forward-thinking faith in progress, in practice, reproduces the state of flux that it attempts to stabilise, generating a complex, reciprocal, action-reaction model of increasing complexification.

3. The Enlightenment Project

The Enlightenment Project, since it plays a central role in motivating many ideals of modernity, begs further explication. *The Story Of Philosophy: From Antiquity to Present* (Delius, et al, 2000:62) indicates that features of enlightenment thinking were noticeable as early as the time of Socrates and Plato. In a broad sense, where enlightenment is seen as not being restricted to a particular era, many modern thinkers describe it as a process that includes “the abandonment of prejudices, the destruction of myths, the will to liberate oneself from natural or social fetters, and, on the part of enlightenment pioneers, an actively emancipatory attitude to education” (Delius, et al, 2000:62). In a narrower sense, the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (predominantly the latter) denotes the genesis of a new era, the modern era. (Note the article and capital E in the use of the term in this way). Already as early as

the Renaissance and, as noted in earlier discussions regarding the shift in Western thinking from *providence* to *progress*, more and more emphasis is placed on humankind's ability to determine its own future rationally. Using Kant's definition, Delius (2000:62) describes Enlightenment thinking as follows¹³:

Enlightenment is Man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to make use of one's own intellect without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its causes are to be found not in a lack of intellect, but of the determination and courage to use it without the guidance of another. Have the courage to know – that is the motto of enlightenment.

The scope of influence of the Enlightenment Project was not limited to intellectuals, philosophers and theorists. Throughout Europe, public awareness regarding the Modern Project was encouraged, mainly through increased literacy and increased availability of literary material, but also as a result of the coffeehouse and salon culture of public debate. People could read about wars, disasters, exotic discoveries and day-to-day politics in the press, but also 'moral weeklies', 'intelligence sheets' and scholarly journals were readily available and featured issues surrounding enlightenment beliefs (Delius, et al, 2000:62). Establishments such as salons and coffeehouses provided environments where the public could be spectator to, or even partake in, debate concerning topical issues of the day. Accordingly (Delius, et al, 2000:63):

Coffee was the fashionable beverage of the age; coffee-houses were places to debate and philosophize, where you could read about the latest news and ideas, venues for communication which transcended class barriers. These were the meeting place of independent men of letters, connoisseurs of arts and science, who in view of the increased demand for reading matter, were able to make a living from writing, and as witty conversationalists also had access to the salons and tables of the nobility.

¹³ This dictum that Immanuel Kant (1959:85) made famous – 'have the courage to know' is translated in English in the relevant passage, but in the original text *What is Enlightenment?* it reads "Sapere aude!".

So, the Enlightenment Project, synonymous with modernity, is characterised by firm faith in the rational and scientific ability of humankind (in contrast with medieval belief in transcendent spiritual powers) to determine its own future. With reference to the resultant modern agnostic society, Charles Jencks (1987:29) shows that “one can thus see Modernism as the first ideological response to this social crisis and the breakdown of a shared religion”. He goes on to cast light on the extreme, yet extraordinary modern conception of a utopian society:

Faced with a post-Christian society, the intellectuals and the creative elite formulated a new role for themselves, inevitably a priestly one. In their most exalted role, they would heal society’s rifts in ‘purifying the language of the tribe’, they could purify its sensibility and provide an aesthetic-moral base – if not a political one.

As such, the Enlightenment can essentially be defined in terms of the “belief that progress in society could be brought about through the gradual perfection (through increasing self-knowledge and rigorous intellectual method) of humanity" (Ward, 2003:10). Differently put, it sought the positive upliftment of humankind and the creation of a better world, through belief in “objective science, universal morality and law and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (Habermas, 1985:9).

At the centre of Enlightenment thinking exists faith in universal reason, faith that there is a single correct way of interpreting the world (Anderson, 1996:4). This corresponds with Anderson’s (1996:6) earlier mentioned depiction of the modern experience as possessing “a concept of universality... but no experience of it” and moreover, how as a result there exists “the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant would figure out how to get everybody on the same page”. Thus the Enlightenment develops as a “project aimed at getting all the world’s diverse peoples to see things the same way – the rational way” (Anderson, 1996:4). Referencing Harvey, Anderson (1996:4) clarifies the Enlightenment endeavour for universal knowledge in the following:

The thinkers of the Enlightenment, Harvey said, “took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question”. From this it followed

that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single mode of representation which, if we could uncover it (and this was what scientific and mathematical endeavors were about), would provide the means to Enlightenment ends”. The Enlightenment – and the twentieth century rationalism that grew out of it – was not only a philosophical effort, then, but an ideology of progress: “a belief in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders”.

Evidently, “the idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life” (Harvey, 1990:12). The first kind of emancipation, which Enlightenment thinkers strive for, is freedom from natural disasters and human suffering through the control and domination of natural forces as the “scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity” (Harvey, 1990:12). The second kind promises “liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power, as well as from the dark side of our own human natures” through the “development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought” (Harvey, 1990:12). Jürgen Habermas describes the optimism of the Enlightenment vision in the following (1985:9):

Enlightenment thinkers of the cast of mind of Condorcet still had the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces, but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justices of institutions and even the happiness of human beings.

To encapsulate some of the ideas of this section, I would like to draw attention to three dominant themes in modern Enlightenment thought, namely a strong belief in progress, in science and in liberal social systems. Although these themes have been touched on in much of what has been described so far, they solicit repetition as they

determine much of western social culture at the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁴

The belief in progress can perhaps be singled out as the dominant element in the modern intellectual tradition, and can be seen as being supported by advances in modern science and the development of liberal social systems. Noteworthy scientific advancements in the modern era as outlined earlier, for example Newton's discoveries of gravity and motion and Darwin's explanation of biological evolution, provided a faith in science that "grew out of the belief that scientists had explained the laws of nature" (Kramer, 2002:16). Science, therefore, offered rational, observable and reliable methods for intellectuals to gain access to knowledge of the natural world in which they lived. Small wonder then, that people generally also began to rely on what filtered through to everyday life of the scientific methods of reason and empirical observation as the basis for gaining knowledge outside the sciences. Hence, scientific methods began to offer "a model for all true knowledge" (Kramer, 2002:16). But, science not only offered systems of knowledge. Through scientific and technological modernisation, science offered practical, tangible 'improvements' in everyday life, as evident in the development of "new machines... new forms of transportation, new forms of communication, better health care, more efficient production of food and all of those countless other technological and economic advances" (Kramer, 2002:16). Science became "the most popular belief systems of the late 19th and early 20th century" and appealed not only to intellectuals, but also the general public as it could provide what Kramer (2002:16) calls "material benefits" as well as new knowledge. Therefore (Kramer, 2002:16):

Science offered more than a form of thought or a form of knowledge. It seemed to offer a very practical application to human experience. It gave people a way to control their world.

¹⁴ In what follows, although I rely much on Kramer's (2002:16-18) account, it is important to note that these themes are generally known to be significant and are discussed at length by many important thinkers of the modern period.

The process of modernisation together with faith in science played a significant role in encouraging a pervasive belief in the idea of progress – a “renewed sense of optimism” in the provision of material benefits to humankind (Ward, 2003:60). This general sense of optimism was based on the idea that the modern epoch had surpassed all previous epochs in terms of economic, technological, scientific and social development. In most cultures, up until the modern era, “people looked to the past as the highest source of knowledge and understanding” (Kramer, 2002:17). As discussed earlier, modernity replaced this backward looking tradition with one of looking forward, and with this transition signalled the conception of the Enlightenment belief in (in fact, ideology) of progress. Tremendous confidence existed in the superiority of the present to past eras, as it was not conceived of that “there would be a way in which progress could be flawed”. Progress was viewed as “the solution to human problems” (Kramer, 2002:17).

Due to this utopian confidence in progress, this feeling of superiority is not only directed at past (or even future eras) but also at less ‘developed’ cultures. The following extract sheds light on the context surrounding this notion (Kramer, 2002:17):

This idea of progress created a sense of superiority that Europeans had towards all other cultures...Europeans controlled more of the world at the beginning of the twentieth century than they had ever controlled before... And most Europeans assumed that people in other parts of the world could only become modern – could only join in modern progress – by adopting European knowledge and ideas... The ascendancy of European civilisation was interpreted as evidence of the superiority of European economic and political institutions as well as a sign of Europe’s superior knowledge and cultural values. The governmental forms of Europe were also seen as the most advanced, the most modern, and the most enlightened.

And so, in addition to what has been said about progress at the level of scientific and technological development, the third significant feature of modernity, which is the second level at which progress functions – namely the modern initiative of social organisation, government and economic organisation – is highlighted. This third feature concerns the institutional sedimentation of Enlightenment ideas concerning

the political structure(-ing) of society. Many modern political Enlightenment figures concerned themselves with understanding the role of politics in society and developing better ways in which government systems could provide a better life at societal level. This, what Anderson (1996:4) calls “the rational planning of ideal social orders”, can, for instance, be noted in Hobbs’s belief in the need for monarchical autocracy and Rousseau’s belief regarding the common good or the sovereign will of the people. The later development of modern political ideological systems such as Communism and Nazism, as intimated earlier, can also be ‘understood’ as a legacy of the Enlightenment quest for universality and stability and its belief in a controlled, rational ordering and structuring of societal systems.

4. Conclusion

Despite the universalising tendencies of the eighteenth century Enlightenment’s social-cultural ideals – to “put everyone on the same page” and to uncover a ‘truth’ valid for all, thus attempting to unite humankind in a utopian vision of rational progress and to secure a ‘universal’ and ‘objective’ reality – the nineteenth century emerged as the most “disunited” century in European history (Baumer, 1977:259). However, it is precisely in the face of this “multitudinousness” that marked the nineteenth century that twentieth century modernism finally emerged, fiercely aspiring towards synthesis, stability and unity (Baumer, 1977:259. This attempt in many ways became the primary driving force for many modern endeavours and resulted in the paradigmatic emergence of what Lyotard (1984:xxiii–xxv) calls *grand narratives*, or *metanarratives*. Based on the Enlightenment presumption that there existed “only one possible answer to any question” (Harvey, 1990:27), per se “a single correct mode of representation” (Anderson, 1996:4), metanarratives can be explained as ‘universalising’ and ‘eternalising’ ‘truths’, rooted in the belief that people can be free if they can comprehend once and for all the ‘functioning’ of the world they live in. As such, metanarratives, ‘myths’ or ‘stories’ – which exist as systems of knowledge, or as theories, regarding the way the world and the people within it operate and function – endeavour to “pull together” systems of knowledge in

various fields, to “relate them to one another, and – above all – give them a unifying sense of direction” (Anderson, 1996:4). The development of various modern ideological political systems (amongst other modern stabilising schemes) endeavouring to create ‘better’ societal structures (for instance Marxism, Fascism, Communism, and Socialism) can be viewed as modern metanarratives. As such, Jean-François Lyotard (cited in Anderson, 1996:4) refers to “the Christian religious story of God’s will being worked out on earth, the Marxist political story of class conflict and revolution, and the Enlightenment’s intellectual story of rational progress” as examples of modern metanarratives.

The legacy of the Enlightenment vision, however, provided the central axis around which the metanarrative, or ‘myth’, of twentieth century cultural-creative modernism emerged. As such, modern creative practices cannot be divorced from their socio-cultural background. So, predicated on the ideal of Enlightenment progress towards a better world, or what Franklin Baumer (1977:330) calls “the Earthly Paradise”, modern graphic design in the first half of the twentieth century, endeavoured to provide a universal system of visual communication, that could overcome the differences and resultant instability and pluralism of modernised everyday life. Mature modern graphic communication, exhibited stabilising, ‘universalising’ and ‘eternalising’ tendencies, which promoted, albeit in different guise, Enlightenment ideals aimed at transforming everyday life for all, by endeavouring to provide modern graphic designs that would appeal to a wide range of diverse cultures and would, as such, function as a clear and objective communication system.

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Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern ‘graphic design’

1. Introduction

Graphic design was a new profession for a new century. Its emergence was underpinned by major technological changes, and while these had their roots in the previous century, it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that their implications for the design process were realised. (Aynsley, 2001:14)

Against the backdrop of modern social and cultural features and ideas, the themes dominating modern creative practices, specifically that of graphic design, go far deeper than they may appear on the surface (stylistically). (This backdrop of modern social and cultural feature and ideas had been provided in a preceding essay – *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19.) The visual or aesthetic features of graphic designs may, in absence of a thorough cultural context, only bear – i.e. seem to be susceptible to – superficial formal analysis in terms of composition, colour-use and the like. Contrastingly, a comprehensive investigation and ‘reconstruction’ of graphic design’s socio-cultural context, one that considers attitudinal shifts, technological developments, economic positions and other relevant qualities or ideas of this, as of any given era, will allow for an analysis which understandably goes far beyond that which is limited to the formal. This type of perspective provides access to a rich and illuminating field of influences and has the power to reveal to graphic design practitioners and students alike, the significance – in a more broadly cultural and social sense – of their role as visual communicators and also that of the legacy of cultural artefacts and their influence on society at large.

Charles Harrison (1997:11) cautions us not to think of modern art (read also ‘modern graphic design’) of the early twentieth century “*simply* as the artistic expression of modernity; that is to say as a form of spontaneous reaction to social conditions and historical events”. There are other factors at play – for example, the art- or design-

historical context within which practitioners work. For instance artists (or designers) “tend to refer to other art, be it achievements of an earlier generation, their own immediately previous production, or the enterprises of their contemporaries” as such, the practice of art is necessarily conducted within the context of some tradition of art and with regard to other works of art” (Harrison, 1997:12). Similarly, many strands of modern graphic design practice have produced motives not necessarily always aligned to mainstream modern cultural, creative or even intellectual or social ideas and practices. Graphic designers work(ed) in a minefield of often-elusive persuasions, which certainly cannot all be accounted for here. Some more significant factors that shape graphic designs may include: historical, social and/or cultural conditions, philosophy and theory, fashion and stylistic reference, capitalist and/or corporate practices and persuasions, cultural practices in related fields (including architecture, fashion, art, music, film and product design amongst others) and also technological, scientific, political and economic factors at play in any given era. Apart from being superfluous to the intentions of the study, it would also be, as a consequence of the profusion and complexity of shaping factors which cast graphic design practice, inappropriate and inadequate to attempt an all-embracing, comprehensive historical account of modern graphic design practice. The overview that follows here is selective and by no means pretends to be complete in its historical or theoretical account; there are vast tomes of texts that do just that. To reiterate, the intention here is to look at modern creative practices, including graphic design, insofar as they can provide a design-historical backdrop for contemporary (postmodern) graphic design.

Furthermore, in what follows, not much emphasis will be given to discontinuities that exist between socio-cultural concepts and features and that of creative practices (or even the discontinuities between different disciplines of creative practices). It would however, be remiss not to point out that the ‘modern’ practice of art in the purist sense, was not pervasive throughout the modern period and that there indeed existed many artists who worked in the more ‘traditional’ manner. Likewise many graphic

designers¹⁵ did not pay much attention to the modern theoretical ethos underpinning ‘high’ cultural trends and in contrast, simply proliferated commercially oriented graphics in the eclectic, decorative Victorian style. Accordingly Harrison (1997:12) cautions that modern art should not be regarded as “somehow isolated and unquestionable” and explains:

The second deficiency in the account [of modern art] is that it encourages us to consider modern avant-gardism in virtual isolation as the representative art of the twentieth century. The danger here is that we may come to regard modernism as a somehow ‘natural’ and inescapable tendency in culture, and fail to bear in mind that it was always an option among others – and one never adopted by more than a minority.

A parallel between modern graphic design and modern art becomes apparent, in that “modernist art and design were, from the onset, never completely accepted by the majority” and “early Modernists encountered opposition from those believing their philosophies subversive, elitist, or both” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:98). Deborah Rothschild (1998:9) further clarifies this exclusive nature of modern art and graphic design:

In spite of the many manifestos produced to “explain” new positions to the public, announcements produced for vanguard events, publications and exhibitions were mainly pitched to those inside the fold and designed to irritate those outside it.

Of significant importance to the discussions that follow is the inextricable link between art and graphic design during the early twentieth century. Richard Hollis (1994:8) explains that the line between artists and graphic designers often becomes blurred, as “a large number of the early pioneers of graphic design were themselves

¹⁵ I use the term *graphic designer(s)* or *graphic design* quite loosely here and later with reference to the avant-garde, as graphic design, as a professionally recognised activity only became widely accepted around the mid-twentieth century (as will be discussed in more detail later, see page 49). During the early modern avant-garde many of the creative activities can retrospectively be termed as a practice of what we now recognize and know to be graphic design, but at that time ‘design’ (applied, graphic or other) was intrinsically emerged in craft- and commercial art practices.

artists”. This is especially evident in the early, formative stages of the graphic design profession when many artists practised commercially, and/or *vice versa*, many graphic designers practiced artistically. Heartfield is an example of this type of graphic designer/artist, as Maud Lavin (2001:13) explains that although Heartfield exhibited his work on occasion in a fine art context, for example “initially, in the Berlin Dada exhibitions of 1919–20 – he presented his photomontages mainly through newspapers, book jackets, and posters”. Moreover, graphic design as a recognised professional activity was only to emerge much later, towards the middle of the twentieth century. Up until then, viewed retrospectively, many artists/designers were at ease to cross between pure ‘artistic’ and more commercially oriented graphic design approaches. In light of this, much of the discussion that follows will focus on ‘artistic practices’ as an important component of and influence on early modern graphic design and vice versa.

Where graphic design in its ‘mature’ form becomes significantly different from art is that firstly “although its form may be determined or modified by the designer’s aesthetic preference or prejudice, the message has to be put in a language recognized and understood by its intended audience” and secondly “unlike the artist, the designer plans for mechanical production” (Hollis, 1994:8). To put it differently: the designer can thus be seen as being at the forefront of the cultural practitioners who represent a truly modern mindset – thinking and ‘imagining’ in accordance with a paradigmatically modern, mechanistic or technological model.

In short, this essay will attempt to provide a selective account of the emergence of aesthetic modernity in the early twentieth century, insofar as it contextualises the development of graphic design practice. This is done in order to provide a broader framework within which to view contemporary graphic design later. In discussions on modern graphic design practice, an attempt will be made to bring together the socio-cultural features and ideas of modernity with the features and ideas underpinning this emergent, yet diverse creative practice. Specific consideration will be given to avant-garde creative practices, and graphic design practices within them, for instance in movements such as Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada and so forth. Within

these areas, I will highlight a selection of loosely defined themes relating to socio-cultural issues. These will include: the modern avant-garde conception of ‘making it new’, the development of aesthetic abstraction, the role of the modern ‘machine-age’ in constituting modern creative practices and the notion of progress, amongst others.

2. The emergence of modern ‘graphic design’ practice

2.1 Modernisation as ‘infrastructure’ for the practice of modern graphic design

The first two decades of the twentieth century were a time of incredible ferment and change that radically altered all aspects of the human condition. The social, political, cultural, and economic character of life was caught in fluid upheaval. In Europe, monarchy was replaced by democracy, socialism, and communism. Technology and scientific advances transformed commerce and industry. Transportation was radically altered by the coming of the motorcar (1885) and the airplane (1903). The motion picture (1896) and wireless radio transmission (1895) foretold a new era of human communications. Beginning in 1908 with the Turkish revolution to restore constitutional government and the Bulgarian declaration of independence, colonized and subjugated nations began to awaken and demand independence. The slaughter during the first of two global wars, fought with the destructive weapons of technology, shook the traditions and institutions of Western civilization to their foundations. (Meggs, 1998:231)

In light of this, the twentieth century commenced with the idea of graphic design as “A New Profession” (Aynsley, 2001:9). With regard to the task of the graphic design profession in broad terms, Jeremy Aynsley (2001:9) further comments:

Visual communication is an inextricable part of human history. It has existed as long as there has been the need to make marks or leave traces, to communicate through signs and symbols rather than the spoken word. In the contemporary world the activity of organizing signs and symbols, or words and images, for public exchange is recognized as graphic design – a specialist area of the broader field of design

For graphic design as a professional activity to emerge in the early twentieth century, and with it the ideal of a modern visual communications system, certain social and technological modernisations had to be in place. Most significant would be the

technology for the reproduction and distribution of visual communications – be it the means of production of books, newspapers, magazines, advertising, packaging, handbills or posters for example. The industrial revolution had provided for ink and paper manufacturing, mechanised printing and specialised machines for binding, folding stapling and other finishing requirements. Also the availability of new typefaces, for the printing industry was further instrumental, together with the aforementioned, in the emergence of modern graphic design. A fundamental reform regarding the translation of traditional classical fonts to clean, modern sans-serif faces was brought about by a number of influential individuals. Pioneers in this typographic reform include, amongst others: Peter Behrens in Germany, Will Bradley, Bruce Rogers and Frederic Goudy in the United States and Eric Gill and Edward Johnston in Britain (Aynsley, 2001:15).

As part of the process of modernisation, large-scale printing houses were established in big cities, where books, magazines and posters and other printed media were produced at unprecedented rates. With the means of production taken care of, and thus products on the table, what is missing in the equation is the people comprising the market for the products. Industrialisation had taken care of the latter as masses of people migrated from town and rural areas to cities in search of paying labour. Mechanised transport in the form of railway systems and motor vehicles not only directly altered the modern way of life, but also indirectly, in allowing for the increased distribution of consumer goods for the emergent ‘mass’ market, now developing at a steady pace.

The change in the scale of distribution of goods, as a result of industrialisation and the new transportation methods, played a significant part in advancing the development of new techniques of ‘selling’. Moreover, this compelled producers competing anonymously in a vast free market to start ‘branding’¹⁶ their products in order to

¹⁶ I use the term ‘branding’ here in a way that is qualitatively very different from contemporary branding, as will be shown in a later essay which will highlight the phenomenon of the mass-consumer market in relation to contemporary graphic design practice.

differentiate them from the competition and to give them distinct personalities. Examples of this include Singer, who began stamping the name of the company on its sewing machines around the 1850s as their sales started increasing across the United States, and also more mundane goods such as biscuits and soaps started bearing imprints of company names (Aynsley, 2001:26). As this mark-making practice increased it initiated the formation of governing institutions such as the Union des Fabricants in Paris (1872), followed later the US Trade Mark association (1877). In this early environment, which paved the way for present consumerism, modernisation dramatically changed the way in which goods were presented to the customer and here is where graphic design started finding strong support, as Aynsley (2001:26) explains:

For most consumers¹⁷ at the beginning of the twentieth century by far the most usual way to come across graphic design was when shopping. During the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth, huge changes in the way goods were prepared and presented for sale were introduced. Whether customers were aware of it or not, manufacturers, distributors, retailers and advertisers were involved in a process of specialization that permanently altered the way we encounter goods... In the area of foodstuffs, technology enabled goods previously sold loose as staples to be packaged hygienically in ways that could withstand distribution. The paper-bag machine was patented in 1852 by Francis Wolle... Machines for printing and embossing designs on metal for decorated tins were developed in the 1860s, followed by cardboard technologies and automatic canning and bottle-making. Aluminium foil was invented in 1910 and cellophane in 1913... Manufacturers stressed that the label or package was not just an advertisement but an integral part of the object as a newly defined commodity.

Of further significance, especially to many of the early modern avant-garde movements, and which has major implications regarding the later development of postmodernism, is the emergence of a modern 'mass' media culture. Early twentieth century modernisations, such as the radio, wireless telegraphy and the telephone, together with the proliferation of printed media – newspapers, magazines and

¹⁷ While Aynsley (2001:26) seems content to use the terms 'consumers' here, a greater sensitivity to the structural changes in the history of capitalism would show, I believe, that consumers are the counterparts of a relatively new focus on the 'users' of 'products' and 'brands', rather than on the products, a feature that characterises the postmodern era.

advertising (now with the possibility of being illuminated due to electric lighting) and so forth – facilitated the materialisation of modern media, as Richard Weston (1996:60) explains:

Marconi's first radio signal flashed across the Atlantic in 1901, and wireless telegraphy soon combined with the telephone and telegraph to facilitate the first modern 'media explosion'. The mix of news, features and advertising, already established as the basis of the modern newspaper in the mid-nineteenth century, was transformed by the introduction of photomechanical illustrations and up-to-the-minute stories from around the world. A new sense 'of the present in its totality', as Paul Claudel put it in 1904, could now be communicated (what would he make of CNN?).

It is interesting to note that the materialisation of the modern media culture was not only an important tool for the creative avant-garde, as intimated earlier, but it was also instrumental in facilitating the emergence of the modern graphic designer as mediator between the client (mostly commerce) and a budding 'consumer' public, by generating 'media' images in the form of promotions, adverts, posters, packaging or logotypes amongst others.

The professional activity of graphic design gradually became more established, as education and training, not only developed professionally competent practitioners, but also created a stronger awareness of the profession. The School of Design, established in 1837 in London, was rapidly followed by a network of subsidiary schools that began appearing in modern manufacturing towns or cities. Allied to formal education, a variety of publications became available at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which showcased the excellence of commercial creative practices and further contributed to the establishment of graphic design as a profession. Early magazines dedicated to poster art, before the emergence of graphic design specifically, include, for instance the periodicals *Les Maîtres de L’Affiche* (Paris, France) from 1895, *The Poster* (England) from 1898 and *Das Plakat* (Germany) from 1910. Later during the interwar period “specialized publications indicated that graphic design was gaining more strength” and journals such as “*Arts et Métiers Graphiques* (1927-39) and *Gebrauchsgraphik* (1924-44) took a wide interest in book, poster and exhibition design” (Aynsley, 2001:8).

The institution of museums also played an important part in establishing the graphic design profession and moreover, became an important platform for advancing the modern aesthetic. The South Kensington museum (today known as the Victoria and Albert Museum) was established in 1853 by the Art and Crafts pioneer Henry Cole and similar museums followed soon after in many parts of Europe. Later, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) established in 1935 in the United States, New York specifically, is most significant in preserving the legacy of the modernist art and design.¹⁸ Amongst others – technological innovation, the establishment of museums, educational and professional governing institutions, together with the continual proliferation of printed materials, books, magazines and avant-garde manifestos in support of the modernist credo – did much to enhance the development of professional graphic design and to reinforce modernism in art and design.

2.2 Poster art and the development of modern ‘graphic design’:

Technological and aesthetic innovation and modernisation

Although the term is used retrospectively quite loosely, it is important to note that as a professional activity, the practice of graphic design had not yet been widely recognized. Aynsley (2001: 8) indicates that although it was coined in the 1920’s, it was only after 1945 that the term *graphic design* was broadly adopted to define “the educational and professional activity – a stage where degree courses in Graphic

¹⁸ Woodham (1997:30), referencing Lynes, describes how the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) “was for many decades closely associated with the promotion of a ‘Bauhaus aesthetic’”. Furthermore, “its first specifically design-oriented show was the 1934 ‘Machine Art’ exhibition, organized by Philip Johnston, with an emphasis on clean geometric, and classical forms, symbolically and materially attuned to new materials and modern mass-production technology” (Woodham, 1997:30). Ironically, it was precisely this preservation of modernism in museums, “its exposure on pedestals or behind glass cases” that in the end reduced modernism to aesthetic styling, divorced from its “original everyday context and function” and its fundamental sense of revolution and subversion (Woodham, 1997:30). It is important to note, even though it will only be discussed in detail in a subsequent piece, that the ‘domestication’ of the modern aesthetic, with its inherent sterility and inability to respond to the needs of a contemporary consumer market is one of the primary factors in the development of postmodernism.

Design and Illustration were established in many parts of the world” (Aynsley, 2001:8). Similarly, Lavin (2001:6) indicates that graphic design “is quite young as a pervasive practice, born as a largely unacknowledged technique in advertising in the nineteenth century, with a growth spurt and recognition as a profession in the 1920’s, and not really burgeoning until its widespread corporate sponsorship after Word War II”. Hollis (1994:8) also comments that graphic design only became broadly accepted as a professional activity towards the mid twentieth century and explains:

... until then, advertisers and their agents used the services provided by ‘commercial artists’. These specialists were visualizers (layout artists); typographers who did the detailed planning of the headline and text, and gave instructions for typesetting; illustrators of all kinds, producing anything from mechanical diagrams to fashion sketches; retouchers; lettering artists and others who prepared finished designs for reproduction. Many commercial artists – such as poster designers – combined several of these skills.

The practice of graphic design as we know it today has its roots in the poster arts at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, which emphasise a crossover between fine art and graphic design. It may be said that poster art developed the commercial aspect of art, which later led to the professional activity of graphic design practice. Hollis (1994:11) appropriately comments:

As graphic design, posters belonged to the category of presentation and promotion, where image and word needed to be economical, connected in a single meaning, and memorable. In the streets of the expanding cities at the end of the nineteenth century, posters were an expression of economic, social and cultural life, competing to attract buyers for goods and audiences for entertainment.

The emergent modern poster arts highlight new technological-industrial techniques and materials, particularly that of lithographic printing, which integrated artistic and industrial production and which brought about radically new art-making processes and aesthetics. Using the new lithographic technology “what is printed is a direct record of the lines drawn by the hand of the lithographic artist or master printer” and artists could either “instruct the master printers” or “work directly on the lithography plates” (Aynsley, 2001:22). In this manner, “the artist had direct access to the process

of reproduction, without the technical demands and graphic limitations of engraving in metal and wood” (Hollis, 1994:11). In contrast to traditional metal type methods, which used square sets of type that were packed and locked into rows with image blocks to produce efficient grid-like layout structures, lithographic posters initiated a new freedom of expression with often-overlapping organic integrations of image and text. Hollis (1994:16) explains how developments in poster art led to the conception of graphic design practice:

Poster artists of this period demonstrated the aesthetic freedom and creative daring that accompanies the first confrontation with new technological innovation in graphic production and reproduction. When artists, instead of adding text with printer’s type, drew the lettering themselves, and when they were responsible for each element within a design which was intended for reproduction by machine, they were practising what was later to become recognized as graphic design.

The poster arts found their aesthetic inspirations within the stylistic expressions of Art Nouveau. Art Nouveau is an important moment in graphic design’s stylistic history as it provides one of the first stepping-stones towards modernism. Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast (2000:41) describe the impetus behind the movement:

Art Nouveau was a rebellion against the entire Victorian sensibility, steeped as it was in the past. The exponents of the style fervently hoped to revolutionize every aspect of design in order to set a standard that would be compatible with the new age.

So, Art Nouveau poster art at the turn of the century, apart from its technology-based implications, became significant for graphic design in that it presages the shift in aesthetic tendencies towards modernism. Heller & Chwast (2000:41) refer to Art Nouveau as the “first major stylistic upheaval in which antiquity was no longer the dominant influence”. Similarly Phillip Meggs (1998:190) comments on the implications of the movement [*italics in original*]:

To dismiss Art Nouveau as surface decoration is to ignore its pivotal role in the evolution of all aspects of design. Art Nouveau is the transitional style that evolved from the *historicism* that dominated design for most part of the nineteenth century. By replacing historicism – the almost servile use of past

forms and styles instead of the invention of new forms to express the present – with innovation, Art Nouveau became the initial phase of the modern movement, preparing the way for the twentieth century by sweeping this historicizing spirit from design.

Ideas, processes, and forms in twentieth-century art bear witness to his catalytic importance. ... Because Art Nouveau forms and lines were often invented rather than copied from nature or the past, there was a revitalisation of the design process that pointed toward abstract art.

Art Nouveau generated like-minded creative ideas such as evident in the work of the German Jugendstil movement, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Glasgow school, and the Vienna Secessionists. Advancing abstraction, inventive creativity and freedom of form-making, these groups presage the ethos of the modern avant-garde. The avant-garde's revolt against any traditional notions of form-making placed emphasis on innovation and novel, non-representational, uninhibited and unrestricted creative methods, and gradually brought an unprecedented, modern, abstract visual idiom into being.

In summary, technological and other modernisations at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided the practical and commercially oriented impetus for modern graphic design to develop. At the same time, a unique aesthetic consciousness was developing – the modern avant-garde, which culminated in a self-conscious uprising and revolt against all classical art-making traditions. This aesthetic insurgence played an important role in constituting a liberated and 'modernised' visual vocabulary and provided a stimulating environment and new opportunities for creative inventiveness on the part of emerging graphic designers. Art and graphic design practice, despite the fact that the latter was not yet a formally recognized profession, developed a reciprocal relationship and a shared range of influences and ideas in the emergence of an aesthetic modernity in the early twentieth century, which had its deepest roots in the creative avant-garde.

3. The origins of modernism: Avant-garde art and design

During the 1910s and 1920s in Europe and the United States there was an unprecedented give-and-take of new ideas and ways of seeing that took place among a small group of artists-designers of different nationalities, an interchange made possible in part by twentieth century advances in travel and communication. This interchange was also in large part a reaction to the nationalism that led to World War I and the concomitant fresh belief that confederates, be they workers or artists, could form alliances across national boundaries. The result was not a homogeneous style but a variety of innovations in art-making, including design and typography, which were each inflected with national and personal accents. (Rothschild, 1998:9)

3.1 The avant-garde and graphic design: a complex association

Tracing back the development of modernism, graphic design in the early twentieth century involved itself in avant-garde art and design movements, such as Futurism, Constructivism and Dada, amongst others – sometimes directly and other times indirectly. Here the relationship between art and design becomes a difficult one to unravel. Rothschild (1998:10) sheds light on this complex association and the role that graphic design played within it in terms of the early avant-garde art (and design) movements:

It was largely through small magazines, reviews and announcements that such movements as futurism, Dada and Constructivism became internationally known, and it was through them that innovations circulated. These publications and the innovative graphics used on them created the face of the avant-garde.

In this piece, Rothschild highlights the direct involvement of graphic design with the avant-garde movement on a very practical level, where ‘graphic designers’ controlled the creative production of printed materials used to promote the avant-garde messages. Meggs (1998:231), author of *A History of Graphic Design* indicates that with the development of the avant-garde, particularly Cubism, “the traditional objective view of the world was shattered”. Here, following on from where Art Nouveau left off, the avant-garde alters the path of graphic design in a more indirect manner, in that it radically altered the context within which designers/artists worked,

providing new visual vocabularies and new possibilities of invented form. Hence the progression towards a non-representational, abstract art during the first few decades of the twentieth century had profound influence on graphic design. Accordingly, Meggs (1998:231) explains, that against the early twentieth century socio-cultural turbulence:

... it is not surprising that visual art experienced a series of creative revolutions that questioned its values, approaches to organizing space, and role in society. The traditional objective view of the world was shattered. Representation of external appearances did not fulfil the needs and vision of the emerging European avant-garde. Elemental ideas about color and form, social protest, and the expression of Freudian theories and deeply emotional personal states occupied many artists. While some of these modern movements – fauvism, for example – had limited effect on graphic design, others – cubism and futurism, Dada and surrealism, de Stijl, suprematism, constructivism and expressionism – directly influenced the graphic language of form and visual communications in this century. The evolution of twentieth century graphic design closely relates to modern painting, poetry, and architecture. It might almost be said that a fusion of cubist painting and futurist poetry spawned twentieth century graphic design.

3.2 An overview of modern avant-garde movements

Within the heterogeneity of the avant-garde, two main streams in modern art and design can be identified, specifically with regard to the modern avant-garde in the early twentieth century, namely: one with formalist concerns and the other with socio-cultural – including psychological, conceptual, social and/or political – concerns (De la Croix, et al, 1991:954). The former includes primarily the Cubist movement and the latter includes creative movements such as Expressionism, Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism amongst others. Understandably, these categorisations overlap to some extent as Horst De la Croix (et al, 1991:954) explains:

All artists have some interest in the formal qualities of their work, but those who followed the formalist approach made this interest the major theme. Similarly, most artists want their work to touch the emotions and mind of the viewer, but this was the main motive underlying the art of those who followed the psychological and conceptual approach. Finally, many artists working within the psychological and conceptual approach addressed some of the concerns with the conditions of the society around them held by the artists who followed the approach of art with social and political concerns, but only

adherents of the social and political approach made that content the central focus of their work.

The diversity of motivational forces surrounding modern artists during the early twentieth century resulted in a dense, complex field of creative *-isms* that often becomes overwhelming to navigate. In what follows the general features and to some extent the theoretical tendencies and/or thematic underpinnings of some of these modernisms will be discussed. Needless to say, this overview of modern avant-garde movements that significantly contributed to the creation of a new, different cultural milieu within which graphic design could emerge as a distinctive artistic-cultural practice, could be extended and diversified almost indefinitely. Given the constraints of the present study, however, this cannot be done in exhaustive detail. It will have to suffice to describe in summary terms (following in particular *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopaedia of Graphic Design and Designers*¹⁹ and *A History of Graphic Design*) the key features of some of these movements. (Appendix C, page 182, contextualises the approximate timelines of a selection of art and design movements mainly within the twentieth century.)

a) Expressionism

Expressionist artists sought to align art with life and rebelled against normativity in the form of conventional aesthetic forms and cultural standards. Furthermore, they experienced an intense feeling of social crisis, especially during the years surrounding World War I, as Meggs (1998:245) explains:

Many German expressionists rejected the authority of the military, education, government, and the Emperor. They felt a deep empathy for the poor and social outcasts, who were frequent subjects for their work. Intense idealism fuelled the expressionists's [sic] belief in art as a beacon pointing toward a new social order and improved human condition.

¹⁹ For the sake of readability, I have omitted the capitalised syntax that Livingston & Livingston (1992) use to indicate words that can be cross-reference.

Expressionism's visual character was marked by an "unorthodox visual language", which resulted from a synthesis of diverse influences and include "Jugendstil's black-and-white linear patterning, Impressionism's new scientific theories of vision, Fauvism's violent color palette, Van Gogh's and Gauguin's emotionality, Russian mysticism and spiritualism, and developments in Western science at the beginning of the new century" (Heller & Chwast, 2000:83). Meggs (1998:245) explains that the Expressionists' intention was not to depict an objective representational reality, but rather "subjective emotions and personal responses to subject and events". The stylistic technique exhibited in Expressionist pieces revealed "thick raw strokes, often becoming bold statements about alienation, anxiety and despair" and furthermore (Meggs, 1998:245):

Color, drawing and proportion were often exaggerated or distorted, and symbolic content was very important. Line and color were often pronounced; color and value contrasts were often intensified. Tactile properties were achieved through thick paint, loose brushwork, and bold contour drawing. Woodcuts, lithographs, and posters were important media for many expressionists.

Expressionists in Germany formed two groups: the first Expressionist group, Die Brücke (the Bridge), formed in 1905, followed by a second important group that emerged in 1912, the Abstract Expressionists, called Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). The first group emphasised originality and based their beliefs on the notion that "individualism was essential to artistic renewal" and that a turn away from objective reality could provide "an inner, imaginative expression rather than an impression" (Heller & Chwast, 2000:83). The second group adapted the Expressionist aesthetic towards a more abstract visual mode. Amongst the important progenitors of Abstract Expressionism were the Swiss artist, Paul Klee and the Russian, Wassily Kandinsky, who "cultivated the abstract as a universal source of symbols" and "broke with optical reality in order to find a psychological basis for aesthetic pleasure" (Heller & Chwast, 2000:83). This latter group were less predisposed to convey the subjective emotional state of human suffering and instead "sought a spiritual reality beyond the outward appearances of nature and explored problems of form and color" (Meggs, 1998:245).

Expressionist groups aligned themselves strongly with political ideals during, and in the years following, the First World War. Yet, in the early 1920s, the movement began to lose its momentum as it had ideologically and stylistically run its course. Perhaps it was inexorable that “the excitement of the novel and the unprecedented, which had given rise to German Expressionism, should lose its attraction once all facets of the style had been developed” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:83). Expressionism had become an empty, easily copied visual styling, having been removed from its original theoretical ideals. Hence a “whole graphic repertoire of Expressionist forms, types, and color applications, created in the heat of feeling, was left to those who irresponsibly applied it to products as stylistic veneer” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:83). Later, with Hitler in Power, “Expressionist artists were denounced as degenerate” and the art form was forbidden, as was the case with most creative practices at the time that did not follow the ideals of National Socialism (Heller & Chwast, 2000:83). However in later years, as might be expected, the Expressionist philosophy and graphic style continued to have considerable influence on the practice of art and design as Meggs (1998:245) explains:

The techniques and subject matter of expressionism influenced graphic illustration and poster art; the emphasis on social and political activism continues to provide a viable model for graphic designers addressing the problems of the human condition and environment.

Apart from the stylistic implications of Expressionism, its socio-cultural concerns foretell the ‘socialist’ preoccupations underpinning the development of aesthetic modernism. This is evident for instance in the socialist-directed design reform movements in England and Germany that ultimately culminated in the democratic, egalitarian ideal as foundation for the modern design philosophy. Stylistically, Abstract Expressionism played a very important role in advancing the typically rational, abstract(ed), geometric modern ‘style’ as espoused by the paradigmatically modern design school, the Bauhaus. One should further note that, as Meggs (1998:245) indicates, “[t]heories about color and form advanced by Kandinsky and Klee became important foundations for design and design education through their

teaching at the Bauhaus”. It should therefore not be surprising that, with regard to the role of Expressionism in the development of modern graphic design an emphasis on formalism is apparent, which implies a compatibility with kind of universalist values entailed by socialist ideals. (See Appendix D, page 183, for a selection of Expressionist works.)

b) Cubism

Concurrent to the existence of Expressionism, but not enjoying the same long lifespan, Cubism emerged in France between 1906 and 1909 and lasted until about 1912 (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:51). In contrast to Expressionism, Cubism seemed to exist as a far more coherent, unified movement. Furthermore, distinguishing itself from Expressionism’s socio-cultural interests, Cubism primarily preoccupied itself with formalist concerns, specifically the destruction of traditional accepted notions of artistic representation, thus making way for a new visual approach to emerge. Accordingly, Cubism developed as “the seminal experiment on which the form languages of other movements were built” and “marked the final break with reliance upon nature for subject matter and the complete rejection of decorative tendencies” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:89).

Of primary concern for the avant-garde was an escape from convention and tradition; it is not surprising then that inspiration was sought outside of the ‘everyday’ existence of artists and designers. Tribal or primitive art, for instance the “chiselled geometric planes of African sculpture, masks... and fabrics”, served to inspire the early genesis of the Cubist movement (Meggs, 1998:231–2). Furthermore, Cezanne’s impressionist theories, which advocated that nature should be abstracted into the geometries of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, signifying a move away from the classical, Renaissance-perspective representation of the world, together with his later work, served as primary impetus for the Cubists.

‘Analytical’ (also ‘Analytic’) and ‘Synthetic’ Cubism emerged; the former “abandoned traditional perspective, endeavouring to explore the multidimensional facets of an object rather than express it in a flat two-dimensional manner”, excluded

colour and used collage techniques to emphasise “the ‘idea’ of the object” (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:51). Meggs (1998:232) explains the theories of Analytic Cubism with reference to its main progenitors, Picasso and Braque, during the time from 1910–1912:

During this period they analyzed the planes of the subject matter, often from several points of view, and used these perceptions to construct a painting composed of rhythmic geometric planes. The real subject is shapes, colors, textures and values used in spatial relationships... Cubism has a strong relationship with the process of human vision. Our eyes shift and scan a subject; our minds combine these fragments into a whole.

The latter form, ‘Synthetic’ Cubism, evolved to renew interest in colour, surface texture and especially in the tactile, taking the collage technique further through the application of found materials including lettering and newsprint. Meggs (1998:233) elucidates:

In 1913 cubism evolved into *synthetic cubism*. Drawing on past observations, the cubists invented forms that were signs rather than representations of the subject matter. The essence of an object and its basic characteristics, rather than its outward appearance, were depicted.

Utilising ephemera, Cubists (particularly the ‘Synthetic’ Cubists) explored the relationship between appearance and reality and created a new visual language. Meggs (1998:233) explains that the texture of collage elements could signify the actual objects; so for example, to signify a chair, “Picasso glued oilcloth printed with a cane chair pattern into a painting” (Meggs 1998:233). Similarly, collaged letterforms and found elements from newspapers were used for their associated meaning, allowing for “free composition independent of subject matter”, while also declaring the painting a two-dimensional construct of ‘reality’ (Meggs, 1998:233). As such, the Cubist collage approach functioned as catalyst for much of the free-form typography and layout techniques evident in many succeeding modern movements (Heller & Chwast, 2000:89).

The Cubist approach is especially noteworthy in terms of its legacy of geometric simplification and its advancement of a non-representative visual aesthetic (abstraction), and ‘invention of form’ taken up by many subsequent modernisms.²⁰

Accordingly, Meggs (1998:231, 232) comments:

By introducing a design concept independent of nature, cubism began a new artistic tradition and way of seeing that challenged the four-hundred-year Renaissance tradition of pictorial art... that replaced rendering appearances with the endless possibilities of invented form.

It is easy to understand, as the terms of the discussion, such as ‘geometries’, ‘fragments’ and ‘chair pattern’ indicate, that in retrospect Cubism lent itself readily to the purposes and aims of graphic design when it finally emerged as a distinct practice. As such, the Cubist collage techniques that utilise ‘fragments of objects’ for aesthetic and symbolic purpose – a novel advancement of the idea of abstraction – creates a type of symbolic visual shorthand for graphic communication. In ‘fragmenting’ visual reality into abstracted planes and by introducing constructed symbols to convey ideas to the viewer, Cubism played an important role in initiating and directing the path of visual communication for and towards modern graphic design. (See Appendix E, page 184, for a selection of work from the Cubist movement.)

c) **Futurism**

Futurism developed as a radical art movement established by Italian poet and writer Marinetti in 1909. Initially conceived of as a literary group, it later embraced all the creative practices including painting, music, sculpture and architecture. The First Futurist Manifesto published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909, which espoused “an uneasy mix of Italian nationalism, militarism, and the ‘new religion of speed’, as expressed through cars and aeroplanes” proclaimed the Futurist

²⁰ It should be noted that the development towards abstract simplification and ‘invented form’ is not something that appeared suddenly, out of nowhere, in the early twentieth century and that Cubism was not alone in its aspirations. Although in a different sense, the Art Nouveau movement and the Vienna Secessionists, amongst others, presaged the creative development towards a non-representational visual language.

movement's programmatic conception (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:82). Correspondingly, Rothschild (1998:11) describes the Futurists as "a group of boisterous Italians" who "loudly proclaim[ed] a passionate enthusiasm for technology, urbanism, advertising, and all that comprises the modern machine age". Futurist paintings, a central aspect of the movement's output, are reminiscent of the "fragmented and faceted" forms of Cubism (Aynsley, 2001:42). These Futurist pieces concerned themselves with the depiction of "speed and simultaneity through lines of force, repeated motifs and the inclusion of typographic elements, all emblems of a hectic world of advertising, cafés and railway stations" (Aynsley, 2001:42). Significant contributors of the movement include Marinetti, Boccioni, Balla and Severini.

Marinetti, in the *Destruction of Syntax* Manifesto of 1913 declared the written and printed world and moreover, a commitment to a typographic revolution, central to the Futurist agenda and in the process reveals the typographic features of Futurist works (cited in Aynsley, 2001:42):

I initiate a typographical revolution aimed at the bestial, nauseating idea of the book of passéist and D'Annunzian verse, on seventeenth century handmade paper bordered with helmets, Minervas, Apollos, elaborate red initials, vegetables, mythological missal ribbons, epigraphs, and roman numerals. The books must be the Futurist expression of our Futurist thought. Not only that. My revolution is aimed at the so-called typographic harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page. ... On the same page, therefore, we will use three or four colours of ink, or even twenty different typefaces if necessary. For example: italics for a series of similar swift sensations, boldface for violent onomatopoeias, and so on. With this typographic revolution and this multi-coloured variety in the letters I mean to redouble the expressive force of the words.

Futurism may be seen as having prepared the way for graphic design, in so far as it subverted conventional notions of meaning, especially in language – spoken and written – by "challenging the traditions of the printed page, and the predictable sequencing of typographic information" (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:82). The dynamic ways in which Futurists used primarily type elements and collage techniques

to create picture poems pioneered the later development of concrete poetry. The Futurists' forward-looking, radically progressive intentions (hence the name) rejected the past in a desire to liberate language and form from restrictive conventions. In rejecting the past, an aggressive call was made for "a new graphic order in poetic work – one that thrusts language into the modern age of speed, industrialization, and publicity" (Rothschild, 1998:11).

In terms of the spoken word, the Futurists, learning from the Dadaists, were particularly proficient at generating jarring audio-visual cacophonies of meaning in their promotional events (Rodrigues, 2001:51). Furthermore, the Futurists exploited the media by adopting forceful mass media techniques and by making public spectacles of themselves. Rothschild (1998:12) explains for instance, that Marinetti punctuated his reading of *Words in Liberty* at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in July 1913 with "yelps and noises". Yet, although this exhibitionism was impossible to ignore, it frequently obscured any real artistic content and, Rothschild (1998:12) referencing Weiss, comments that this "caused critics to conclude that the verse held no artistic merit and was therefore merely a promotional strategy "concocted solely to attract notoriety"".

After about 1915 Futurism's power as a forge for change began to decline rapidly. Rothschild (1998:12) notes that perhaps the novelty had "worn thin", and that "the French press and the public at large perceived Futurism, as well as such other vanguard movements as Cubism and Dada, simply as novelty for its own sake accompanied by rampant self-promotion".

The commercially oriented Futurist work of Fortunato Depero in the 1920s evidences graphic design's directed involvement with the movement. Depero, for example, designed covers for the magazine, *Vanity Fair*, and advertisements for Campari, as well as his own personal typographically experimental publication, *Depero Futurista*, in 1927. (Aynsley, 2001:42)

The implication of this Futurist insurrection for the development of graphic design is quite significant. In producing an “explosive and emotionally charged” typography that flouted correct syntax and grammar and overturned all conventional notions of communication, not to mention Gutenberg’s vigorous vertical and horizontal structure, Futurism forced “graphic designers to rethink the very nature of the typographic word and its meaning” (Meggs, 1998:245, 248). As such, the opportunity arose for a new graphic vocabulary and a new array of layout techniques, processes and methods for modern communication to make its appearance, at the hand of a new emergent profession of graphic designers. (Appendix F, page 185, showcases a limited range of Futurist pieces.)

d) Suprematism

Suprematism developed as a Russian art movement created by the painter Malevich in c. 1915, evolving out of his earlier involvement in Futurism and Cubism (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:185). The Russian avant-garde grew out of an environment of political turmoil and upheaval in the early twentieth century, during the tumult of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Suprematism advocated the exclusive use of basic, abstract, geometric shapes and pure colour for their expressive qualities.

Meggs (1998:262) elucidates on the graphic character of Malevich’s Suprematism:

Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) founded a painting style of basic forms and pure color that he called *suprematism*. After working in the manner of futurism and cubism, Malevich created an elemental geometric abstraction that was new, non-objective, and pure. He rejected both utilitarian function and pictorial representation, instead seeking the supreme “expression of feeling, seeking no practical values, no ideas, no promised land.” Malevich believed the essence of the art experience was the perceptual effect of colour. To demonstrate this, perhaps as early as 1913, he made a composition with a black square on a white background... asserting that the feeling this contrast evoked was the essence of art.... Malevich saw the work of art as a construction of concrete element of color and shape. The visual form becomes the content, and the expressive qualities develop from the intuitive organization of the forms and colors.

This conception of 'art for art's sake' stood in opposition to the later Russian Constructivist movement's utilitarian ethos. As such, suprematist artists, mainly Malevich and also Kandinsky, maintained that art should exist as a fundamentally spiritual pursuit and not be servant to the needs of society, thus rejecting any social or politically activist responsibility (Meggs, 1998:263). As such, Meggs (1998:263) explains that Suprematist artists "rejected a social or political role, believing the sole aim of art to be realizing perceptions of the world by inventing forms in space and time".

Another interesting evaluation of Suprematism is afforded by Karsten Harries (1968:70) where he points out that Malevich's 'white square' was conceived as the ultimate in freedom on the part of the artist as well as the spectator in so far as it supposedly engendered a 'white state of mind'. Significantly, Harries draws attention to the fact that confronted by this empty canvas the spectator is able (and tends) to fill it with all kinds of imagined forms and shapes. This proved to be a significant step in preparing the way for new art forms, as well as, by implication, for the practice of modern graphic design. As such, Suprematism's destruction of all creative and aesthetic traditions, techniques, norms and standards, freed artists and designers further from dependence on observation/representation of nature and in turn emphasised their own imaginative creative and constructive capacities. (See Appendix G, page 186, for a few Suprematist pieces by Malevich.)

e) Dada

Dada was a literary and visual art movement that developed in Switzerland during 1916 and then later spread to major cities such as New York, Paris and Berlin. (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:51). With a sharp negative and destructive edge, the Dadaists rose up against the convention of modern European life, seeking to subvert all normative standards and traditions. Meggs (1998:238) expands on this idea:

Reacting against a world gone mad, the Dada movement claimed to be anti-art and had a strong negative and destructive element. Dada writers and artists were concerned with shock, protest and nonsense. They bitterly rebelled against the horrors of the world war, the decadence of European society, the

shallowness of blind faith in technological progress, and the inadequacy of religion and conventional moral codes in a continent in upheaval. Rejecting all tradition, they sought complete freedom.

Citing Willet, Rothschild (1998:13) further captures the Dadaist ethos:

Their performances incorporated Futurist “noises” but went further by being totally illogical. “What we are celebrating is buffoonery and a requiem mass,” Ball wrote in his diary. And a month later he notes, “Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least this one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect.”

Favoured graphic techniques of the Dadaists include bold typography and collage (for instance in the ‘Merz’ pieces by Schwitters) and photomontage (as seen in the work of the Berlin Dadaists, including Heartfield, Hausmann and Grosz)). In protesting the senselessness of the First World War, amongst other things, Dada encouraged artists and poets, Tzara, Ball, Arp, Schwitters²¹ and Heartfield for example, to mock established values and beliefs. Rothschild (1998:12) expands on this idea when she notes, “Dada was dedicated to destroying the status quo by irreverently lambasting pretension and authority”. The following quote from a manifesto recited by Andre Breton at the Dada Matinée of 5 February 1920 (cited in Rothschild, 1998:12) further reveals Dada’s negative, destructive element:

No more art! No more beauty! No more aristocrats! No more bourgeois! No more clergy! No more God! No more literature! No more music! No nothing,
Dada, dada, tra la, la, la, la.

The early development of Dada was creatively inclusive; ‘variety’ shows at the *Cabaret Voltaire*, “an open house for artists and writers where art and culture could be presented” (and where Dada had its origin) featured examples of Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism (Rothschild, 1998:12–13). Dada not only challenged and overturned artistic and visual conventions, but also social conventions (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:52). For instance, Tzara orchestrated the Dada performances by

²¹ Ironically Schwitters was refused membership to the Dada movements, as his work was considered too bourgeois (Meggs, 1998, 241).

“sprinkling them with the simultaneous reading of manifestos, the unbearable repetition of nonsense syllables, hammering on bells, and the hurling of insults and obscenities at the crowd” (Rothschild, 1998:17).

The Dadaists were enamoured with the publicity possibilities of the emerging mass media. Following the Futurists, “they were also eager to destroy the status quo through scandal and media notoriety” (Rothschild, 1998:15). This was done in part, by incorporating “the attention-getting mix of letters, images, and symbols found on broadsides, billboards and newspaper ads” to shock the aesthetic sensibilities of the creative authorities that considered commercial art “as far removed as possible from good taste and elegance” (Rothschild, 1998:14). Needless to say, the new visual, literary and theatrical ‘languages’ that employed shock tactics with bold typography, collage and photomontage as preferred techniques, further laid the foundation (although ‘foundations’ were probably furthest from the Dadaists’ intentions) for the development of graphic design.

Paradoxically, Dadaists in their aim to shock and destabilise the bourgeoisie, unintentionally alienated the masses at the same time (Rothschild, 1998:14).

Rothschild (1998:14–15) investigates this irony:

While denouncing the bourgeoisie, most of the artists mistakenly, and rather naively, believed that their work would speak to the masses and be embraced by them. It was one of the avant-garde’s many paradoxes that their adoption of nonelitist forms such as the vulgar language of advertising and the clattering brashness of variety theater brought these artists little acceptance among the labouring class, but only bemusement and hostility.

To the extent that graphic design comprises the major component of ‘commercial art’ today, it is striking that what may be called the ‘masses’ are likely to be as conversant with its visual vocabulary as the contemporary bourgeoisie (arguably the yuppies). In passing it should be noted that, the contrast between these social aims, on the one hand, and those of the contemporary agencies/industry that enlist graphic design for the attainment of their economic goals, is obvious.

In contrast to Schwitters in Hanover, who concerned himself with artistic, constructivist and commercial interests, the Berlin Dadaists – Heartfield, Herzfelde and Grosz – developed a politically oriented approach. The Berlin group produced Dadaist photomontages using type and mostly imagery constructed from bits of photojournalism, developing a unique visual communication based on revolutionary political beliefs in order to facilitate public awareness and to initiate social change (Meggs, 1998:241).

Many artists and creative practitioners, Heartfield for instance, drew inspiration from Dada, and participated in the Movement, while at the same time diverting their energies into other creative projects. Duchamp, a prominent Dadaist, based his work on a philosophy of absolute freedom, producing ready-made sculptures such as a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool – and for his exhibitions of ‘found objects’ – a urinal for instance (Meggs, 1998:239).

Although it ceased to be effective after 1922, Dada provided important inspiration or impetus for many contemporaneous creative movements, and also stimulated subsequent movements, for instance Surrealism that emerged in Paris in 1924 (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:52). Meggs (1998:241) explains:

Dada was born in protest against war, and its destructive and exhibitionist activities became more absurd and extreme after the war ended. In 1921 and 1922, controversy and disagreement broke out among its members, and the movement split into factions. French writer André Breton (1896–1966), who was associated with the dadaists, emerged as a new leader who believed that Dada had lost its relevance, making new directions necessary. Having pushed its negative activities to a limit, lacking a unified leadership, and with its members facing the new ideas that eventually led to surrealism, Dada floundered and ceased to exist as a cohesive movement, by the end of 1922. Dadaists like Schwitters and Heartfield continued to evolve producing their finest work after the movement’s demise.

The various avant-garde practices proliferated creative innovations that were “tempered and reconfigured” into graphic design practice (Rothschild, 1998:49). Thus, regarding its effect on graphic design, Rothschild (1998:49) further comments that avant-garde artists and designers facilitated “a thorough artistic renewal of all

kinds of printed matter – from the designs of books, reviews, posters, and advertisements to newspapers and documents of practical use, such as bills and stationery”. Moreover (Rothschild, 1998:49):

The Dadaists and other innovators were tireless in their efforts at communication and exchange – via letters, poems, magazines, pamphlets, fliers, conferences, and manifestos – with other progressives around the world. It was largely through their networking, which magnified and enhanced the impact of their movements, that modern artists and designers were able to create new art forms that ultimately shaped the face of modern art and design.

So, not counting the value gained in its direct involvement with developing and promoting the modern avant-garde, graphic design has gained intensely from its development of a new, modern visual vocabulary and making-methods. Thus, graphic design benefited immeasurably from the “concepts, images and methods of visual organization from cubism, futurism, dada, surrealism, and expressionism” that have provided “valuable insights and processes for graphic designers” (Meggs, 1998:248). (Appendix H, page 187, provides a selection of Dadaist artworks.)

4. Common tendencies, features and themes evident in the Modern avant-garde

The selective, and regrettably sometimes brief, overview of several modern avant-garde movements, provided in the preceding sections, is requisite here in supplying a foundation for commenting further on some of the general themes evident in avant-garde art and design practice.

4.1 A confluence of creative and commercial interests

Within this exciting environment of the early twentieth century, it is important to note that graphic designers/artists were likely to emerge in two streams: involved on the one hand, with commercial interests or, on the other hand with social, artistic, philosophical and theoretical imperatives, for example as evident in the tendencies of the various modern avant-garde movements.

Moreover, within this loose categorisation, further stylistic differentiation can be made between creative practitioners who followed the new, modern, avant-garde visual approach, mostly the abstracted aesthetic, and those who continued in the prolifically decorative legacy of Victorian-styled graphics. However, these loose classifications should not be considered to be exclusive, as many creative practitioners comfortably crossed between commercial and artistic theoretical-philosophical motives (most often not confined to just one avant-garde movement)²². At the same time, many adapted the theoretically inspired, purist modern aesthetic to suit commercial purposes. At an extreme level, graphic designers/artists simply combined these often disparate imperatives at random, including: theoretical-artistic, avant-garde, intellectual interests; commercial interests; traditional eclectic, decorative, commercial styling; purist, theoretically underpinned, avant-garde styling; or a commercially-adapted, avant-garde ‘styling’.

Schwitters, for instance influenced by Constructivism, developed the non-political *Merz* offshoot of the Dada movement, and published a periodical with the same name, of which the eleventh issue dedicated itself to commercially oriented advertising typography (Appendix H, fig. 5, page 187). Apart from this combination of apparently incongruent interests, he also founded a commercially-oriented practice, a leading trade group, named the *Circle of New Advertising Designers – NWG* or *ring*, “*neue werbegestalter*” (as the group referred to themselves using the spelling and capitalisation as indicated by Schwitters on their letterhead) (Lavin, 2001:27). He also managed a “successful graphic design studio with Pelikan (a manufacturer of office equipment and supplies) as a major client” and worked as a typography consultant for the city of Hanover for several years, amongst some of his commercial activities (Meggs, 1998:241). So, apart from producing Dada poetry, playing sense against

²² Avant-garde artists and designers often collaborated in order to come to greater theoretical and artistic insights, for instance van Doesburg did not see Dada and de Stijl as opposing, but rather as complementary movements, believing that “Dada could destroy the old order, then de Stijl could build a new order on the razed site of prewar culture” (Meggs, 1998:173-4).

nonsense, numerous *Merz* collage-paintings and twenty-four issues of the *Merz* periodical, he was prolific in his commercial production.

4.2 The break with traditional forms and notions; progress and modernism's 'vision of the new'

Of significant concern for modern artists and designers²³ was the development of a unique, paradigmatically modern style apposite for the new modern era²⁴ – a time characterised by a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment, embodied in new social relations, urbanisation, secularisation and scientific, technological, industrial and economic innovation (amounting to 'modernisation') amongst others. Pound (cited in Weston, 1996:59) for example indicates that the "modern arts have a special obligation, an advanced or avant-garde duty, to go ahead of their own age and transform it".²⁵ In doing so, an important feature in modern art is highlighted, namely a determination to break with past, traditional and/or classical forms and notions (Harrison, 1997:18). Allied to this, is a tendency in modern art that promotes "a commitment to scepticism in the face of received ideas and beliefs, however apparently authoritative, combined with an inclination to regard direct experience as the true source of knowledge". Harrison (1997:18) further clarifies:

²³ In light of the preceding comments (see section 4.1 *A confluence of creative and commercial interests*, page 68) and the generalising nature of the discussions that follow, I use the terms 'artist' or 'designer' quite loosely to refer to creative practitioners who crossover between commercially oriented approaches and more artistic, theoretic avant-gardist approaches, both of which can incorporate the practice of 'graphic design'.

²⁴ It is important to note here the distinction that Baumer (1977:502) makes between the 'old' modern and the 'new' modern. The former constituted predominantly the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment vision for a rationally ordered new world, a belief based on faith in reason and progress through technology and science and the emancipation of humankind from the dark side of human nature. The latter represented the avant-gardist 'new' modern at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century that attempted to overturn all standards and values, even those set by the Enlightenment moderns.

²⁵ Notable, too, is the belief (expressed here) in art's capacity to transform social reality, which signals a departure from the (earlier) belief in 'art for art's sake'.

For the Empiricist philosopher it was incumbent upon the responsible individual to seek emancipation from superstition, and to suspend a given belief if no relevant observation and experience could be adduced to confirm it. (This grounding in Enlightenment scepticism helps to explain modernist art's virtually complete disengagement from traditional religious themes.)

Modernism's move away from traditional, accepted and conventional forms and notions, in order to originate a new creative artistic expression of modernity, is illustrated in a variety of ways in almost all the different avant-garde movements and shapes the foundation on which modernism is built. Accordingly, a retreat from representational, 'figurative' art and the Renaissance notion of accurate perspective is evident in the typically modern, abstract(ed) art and design. Abstract Expressionism and Cubism are paradigmatically modern with regard to the way in which these movements 'construct' and 'invent' forms independent of the traditional vision of reality. Leonard Shlain (2001:102–132) provides a fresh 'perspective' on the revolutionary nature of the work of the 'modern' artists from Manet to Cézanne, Monet and others by demonstrating its anti-perspectivist compatibility with modern, post-Newtonian physics such as Einstein's relativity theory.

In order to appreciate the contrast between endlessly innovating avant-garde practices and the perspective-oriented artistic convention that preceded it, one has to be reminded of the following. Up until the development of modernism, the traditional role of art had been in many different ways to represent reality using classical norms of accurate perspective and realistic depictions (even when done so with a view to making a critical statement on the conditions of that reality). More often than not, the accent of conventional artistic practices had been on the visual representation of religious themes²⁶. In the modern era a move away from these religious themes towards a more secular approach becomes apparent. Moreover with modern technological development, specifically the innovation of the camera, but also with

²⁶ Ironically, early medieval premodern art "tried to represent a disembodied, immaterial reality" avoiding any "suggestion of corporeality" which resulted in the geometric abstraction of human form (Harries, 1968:7). It was only later during the Renaissance that religious art developed with correct forms of perspective and accurate representations of 'reality'.

the refinement of printing (reproduction) techniques, artists begin turning away from these types of 'accurate' representations of reality. Thus the camera, with its intent of reproducing reality, renders 'realistic' art obsolete. Hence, technological innovation becomes an important factor instrumental in the production of modern avant-garde art.

So, in modernity, many artists and designers begin to experiment with expressing the 'opposite' of 'reality', by representing the uncertainties and ephemerality of perception and/or the artist's 'inner vision(s)'. Furthermore – complex, natural, organic shapes are reduced and simplified into the geometries of, for example, the cylinder, sphere, triangle and square. And amongst others, multiple, simultaneous viewpoints are represented, and a concurrent synthesising of space and figure becomes evident. Note here the fragmented multiplicity of Cubism and the dynamism and simultaneity of Futurism. Early instances of these and other modernist techniques started to develop and become apparent, in the Impressionist work of Manet (referred to earlier) and in the work of the Post-Impressionists, which include Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, and in later avant-garde '-isms' including Cubism, as seen in the work of Matisse, Braque and Picasso. Modern abstract art develops from this, for instance in the work of Malevich, and graphic design absorbs the new aesthetic as the preferred 'language' of modern visual communications, as will be seen especially in later modern movements such as de Stijl and the Bauhaus and the work of the New Typographers.

The tendency to break away from past traditions, particularly that of looking to past ancient (classical) cultures or antiquity for inspiration, functions in itself, as a kind of 'wiping clean of the slate' and is an important preparatory step towards the eventual appearance of modern art movements, as well as the practice of graphic design. Following on from this, the modern era then, is characterised by the forward-looking, experimental notion of finding new, unique ways of doing things, not based on any ancient conceptions or past traditions. Jürgen Habermas (1985:5) comments accordingly that modernity "revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition;

modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative”.

Therefore, with reference to aesthetic modernity, he indicates (Habermas, 1985:5):

The avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future. The avant-garde must find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured.

Turning to graphic design, Rothschild (1998:10) highlights what may be considered as the founding basis for modernism, the idea of ‘making it new’, when she comments that the modern avant-garde promoted “progressive ideas and unconventionality” The rebellious, experimental force of the avant-garde, its unrelenting call for liberation from convention and its ensuing quest for the new, dramatically affected the evolution of graphic design, as Rothschild (1998:10) encapsulates in what follows:

...graphics produced by the avant-garde exclusively for the avant-garde (as opposed to their advertising work), whether in magazines or posters, were usually difficult to decipher, ambiguous and nonsensical. This overturning of convention, this assailing of standard graphic and typographic formats, was one aspect of a search for intellectual freedom. The impulse towards liberation enabled avant-gardists to break with easel painting for more egalitarian forms of expression as well as to see with fresh eyes untried possibilities for arranging and relating words and images on paper. Their experiments expanded the expressive potential of language, and with time their radical innovations were absorbed and modified, becoming a vital source for modern graphic design.

4.3 Unpacking ‘construction’: modernism’s techniques, processes and materials

Instead of building on convention and furthering traditional notions of ‘art’-making, techniques and materials, avant-garde graphic design dismantled the standard building blocks and typical ways of doing things – using classical text and images, neatly blocked in grid structures – and started to analyse, investigate and explore, in order to invent new ways to converse aesthetically. It is interesting to recall here how the Futurists ‘deconstructed’ conventional page layout techniques, the individual letters that make up words and even spoken language, or how the Dadaists investigated multiplicitous, fragmented ways of seeing and how they started to collage together

pieces of modern everyday life – newspaper fragments, text, bits of photographs, found textures etcetera. So, in the modernising process of ‘making it new’, avant-garde artists and designers initiated the ‘unpacking’ (dismantling) of their art- and design-making processes, techniques and materials as part of a heightened awareness and understanding of ‘reality’ as a construct. This awareness was in part brought about by the legacy of the Enlightenment process of education, scientific research and experimentation, the process of gaining a rational understanding of the world as something constituted by human cognition, together with the gradual secularisation of society, and played an important part in advancing this sense of reality as a ‘construct’. Furthermore, the sensitised awareness of uncertainty, constant change and flux resulting from the condition of modernised life, together with, perhaps unwittingly, the emerging scientific awareness of concepts such as ‘relativity’, ‘fragmentation’ and ‘indeterminacy’, played a role in directing artists’ and designers’ creative attentions towards similar tendencies that expose dynamism in their work (Baumer, 1977:402–416).

It is interesting, even if it cannot be investigated in detail here, to see how creative practices develop out of (and conversely in certain instances establish and advance) ideas pertaining to modern cultural life in the early twentieth century. So, for example, Lloyd Kramer (2002:97) indicates that art (painting) in the early twentieth century “provides one of the best ways of understanding the broader themes of a culture concerned with the fragmentation of identities and a culture that was increasingly aware of the relativity of human perspectives on reality”. This novel awareness affected, for example, avant-garde practices as can be seen in the fragmentation and multiplication of perspectives evident in Cubism, as mentioned earlier. It seems as if ‘art’ and science had independently arrived at “complementary attitudes” during the early twentieth century (Appignanesi, 2003:16). Developments in science that place emphasis on fragmentation, multiple perspectives and relativity, for example Heisenberg’s indeterminacy theory, or uncertainty principle of 1927, parallel developments in art and design with similar ‘motifs’. In particular, Einstein’s theory of relativity (though not consciously) contributed to changing the way in which

artists perceived, thought about and creatively processed reality²⁷. As such, the “world perceived by the five physical senses was now understood not to be exactly what it seemed” (De la Croix, et al, 1991:952). This novel awareness contributed to a general disintegration of faith in certainties – moral and physical – and created an atmosphere conducive to the development of multiplicitous, fragmented, and abstract realities in art. And so (De la Croix, et al, 1991:952–3):

Amid the increased pressures of the early twentieth century, many artists turned away from the certainties of art based on the Renaissance ideal, with its method of mathematical perspective... Given the new view of the world, the “look” of reality seemed problematic to many artists, as did any direct copy of its appearance. Hungarian-American artist Laszlo Maholy-Nagy called for nothing less than a “new vision... vision in motion” to express the new age: “*Vision in motion* is simultaneous grasp. Simultaneous grasp... is seeing, feeling, and thinking in relationship and not as a series of isolated phenomena. ... *Vision in motion* is a synonym for simultaneity and space-time; a means to comprehend the new dimension.”

Thus, a recurrent theme in modernism emerges, namely the “idea that art [and/or design] is “constructed” – that images and words do not *represent* the world transparently” (Rodrigues, 2001:58) [italics not in original]. By implication, where images and words are used together, through the notion of ‘constructing’ the world, communication is suggested and the practice of graphic design results. As such, responding to the question of *how* artists (and/or designers) perceive (see) the modern world differently than in the past, Chris Rodrigues (2001:58) indicates that artists (and/or designers) “did not provide a single answer to this question; but they all suggested by different pictorial strategies that the visual meaning of the world is not given, but built up and **constructed**” [bold in original]. For example, the de Stijl group, which will be discussed in detail in a later essay, sought to reveal “the universal laws that govern visible reality but are hidden by the outward appearances of things” believing that “[s]cientific theory, mechanical production, and the rhythms

²⁷ Shlain (2001:129–132) points out that, surprisingly, artists like Manet, Cezanne and Monet anticipated in their art some of the more startling predictions and implications of Einstein’s special theory of relativity of 1905. As such, Shlain’s (2001) book *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time and Light* provides a superb analysis of the intricacies of correspondence between art and science.

of the modern city formed from these universal laws” (Meggs, 1998:271) (see *Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design*, page 96.) Also, to recall an earlier observation, the Futurists for instance, attempted to subvert accepted, traditional ways of coding and understanding a rapidly changing modernising world, focussing in particular on the way in which meaning is constructed through language – words. The atonal music of Schoenberg and the Abstract Expressionist art of Kandinsky further attest to this underlying theme.

It is not difficult to see how the ideas of a ‘constructed’ reality and of fragmentation are implicated in the process of destruction and subsequent reconstruction in avant-garde ‘graphic design’ practices. Graphic designers, as well as artists, in the process of ‘modernising’ (‘making new’) the techniques, aesthetics and the traditional vocabulary of visual communication broke with all accepted norms, standards and conventions, thus creating the impetus for a new, ‘unconventional’ graphic language to be brought into being. (Needless to say, this would, in time, become a new convention.)

4.4 Emphasis on medium and process and the emergent modern mass media

An important way in which the dismissal of traditional, accepted forms and notions manifests itself, is the way in which modern art draws particular attention to itself – to its medium and making processes and/or techniques – in contrast with the ‘invisibility’ of traditional art-making techniques. Related to this, as discussed in the previous section, a heightened awareness and a self-conscious involvement in the processes, techniques and materials of modern art and design become evident. This tendency flows out of two main imperatives: firstly to be unconventional and secondly, as a renewed self-consciousness, to explore, investigate and ‘unpack’ or ‘dismantle’ traditional materials and methods in order to gain heightened understanding and to initiate renewal as intimated earlier. Many modernist artworks, for example paintings, showcase heavy brush strokes and/or, in sculpture, tool- or finger marks.

Taking this idea to a different level, the emblematic, modernist, collage technique is another important instance where the technique and medium contributes to the value of the artwork, not simply as making process, but as an integral part of the symbolic meaning of the artwork itself. Expanding on this idea, De la Croix (et al, 1991:954) invites one to consider modernism as motivated by two main compulsions. Firstly, that, artists (and designers) above all desire “to express in their art something of what it was to be alive in the modern world”. And secondly, that, “Modernist art contained a heightened sense of the personal vision of artists and of the way materials could be used to create works that expressed that vision”. The concrete fulfilment of this idea is evident in the early modernist collages of the Cubists and the Dadaists. For instance, Höch (although no model Dadaist, as she never renounced the value of art) produced Dada collages using “ready materials, especially photographs of friends and pictures from popular magazines”; in doing so her primary interest was to show “what the modern world around her was like” (Rothschild, 1998:35). Similarly the Cubists used paper collage elements, letterforms and words from newspapers, incorporating these images from popular cultural media into their collages as visual form and moreover for ‘symbolic’ meaning. The Cubist collage by Léger, *The City*, for instance, makes an interesting statement on the modern metropolitan lifestyle (see Addendum E, fig. 4, page 184). Meggs (1998:233) explains that in this piece, “[p]erceptions of the colors, shapes, posters, and architecture of the urban environment – glimpses and fragments of information – are assembled into a composition of brightly colored planes”. In other words, these perceptual, but non-representational, abstract fragments may be understood as being highly symbolic of social fragmentation, so characteristic of modernity itself. Lavin (1998:xii) aptly comments:

The avant-garde can be viewed as a wedge that forced art into the arena of everyday life. By challenging the conventional social functions of art and mobilizing the technologies of mechanical reproduction, graphic designers became the engineers, publicists, and prophets of a rapidly changing world.

In the Dadaist photomontages of Heartfield the modern collage technique is not only used to expose the making processes of the modern artwork, but moreover, to draw on

the popularity and to reveal power of the emergent modern media culture. Accordingly, Heller & Chwast (2000:89) indicate that “[t]he media were formidable tools: Modernism was propagated by highly publicized demonstrations and exhibitions as well as through numerous manifestos reprinted in avant-garde periodicals, almanacs and newspapers, all having relatively wide distributions.” Heartfield’s photomontages for *AIZ*, *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper) – a communist newspaper, make powerful political statements. Heartfield, for example, “designed the photomontages to function within the contexts of photo layouts and news stories of which they were an integral part” (Lavin, 2001:13). Lavin (2001:17) explains how Heartfield uses the power of the newspaper, a popular, modern ‘mass’-medium, in the making-processes of his photomontages:

Heartfield’s post- 1924 “contemporary history photomontages” (as he termed them) were often based on photojournalism taken from his own archive, one built from newspaper clippings and material found at picture agencies. At other times, Heartfield staged his own photographs but remained within photojournalistic formats.

These ‘art-making’ techniques harness the power of the emerging mass media for socio-political concerns, given that “in its similarities to the straight photograph of a “news event,” the Heartfield photomontages assumes a documentary style truth-value” and “yet in its differences, it suggests a political reality that is obscured by conventional media representations and party rhetoric” (Lavin, 2001:18). For example, the piece *Goering: The executioner of the Third Reich* that appeared in the September 14, 1933 issue of *AIZ*, shows Goering’s face contorted in rage with a caption that reads: “Photomontage by John Heartfield. The face of Goering is taken from an original photograph and was not retouched” (Lavin, 2001: 21) (see Addendum H, fig. 7, page 187). As such, Heartfield’s and other modern collage and photomontage pieces are often created to function in close context with the surrounding photojournalistic content of ‘mass’ media communications, thus “raising questions of verism, manipulation and belief” (Lavin, 2001:18).

4.5 An aesthetic/theoretical link with industrial production

Many avant-garde art and/or design movements show evidence of the aforementioned destruction or ‘unpacking’ and ‘repacking’ of traditional making processes, materials and techniques. The consequent ‘repacked’, modern, avant-garde art and design languages that emerge evidence a complex varying network of motivating forces. Primary amongst them would be the inclusion of the machine as symbol for progress and ‘modernity’ in emerging modernisms, resulting in a strong machine/industry driven theoretical and aesthetic underpinning that will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent essay (see *Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design*, page 96). For now it will suffice to say that technological innovation and modernisation gave rise to the machine becoming a valorised symbol for aesthetic modernity. Accordingly a significant tendency of modern art and design, namely “confidence in the possibility of progress and betterment in human societies, to be brought about through the exploitation of technological advances and the application of rational principles” is highlighted. (Harrison, 1997:18). The Futurist tribute to the modern machine age is exemplary in this regard. Futurist paintings that depicted moving feet, racing cars and, on the whole, the dynamism of industrialised, modern city life, exalted “the modern world of the machine, the city and science, of speed motion, and change” (Baumer, 1977:503).

As an aside, it can be noted that this hypertrophy of the machine in modernity was certainly not unopposed. The symbol of modern civilisation, Franklin Baumer (1977:508) explains, was “the megalopolis, or world-city, characterised by outward rather than inward direction, dedicated to the cult of bigness, in the grip of machine organization, peopled by masses without roots”. It is not difficult to see how concepts such as ‘disenchantment’, ‘dehumanisation’, ‘alienation’, ‘anxiety’, ‘loss of soul’, ‘mass culture’ and others, emerged (encouraged in the texts of Nietzsche and Marx for instance) to describe the negative impact of modern life on Western civilisation – Baumer’s megalopolis (Baumer, 1977:508). So, by the turn of the twentieth century, in opposition to the concept of Enlightenment progress and optimism, a general sense of decline of Western civilisation became apparent, to which industrialisation and modernisation had in no small measure contributed.

However, paradoxically perhaps, the exaltation of the machine (technological modernisation at large), already patent in some early modern, creative avant-garde movements²⁸, became assimilated into the reductive, abstracted and rational visual language of subsequent ‘high’ modernism, for example de Stijl, the Bauhaus, and the International Typographic Style. (See *Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design*, page 96, for further discussion regarding this topic.)

4.6 Subjectivism in art and design and the philosophical implications of abstract modernism

Apart from the overt tendencies evident in the profusion of modernisms concerning themselves with aesthetic, social, political, and psychological motivations, even the seemingly formalist preoccupations of Malevich in his Suprematist abstractions are essentially more about the realization of the artist’s inner vision. Harrison (1997:18) highlights this as an important theme in modern art, “associated particularly with the Romantic movement” namely, “to stress the role of the imagination in safeguarding human freedom and in realising human potential”. German Expressionism, for example, exhibits an interesting confluence of theoretical tendencies, primary amongst them would be the drive toward a progressive future, free from the ties of a traditional authoritative past, an important theme in modern art, as highlighted earlier. However, later, these and other concerns regarding the human condition characteristic of early Expressionist pieces are replaced by idealist and utopian, even escapist, tendencies specifically in the Abstract Expressionists’ artistic notions that revel in the spiritual abstract realm of the artist’s inner vision.

Recalling De la Croix’s (et al, 1991:954) observation, noted earlier, two distinct streams in modernism emerged: one of these with formalist concerns, the other with psychological. In generalising terms, the former approach tended to be uncritical of

²⁸ Futurism is paradigmatic here in its embrace of ‘futuristic’ progress, technological advancement and modernisation in various forms.

modernising trends, such as evident, especially later, with the Bauhaus's advancement of the modern, abstracted, rational visual and theoretical approach that pays tribute to the machine and to industry. With regard to the latter, in generalising terms, much of the modern art during the early twentieth century had more to do with inner motives than with representation and external appearances.

Significant psychological tendencies in modern art developed out of this preoccupation with inner motives and the artist/designer's personal vision. The Surrealist movement, for instance, following the ideas of psychoanalysts Jung and Freud, placed emphasis on the imaginative potential of dreams and the unconscious. Expressing dissatisfaction with the state of the modern world, subjective modernist trends turned 'inward' to escape 'modernity'. Thus, in attempting to sever ties with the past, terminating 'all that is', as an effect of the avant-garde's unrelenting 'quest for the new', modern civilisation had lost its 'rootedness' and thus become "devoid of meaning... lacking being, or essence; in any case irrational and incomprehensible" (Baumer, 1977:414). The first manifesto of the Surrealist movement, for example, defined itself as "Psychic automatism in its pure state.... Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (Breton cited in Baumer, 1977:411–414). Surrealism and similar movements with psychological or subjective preoccupations developed as a type of "[g]oing inward—to find the self, or oneself, or the Self (in the case of Carl Jung), or the marvellous" (Baumer, 1977:411). Thus, subjective modernisms emerge as a reaction to the 'failing' Enlightenment conception of technological modernity and associated promise and progress, and simply express "dissatisfaction with the external world dominated by science and reason" (Baumer, 1977:411).

Harries (1968:61) enables one to grasp this 'subjectivism' as an integral 'destructive' component, an indispensable precursor to the 'search for the new', as he expands on the theoretical/philosophical implications of abstract modern art (alluded to earlier) referring, amongst others, to Cubism, Dada and particularly Suprematism. He draws attention to the fact that "the world and its values were rejected for the sake of freedom" and "art became a weapon in the struggle against reality" (Harries,

1968:61). Here, Harries is placing emphasis on the progressive, modern notion of 'making it new', rejecting the past with its traditional, conventional values and notions, and in doing so the modern creative/destructive moment (to be discussed later in detail) is unavoidably implied. Referencing Hans Richter's writings from *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, Harries (1968:61) accordingly indicates:

A first and key determination of such art is its negativity. It is anti- : anti-religion, anti-morality, anti-nature, and in the end even anti-art. "We are all propelled," writes Hans Richter... "by the same vital impulse. It drove us to the fragmentation or destruction of all artistic forms, and to rebellion for rebellion's sake; to an anarchistic negation of all values, a self-exploding bubble, a raging *anti, anti, anti*, linked with and equally fervent *pro, pro, pro!*"... Realistic art had become an impossibility, as the sense of reality had been lost.

With the absence of a sense of reality, subverted by the multiplicity, instability, irony and flux of war amongst others, but mostly modern life in general with its inherently ever-changing, 'modernising' disposition, the modern artist turned to his or her inner reality – to personal visions – in order to gain freedom from the past (and the present) (Harries 1968:62). Turning away from conventional ways of doing things, together with the progression of abstraction in modern art, particularly cubism, realistic portraiture lost its favour and became, at the hand of Picasso for instance, "a mere occasion which the artist manipulates as he sees fit" (Harries, 1968:63). Here the object or human form is fragmented and distorted, destroyed, into simultaneity – a multiplicity of forms in space. The traditional Renaissance ideal of perspective was rejected as the artist struggled to "free himself and us from the tyranny of the expected" (Harries, 1968:64):

...thus in many cubist paintings, the rejection of traditional perspective is better understood as part of a project of liberation which denies the expected means of orientation for the sake of greater freedom.

However, it is in the abstract modern art of Malevich, that the personal visions and the project of liberation encountered in the modern avant-garde, found its zenith. Malevich, in his theoretical writings indicates that, "suprematism has its foundation in

a desire to escape from the absurdity of the human situation” (cited in Harries, 1968:67). Harries (1968:67) explains:

Like Camus, Malevich discovers the origin of the absurd in the vain demand that there be a higher meaning, a goal. Religion, science, and art are said to express this demand in different ways; they are witness to man’s delusions that the world exists for his sake and that life is a task. But the world is indifferent to man; it doesn’t care what man does; there is no final goal.

Abstract art in its most ‘advanced’ form, for instance in Malevich’s white square (also his black square), evidences the achievement of ‘freedom’ that can only be realised by going beyond mundane, everyday modes of existence (Harries, 1968:68). “Freedom requires calm, yet our involvement with the world makes such calm impossible”, Harries (1968:68) indicates. Furthermore, he (Harries, 1968:68) comments that in replacing the world with “a more adequate environment for freedom” in the form of abstract, non-representational art, it “invites the “white state of mind” which emerges when all cares and concerns have been silenced and man desires nothing”. From this eradication of all notions of traditional artistic practice through Malevich’s theories of abstraction and negation, an empty canvas had been provided on which “new worlds of geometric forms” could emerge (Harries, 1968:69). In context, Harries (1968:68–69) referencing Hess, elucidates:

Malevich’s white square points toward a limit of modern art. Beyond it the artist cannot go. Destruction having done its work, a new positive is demanded. Malevich himself interpreted the white square as marking the border which separates suprematism from the art of the past. This new art was no longer the realization of an intention, but spontaneous expression: “I have not invented anything, only the night I have sensed, and in it I saw the new which I called suprematism.” The night submerged the world; yet in it new worlds of geometric forms took shape.

The subjective tendency of the avant-garde – the turn to inner, personal visions – became apparent in the work of painters (Cubist and other) such as Picasso, Braque, Gris, Léger, or Feininger. Liberated from everyday life’s multiplicity, complexity and contradictions, “a reality which does not satisfy the spirit’s demand for clarity and stability”, artists like Malevich turned to the creation of “a new and less evanescent

world in the image of the spirit” (Harries, 1968:71). The personal visions of the modern avant-garde was brought to fruition, in Cubism and Futurism for instance, through creative practices directed “by the human spirit according to its own inner laws... allowed to unfold in relative freedom from outside forces” As such (Harries, 1968:71):

Ideally the work of art is a construction of the spirit in the void. Only then is the artist in his creative freedom truly like God and by this token free of God’s creation; only then has he achieved complete autonomy and defeated the absurdity which is rooted in man’s inability to escape from the opaque world into which he has been placed.

Later, artists and designers assimilated the ostensible ‘stability’, ‘clarity’ and ‘permanence’, afforded artificially by the process of abstraction, reduction and rationalisation imprinted on Western civilisation by the industrial revolution, into the advancement of a new rational, abstracted, modern, visual language.

4.7 Creative destruction, progress and ‘becoming’

For the modern European, there is no longer anything permanent in life; values have disappeared; he is left at last face to face with the Absurd... the contemporary sense of the meaninglessness of life... which in turn stemmed from the disintegration of accustomed structures of meaning, power and belief. (Baumer, 1977:414)

It should be reiterated, given what has already been said concerning the rootedness of graphic design in the formal inventiveness of the modern avant-garde – Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Suprematism, and Dada, amongst other *-isms* – that designers/artists maintained an unrelenting quest for the innovative, experimental and unconventional. Consequently the modern avant-garde became an “integral component of the modern conception of progress... a mechanism contrived by modernism in order to perpetuate itself” (Isozaka, 1984:4). Similarly Habermas (1986:4) indicates that “the distinguishing marks of the works which count as modern is ‘the new’ which will be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next style”.

As mentioned earlier, common to modern art tendencies is an ironic form of negation, conceived of in the negation of ‘all that is’, in order to wipe the slate clean, to start afresh – and thus its foundation lies in the idealisation of freedom. It is not difficult to perceive a simultaneity between modern art and graphic design in this respect. The stylistic development of graphic design in the twentieth century attests to a comparable valorisation of novelty – partly, still, no doubt, as an expression of the ‘freedom’ idealised by modern art, and partly (as will be shown later) because of an unavoidable responsiveness to market expectations – an economic imperative that was bound to become stronger in the course of the century.

David Harvey (1990:16–17) terms the modern self-destructive moment “creative destruction”. Referencing Berman, Harvey (1990:16) explains:

The image of ‘creative destruction’ is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the practical dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How can a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that has gone before?... prepared to destroy religious myths, traditional values, and customary ways of life in order to build a brave new world out of the ashes of the old... extremes of organization, pain and exhaustion, in order to master nature and create a new landscape, a sublime spiritual achievement that contains the potentiality for human liberation from want and need.

The irony of this lies in the fact that if “the modernist has to destroy in order to create, then the only ways to represent eternal truths”, the artist’s vision, “is through a process of destruction that is liable in the end, to be itself destructive of those truths” (Harvey, 1990:16). It is not difficult to see the modern experience of instability, flux and constant change (becoming), reproducing itself here. And with it, another important theme in the development of the modern creative aesthetic is highlighted, namely the modernist, utopian search for a ‘universal’ truth, as a stabilising force (being). To explain this I turn to Charles Baudelaire (1978:13) who formulates an important model for understanding modern (and for that matter postmodern) art and design. For him the task of the modern artist is twofold: firstly to capture the transient, fleeting and contingent nature of modern life, and secondly, moreover, to find within

this flux, that which is eternal and immovable.²⁹ Weston (1996:15–16) explains Baudelaire’s formulation in terms of modern art in the following:

The first artists to describe the idea of modernity did so amid the upheavals of Haussmann’s Paris. This was the poet Charles Baudelaire in his celebrated essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, published in 1863. ‘By “modernity”’, he wrote, ‘I mean the ephemeral, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and immutable.’ The painter of modern life represents ‘the passing moment and all the suggestions of eternity it contains’ and directs himself towards the motive forces of modern life... No one more clearly anticipated the challenges modern art must face than Baudelaire. The modern painter, he suggested, must ‘set up his house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of motion, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite... His passion and his profession are *to become one flesh with the crowd.*’...

This early formulation by Baudelaire (approximately 1850) serves to provide important insight into the role of the creative modernist. However, much of the early modern avant-garde places emphasis on the one half of his formulation, the ‘becoming’ part (which ironically seems to predominate in the postmodernist era as well) in contrast with later, ‘high’ modernism that stresses the rational, constant state of ‘being’.

This is related to what Harvey (1990:17) shows, namely that the “Nietzschian image of creative destruction and destructive creation bridges the two sides of Baudelaire’s formulation in a new way”. In art, the search for the eternal and immutable within the chaos of the modern condition does very little to stem the further differentiation of this multifaceted condition. Instead, through the diversity of artistic practice, each *-ism*, believing they are on the right track to discovering the ‘eternal’ through innovation and proclaimed independence, only creates further fragmentation and complexity.³⁰

²⁹ Depending on whether one is content to emphasize, embrace and exacerbate the transient, fleeting and ephemeral etc. or to arrest it, the artists would be postmodernist (the first option) or modernist (the second).

³⁰ The twentieth century realised “particularly after Nietzsche’s intervention” and the destruction wrought by the World Wars, that “it was no longer possible to accord Enlightenment reason a privileged status in the definition of the eternal and immutable essence of human nature” (Harvey,

We see here the tensioning of opposite extremes (in the Baudelaire's account of the task of modern art and Harvey's formulation of creative destruction), which clarifies the complex, seemingly contradictory nature of modernity. (As an aside, it is this that reinforces the elusive nature of postmodernity, as the one thing that is certain about the postmodern is its relation with the modern, and since the meaning of the modern is confusing and contradictory, then the postmodern is doubly so, as for every modernism there exists a reactive postmodernism.) Stein (cited in Harvey, 1990:17) relates this creative destructive force to modern art with specific reference to the work of Picasso:

As everything destroys itself in the twentieth century and nothing continues, so then the twentieth century has a splendour which is its own and Picasso is of this century, he has that strange quality of an earth that one has never seen and of things destroyed as they have never been destroyed. So then Picasso has his splendour.

As far as graphic design is concerned it is necessary to remark first of all that graphic design was implicated in many of the *-isms* of the modern art movements, and as such would participate in the signature 'modernist' combination of change and permanence (becoming and being) highlighted by Baudelaire. But, on the other hand, one might see in the relative success of the International Typographic Style (discussed in a later essay, see *Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design*, page 96) the equivalent of the *temporary* triumph of the modern

1990:18). A shift occurred in "giving a new role, a new impetus, to cultural modernism" (Harvey, 1990:18-19). Hence:

Artists, writers, architects, composers, poets, thinkers and philosophers had a very special position within this new conception of the modernist project. If the 'eternal and immutable' could no longer be automatically presupposed, then the modern artist had a creative role to play in defining the essence of humanity. If 'creative destruction' was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the artist as individual had a heroic role to play...

impulse in International Style architecture³¹. It is advisable to remind oneself, however, that within the current postmodern situation, the legacy of the International Style (synonymous with the modern) is only one graphic design idiom among many others available to graphic designers.

The question for art (and, as it turned out, for graphic design) of the modern era, following Baudelaire (1978:13), is *how* to represent the eternal and the immutable in the midst of all the chaos. Undoubtedly, as indicated earlier, each modern movement strived to represent its own ‘eternal’, promoting their way as the only path to truth. We see in this, Walter Anderson’s (1996:6) modern moment of having “a concept of universality – based on the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant [perhaps I can include here also ‘artist’ or ‘designer’] would figure out how to get everybody on the same page – but no experience of it”, as highlighted in an earlier essay (see *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19). Weston describes the ironies of such universalistic claims when he quotes the realist, Gustave Courbet (cited in 1996:17), as saying “[m]y painting is the only true one... I am the first and only artist of this century”. Correspondingly, Weston (1996:17) indicates that, half a century later, “the similarly egotistical American Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, would make similar claims – expanding the timescale to five hundred years”.

To recapitulate in short, the modern movement in art originated in the theories and practice of avant-garde movements that focussed on the notion of ‘making it new’, amongst other things, and on the development of an abstract, simplified visual language, obliterating all ties with the past and with traditional and/or classical practices of art. Harrison’s observation of tendencies in modern art, as outlined earlier include, it will be recalled: a belief in progress, a commitment to sever links with a classicist, aristocratic past, to scepticism regarding traditional beliefs, a privileging of

³¹ Although it is impossible to give sustained attention to the development of modern and postmodern architecture here, it should be noted that it exemplifies the two tendencies highlighted by Baudelaire (1978:13).

experience as source of knowledge and, lastly, an emphasis on imagination regarding freedom and human potential (1997:18). Accordingly, evident in modern art is a spiritual expression of the artist's inner visions, often linked to this process of abstraction. The modern avant-garde, for example German Expressionism and Dada, to some extent, was also allied to the social utopian commitment to progress, and the betterment of the quality of everyday life for the modern individual. Differently put, evidence of modern art's concern with social reform is apparent in much of the modern art in the early twentieth century, for example in the avant-garde art and design movements supporting political reform and advocating power to the working classes, as apparent in the anti-Nazi, dada photomontages of Heartfield for instance, discussed earlier. However it is later, with the development of 'high' modernism as a 'stabilising' force in applied, design and architecture, for instance, that modern art and design came to be regarded as capable of forging positive change, and that its social utopian commitment comes to the fore. Thus, in architecture and applied design, art and life is merged and the utopian, democratic ideal – the modern Enlightenment vision of “confidence in the possibility of progress and betterment in society” – becomes palpable (Harrison, 1997:18). Habermas accordingly comments (1985:9) [italics my own]:³²

...the *arts* and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces, but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings...

5. Conclusion

...never before had there been a revolution quite so thoroughgoing, in the sense that it destroyed, in a comparatively short period of time, nearly all the “idols” that had been so painstakingly constructed, not merely by the Middle Ages but by “modern” times as well. It was a time when one kind of modernity gave way, at last, to another. The “old” modernity, initially sponsored by the Moderns of the seventeenth century, and productive of the

³² This extract from Habermas (1986:12) is repeated in an earlier essay, in a discussion on the Enlightenment project. (See *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19.)

Enlightenments, both old and new, effected profound changes in world-outlook, but left important bastions of being virtually intact. The “new” modernity however, dispensed with being, leaving men without landmarks, casting them adrift on an endless sea of becoming (Baumer, 1977:502).

In this revolutionary modern socio-cultural milieu, which Baumer refers to as the ‘new’ modernity, and which favours instability, change and ‘becoming’, graphic designers, in the process of ‘modernising’ the techniques, aesthetics and the traditional vocabulary of visual communication, broke all accepted norms and standards. Amongst others, to reiterate, traditional classical serif typefaces, perfected in their elegance and aesthetic form by the ancients, were replaced by new mechanistic, abstracted sans serif faces. Also, the traditional layout technique of Western communication, reading from top to bottom, left to right, was destroyed by the asymmetrical free flowing verse of the Futurists, as they “animate[d] their pages with a dynamic, non-linear composition” for example (Meggs, 1998:235). All classical typographic norms were shattered and all constraints cast off as the avant-gardists exuberantly mixed fonts, using different weights, styles and heights as they pleased. The machine as vehicle as well as symbol for the modern age changed the philosophical foundation, the aesthetics, and processes of modern art and design. In addition, Dada collages pieced together multiplicitous fragments of modern everyday life, assembling newspaper cut-outs, text, photographs and found textures for instance, to reflect new ‘realities’ and new ways of seeing the world, in this way testifying to Baumer’s contention (1977:502), that the twentieth century witnessed a collapse of ‘being’ and the triumph of ‘becoming’.

As ‘graphic designers’ participated in the creative/destructive process of breaking down ‘all that is’ in order to construct a ‘new’ world that expressed the values and ‘realities’ of modernity (a utopia to some), the elements of relativity, contingency, ‘becoming’ and flux were revealed. This is the one half of Baudelaire’s ‘modern artist’ and it seemed as if here is where the modern avant-garde directed its efforts. However, this avant-garde process of the destruction of traditional and conventional methods and ideas (becoming) – a ‘cleaning of the slate’ – allowed for a new modern language to emerge. Ironically perhaps, this ‘new’ modern language became rooted in

the flux of theoretical ideas and stylistic trends initiated by the avant-garde. It is in the emergence of this new modern language with its emphasis on the ‘universal’, that the stabilising force (being) – the other half of Baudelaire’s ‘modern artist’ – emerges.

So, in many ways the avant-garde can be viewed as providing a foundation for ‘high’ modernism to emerge, engendering it with the much needed precursory component, namely the revolutionary process of ‘becoming’ (to reiterate, as a ‘cleaning of the slate’) in order for modernism to emerge as a stable, universalising force (being). It is easy to see here that, with reference to Baudelaire’s formulation of the task of the modern artist, there is a shift in emphasis between the modern avant-garde, which seems to favour instability, flux, change and the ‘particular’ (becoming), and the various ‘high’ modernisms, which, as the subsequent essay will show, attempt to find stability in the quest for universal and ‘eternalising’ forces (being) (see *Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design*, page 96). So, differently put, one should note the paradoxical tension, across a broad spectrum of modern art movements or ‘schools’, that (on the one hand) one is struck by the avant-garde proliferation of new styles and forms vying with one another in their claims to artistic ‘truth’, which emphasises the element of instability, and (on the other hand) the tendency typical of the modern, towards stabilising some universal aesthetic or graphic norm. Baumer (1977:20) cites Renan in the following passage that illuminates the state of flux (becoming) that modernism attempts to stabilise:

The big step taken in modern criticism, he [Renan] said, has been “to substitute the category of *becoming* for the category of being, the conception of the relative for that of the absolute, of movement for immobility.”

“Becoming”, it should be made clear, does not refer here merely to new and changing answers to perennial questions, which may be taken for granted, not even to great revolutions in ideas. It refers instead to a mode of thinking that contemplates everything – nature, man, society, history, God himself – *sub specie temporis*, as not merely changing but as forever evolving into something new and different. It disbelieves in all fixities, absolutes, and “eternal ideas”.

The world, at the turn of the twentieth century, had undergone a radical revolutionary ‘modernising’ process, which obliterated all conventions, standards, customs and

traditions and thus had done away with significant ‘grounding forces’ including religion and ‘history’, thus culminating in a state of extreme relativism. In a similar process the avant-garde had reproduced this revolutionary breaking down of convention in a creative-cultural realm, thus generating a variety of competitive creative movements each claiming validity in achieving the status of artistic ‘truth’. This is evident for instance in the avant-garde’s fierce propensity for generating manifestos, each pronouncing the philosophies and theories that underpin the movement in an attempt to claim validity. This process can be viewed, ironically, as an attempt to fill the vacuum left by, as Friedrich Nietzsche writing at the turn of the twentieth century puts it, the ‘death of God’ (Megill, 1985:33). Nietzsche’s concept of ‘the death of God’ (or nihilism, as the concept is widely understood) is a recognition of the loss of foundation, in part brought about by the rise of secularism, of anti-theism, in a society once rooted in religion. David Lyon (1994:8) expands on the implications of this loss:

At any rate, Nietzsche’s slogan ‘the death of God’ means that we can no longer be sure of anything. Morality is a lie, truth is fiction. The Dionysian option of accepting nihilism³³, of living with no illusions or pretence, but doing so enthusiastically, joyfully, is all that remains. Following on from this, nothing is left of the difference between truth and error; it is mere delusion.

In light of modernity’s nihilistic condition (in the Nietzschean sense) the proliferation of avant-garde manifestos and claims to artistic ‘truth’ of the various creative modernisms, to reiterate, can be viewed as attempts to fill this void through the creation of a substitute system of values, standards and theoretical foundations.

³³ Nihilism can be described as the general rejection of established social conventions and beliefs, especially of morality and religion. In addition it can point to a belief that life is pointless and human values are worthless, and that there is no objective basis for truth. In the context of Nietzsche’s work, nihilism, closely related to his concept of creative-destruction, discussed earlier, is explained by Harvey (1994:7) in the following:

Nihilism is the Nietzschean concept corresponding most closely to this fluid and anchorless sense of reality. When the restless doubting attitude of modern reason turns reason on itself, nihilism results.

However, ironically, the modern avant-garde could never really reach consensus on how to do so, and instead of providing ‘stability’, merely reproduced the state of nihilism – even if it did so creatively, or as instances of ‘active’ value-creating (as opposed to ‘passive’) nihilism (Megill, 1985:33).

Later, the various ‘high’ modernisms, for instance, apparent in the work of the Bauhaus, the de Stijl group and the International Typographic Style, certainly achieving ‘success’ in part, endeavoured to develop an abstracted, reductive, machine-inspired, visual vocabulary, as a type of ‘universalising’ language. Thus, creative modernism, including Constructivism, artists and designers of the Bauhaus, de Stijl, and the New Typographers, amongst others, worked towards achieving this renewed sense of stability. As an aside, it is also here, that graphic design emerged as a self-conscious, rational and logical process and thus as a professionally recognized activity, in contrast to earlier avant-garde activities that only retrospectively can be labelled as the proto-practice of graphic design.

In closing I would like to draw attention to the inherent contingency and the tensioning between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ of creative modernisms, which Harvey (1990:20) articulates as follows:

As Baudelaire was very quick to see, if flux and change, ephemerality and fragmentation, formed the material basis of modern life, then the definition of a modernist aesthetic depended crucially on the artist’s positioning with respect to such processes. The individual artists could contest them, embrace them, try to dominate them, or simply swim within them, but the artist could never ignore them. The effect of any one of these positions was, of course, to alter the way cultural producers thought about the flux and change as well as the political terms in which they represented the eternal and immutable. The twists and turns of modernism as a cultural aesthetic can largely be understood against the background of such strategic choices.

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Essay 3: The language of modern design: Architecture, applied- and graphic design

1. Introduction

There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience ‘modernity’. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense modernity can be said to unite mankind. But, it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of the universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air.’ (Berman cited in Harvey 1990:10)

Within the socio-cultural experience of “great change” and instability of modern life, various art and design practices concerned themselves with a diverse number of ideals during approximately the first three decades of the twentieth century. As such, the modern movement “was not a monolith but rather a confluence of disparate groups and individuals who intersected at times to share ideas” and although “they all concurred with the desire to smash academic aestheticism, they rarely could reach consensus on the means to do so” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:89). This becomes particularly evident for example in cultural modernism’s experience of fragmentation and flux in *fin de siècle* Vienna. Here, high culture entered a self-perpetuating cycle of innovation “with each field proclaiming independence of the whole, each part in turn falling into parts” (Schorske cited in Harvey, 1990:11). Both producers, as well as analysts and critics of culture, were drawn into a process of fragmentation, which Schorske (cited in Harvey, 1990:11) calls a “ruthless centrifuge of change” and as such, there existed no stable indicators by which cultural phenomena could be determined and “fixed in thought”.

Within the excitement, novelty and misery of ever-changing modern life, the progress and promise of technological and scientific innovation and industrialisation, the shifting social-class structure, and the newfound sense of freedom and ‘self-authority’ resulting from secularisation in the early twentieth century, various ‘stabilising’ modern endeavours emerged to countervail this flux, by generating standards, regulations and new authorities in social and cultural spheres. Accordingly David Raizman (2003:63) comments:

Indeed the search for standards seems in many ways a natural tendency during any period of great change, and consistently so in the history of modern design. Whether they are standards for decoration, utility, performance or safety, a desire for regulations and commonality has continued amid the expansion of design and has been a part of the dialogue of the social, esthetic, [sic] and technical issues relating to it.

It is instructive, to recall here Charles Baudelaire’s (1978:13) model that describes the task of modern artists as twofold: namely, to record the unstable, contingent, changing and transient nature (becoming) of modern life and moreover, to find within that, an element of the universal, eternal and immovable (being) (see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern ‘graphic design’*, page 41). The primary concern for modern applied design, graphic design and architecture manifests itself in a multivalent approach reminiscent of Baudelaire’s model. One could say that modernism, broadly speaking, was characterised by ‘a search for the universal’ – a quest for the ‘eternal’ (being) as a stabilising figure amidst the diversity, ‘confusion’ and continuous change (becoming) of modern life. Allied to this, is Walter Anderson’s (1996:6) characterisation of modernity as having a concept of universality but no experience of it (see the section *The postmodern as a complex phenomenon: An introduction*, on page 11). In light of Anderson’s (1996:6) description of premodernity (in contrast) as having an experience of universality, but no concept of it, the modern search for the ‘universal’ can be understood as a search for a lost sense of stability – that which is familiar and which ‘makes sense’ (being) – as a response to the unrelenting change and socio-cultural diversity (becoming) of the modern condition.

Ultimately, with regard to the arts, this modern quest culminated in the emergence of a ‘universalising’ visual language, attempting to apply such ‘universalising’ or ‘eternalising’ standards, theories and aesthetics to graphic communication, architecture and applied design. Motivated by a rational, abstracted, simplified, machine-inspired theoretical and aesthetic approach, the modern language of art, architecture and design endeavoured, through the elimination of decoration and individualising marks, to foster a rational democratic ideal that communicates beyond cultural, economic, class, political, national and social barriers.

2. Modernity and modernism: ‘Being’ and ‘becoming’

2.1 In search of the ‘spirit of the age’

...the modern world is marked by its unprecedented dynamism, its dismissal or marginalizing of tradition, and by its global consequences, Modernity’s forward-looking thrust relates strongly to belief in progress and the power of human reason to produce freedom.... ‘Who says?’ – authority questions – and ‘who am I?’ – identity questions – are posed in new and urgent ways.... The question then becomes the classical sociological one of how tradition was eroded and broken up by the coming of modernity. Tradition, in turn, is the set of rules given by the village community, religious and cultic life, or the elders or kings who held sway. Modernity replaces such rules, with their taken-for-granted character, with new ones relating to the routines of factory life or the regulations of the bureaucratic organization.... Modernity is all about the massive changes that took place at many levels from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, changes signalled by the shifts that uprooted agricultural workers and transformed them into mobile industrial urbanites. Modernity questions all conventional ways of doing things, substituting authorities of its own, based in science, economic growth, democracy or law. And it unsettles the self; if identity is given in traditional society, in modernity it is constructed. Modernity started out to conquer the world in the name of Reason; certainty and social order would be founded on new bases. (Lyon, 1994:19–21)

The quest for a definitively ‘modern style’ preoccupied creative practices, in particular architecture and design, in the time preceding the ‘coming of age’ of twentieth century modernism. In light of what has been said before, this may have been motivated in part by a search for the ‘universal’ – a sense of stability, order,

structure and/or 'sameness' in the midst of the Victorian superfluity and stylistic multiplicity evident at the time.

Richard Weston (1996:22–23) sheds some light on the progressively modern notion, which developed in the time leading up to the twentieth century, of finding a uniquely representative style for the age – a style that would reflect the inimitably modern 'spirit of the age' (or *Zeitgeist*, the well-known German term for this phrase). The arts, particularly architecture, were regarded as “embodiments of the ‘Spirit of the Age’” (Weston, 1996:22). Accordingly, the question which concerned and appealed to many architects at the time is summed up as early as 1825 in a book by Hübsch entitled, *In which style should we build?* Similarly, another architect, Schinkel comments, “Every major period has left behind its own style of architecture” and asks, “Why should we not try to find a style for ourselves?” (cited in Weston, 1996:22). Accordingly, in 1849 the French critic César Daly, lamenting the Victorian ornamental superfluity and resultant eclecticism and stylistic multiplicity of the nineteenth century, noted the need for “a new architecture which will take us out of the sterility of the past and the servility of copying” (cited in Weston, 1996:22).

Allied to this, a further concern began to occupy creative practitioners (and society in general). An awareness with regard to the poor working (and living) conditions of factory workers and other labourers, resulting from the rapidly expanding industrialisation during the nineteenth century, became a central socio-cultural concern. As such, along with the growing wealth of industrial and merchant classes, and the social unrest and working class resistance of 1830 that led to armed conflict, a sense of obligation developed towards addressing the socio-economic problems of the working-class poor (Raizman, 2003:45). Moreover, this led to the emergence of 'design reform', which developed as a response to the problems of industrial and commercial expansion across a broad spectrum of creative practices. It developed with two main compulsions, concerning itself on the one hand with the educating and training of designers, and on the other, with the education of the public at large regarding the ability to discern between 'good' and 'bad' design. Raizman (2003:45) explains:

Along with industrial wealth came a desire, even a sense of obligation, to shape the values of a more complex and diverse society, and to address issues of social and economic welfare for all. Such attitudes took a variety of forms, including the role of the arts. Reformers took an interest in the education of designers and in the cultivation of discriminating taste in the public at large. Design “reform” aimed to set standards for taste in the public interest and was part of a broad response to industrial and commercial expansion towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

It is important to note that, the purpose of design reform as a ‘stabilising’ force parallels compatible tendencies evident in the search for the ‘spirit of the age’. As one might expect, the intended ‘reform’ in design practices, in the face of the standardisation implicit in industry, would have been motivated by similar universalising intentions. It is therefore not surprising that the implementation of design reform became problematic, as it did not allow for the growing diversity of the emerging mass market. Raizman (2003:45–6) confirms this where he comments on the lack of success on the part of ‘reformers’ to take account of the increasing heterogeneity of the market.

This issue came to light for instance at *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, held in London in 1851 at the celebrated Crystal Palace. Here a great amount of stylistic freedom and diversity, from the range of exhibits to the stylistic multiplicity of the items on display, became evident. Accordingly, Weston’s (1996:23) comments reveal the shortcoming of the design reform, as evident in the goods on display:

...encrusted with ‘style’, the luxury items exemplified the Victorian delight in accumulation whether of facts in science, details in painting, ornament on objects, or money in the bank. This rampant spirit might be the true spirit of the age, but it was not what the organizers wished to see... Most consumers visiting the Crystal Palace had clearly not had their taste sufficiently elevated and Cole and his fellow reformers still had much to do.

In much the same way, regarding the ‘quality’ of goods on display, Raizman (2003:51) comments that “the organizers themselves expressed disappointment in the

results, for there was little evidence that public taste had been improved or that standards of design had been widely adopted”.

What did attract the positive attention of the organisers, and surely the exhibitors and even the public at large however, was the technological ingenuity and ‘utilitarian beauty’ of industrially manufactured goods that brought with it associated conceptions of ‘modernity’, progress and prosperity. The exhibition hall, the Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton, gardener turned architect, was itself exemplary in this regard. Raizman (2003:52) describes the Crystal Palace as a temporary structure, made primarily from “breathtaking expanses of glass” and uniform, prefabricated, cast-iron parts. With the material benefit afforded humankind by the utilisation of modern technology, the Crystal Palace, evocative in its use of modern materials and construction technology of functional structures such as railway stations and bridges, became exemplary in its symbolic and applied references to “modernity, progress and confidence in the possibilities of industrialized technology” (Raizman, 2003:52).

In much the same way, the practical, utilitarian, industrially manufactured goods on display, which “amidst the profusion of luxuries... were an oasis of calm”, elicited delight and praise from the organizers and ardent design reformers at the exhibition (Weston, 1996:23–24), as such:

Richard Redgrave, one of Cole’s circle, expressed delight in the ‘noble simplicity’ of these ‘objects of absolute utility’. And Gottfried Semper... praised the exhibits ‘in which seriousness of purpose does not permit superfluities, such as carriages, weapons, musical instruments, the perfection and nobility of their forms being strictly prescribed by function’. Perhaps the distinctive new style had been there all along, expressed in industrial products and in the ineffable space conjured by Paxton from small, modular, prefabricated components, It was a machine aesthetic for the first machine age, the philosophical foundations for which had been laid in the mid-eighteenth century, when the first rumblings of the industrial revolution were heard in England.

Thus, products began to express their modernity and convey the ‘spirit of the age’ through clear revelation of their industrial production and mechanised making processes. It is here, with an industrial, machine-made, utilitarian aesthetic and its

associated conception of ‘modernity’ and progress that the search for the once-elusive ‘spirit of the age’ found its conclusion. The progressive, rational, utilitarian and democratising simplicity of technology (‘the machine’) began to set aesthetic and stylistic standards for design, while at the same time providing design reformers with (ironically) a qualitative theoretical model for ‘good’ design. As such, Jonathan Woodham (1997:33) indicates:

The moral dimension of modernism originated in the nineteenth-century design reform movement. It reflected a growing belief in early twentieth-century avant-garde design circles that products which both disguised their modes of construction through ornamental embellishment and were out of tune with the ‘spirit of the age’ (or *Zeitgeist*) were exemplars of ‘bad’ design.

It is important to accentuate that the search for ‘the spirit of the age’, as well as the interrelated conception of design reform, highlights the paradigmatically modern notion of finding a type of ‘universalising’ and ‘eternalising’ truth (stability and ‘being’). And understandably so, when one recalls the character of the modern as attempting to (re)establish a sense of unity and stability, in response to the destabilising forces inherent within modernity, such as secularisation, modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and so forth. (Note the opening passage by David Lyon on page 98, which is instructive in this regard.)

2.2 The search for a universal modern ‘language’

In setting the scene for the development of a ‘mature’, rational, abstract modernism that dominated much of the applied design and architecture during the first half of the twentieth century, it is useful to revisit here, albeit as part of a rather long extract, Baudelaire’s double-edged formulation of the task of modern artists (alluded to earlier), as well as the related ideals of the Enlightenment Project, as expressed by David Harvey (1990:10, 12–13) (which has been discussed in detail in earlier essays³⁴):

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of the Enlightenment project, see *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 32, and similarly, see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern ‘graphic design’*, page 85 regarding

'Modernity,' wrote Baudelaire in his seminal essay 'The painter of modern life' (published 1863), 'is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.'... An avant-garde has usually played, as Poggiolo... and Bürger... record, a vital role in the history of modernism, interrupting any sense of continuity by radical surges, recuperations, and repressions. How to interpret this, how to discover the 'eternal and immutable' elements in the midst of such radical disruptions, becomes a serious problem. Even if modernism always remained committed to discover, as the painter Paul Klee put it, 'the essential character of the accidental,' it now had to do so in a field of continually changing meanings that often seem to 'contradict the rational experience of yesterday.' Aesthetic practices and judgements fragmented into that kind of 'maniacal scrapbook filled with colourful entries that have no relation to each other, no determining, rational, or economic scheme,' which Raban describes as an essential aspect of urban life.

Where in all of this, could we look for some sense of coherence, let alone say something cogent about the 'eternal and immutable' that was supposed to lurk within this maelstrom of social change in space and time? Enlightenment thinkers generated a philosophical and even a practical answer to that question. Since this answer has dominated much of the subsequent debate over the meaning of modernity, it merits closer scrutiny.

Although the term 'modern' has rather a more ancient history, what Habermas... calls the project of modernity came into focus during the eighteenth century. The project amounted to an extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers 'to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic.' [as opposed to external authorities] The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity. The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures. Only through such a project could the universal, eternal and immutable qualities of all our humanity be revealed.

Enlightenment thought (and I here rely on Cassirer's, 1951, account) embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains. It took Alexander Pope's injunction, 'the proper study of mankind is man,' with great

Baudelaire's formulation of the task of the modern artists. Also, note that although this extract is in part repeated elsewhere, it is necessary to review it here, in light of the subject matter at hand.

seriousness. To the degree that it also lauded human creativity, scientific discovery, and the pursuit of individual excellence in the name of human progress, Enlightenment thinkers welcomed the maelstrom of change and saw the transitoriness, the fleeting, and the fragmentary as a necessary condition through which the modernizing project could be achieved. Doctrines of equality, liberty, faith in human intelligence (once allowed the benefits of education), and universal reason abounded. ‘A good law must be good for everyone,’ pronounced Condorcet in the throes of the French Revolution, ‘in exactly the same way that a true proposition is true for all.’ Such a vision was incredibly optimistic. Writers like Condorcet, Habermas... notes, were possessed ‘of the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings.’

As confident as this optimistic, positivistic modern vision was, it could and did not last. A fissure started to appear in Enlightenment’s progressive idealistic vision, in no small measure a result of the destruction wrought by the First World War, Nietzsche’s culture-critical intervention that highlighted the inherent axiological disorientation and nihilism of modern life, together with a general sense of the degeneration and decadence of Western civilisation. These and other negatively impacting factors contributed to a socio-cultural milieu where the achievement of Enlightenment vision, through science and technology and based on humanity’s rational ability, became a more distant and questionable prospect. “Progress,” Franklin Baumer (1977:400) comments, “had now been unmasked, and it was apparent to an increasing number that there was nothing automatic or certain about it”. And so, simplifying somewhat, it transpired that the burden of success of Enlightenment ideals was placed on the shoulders of cultural modernism. Here, the fulfilment of this vision was to be realised in the uncovering of ‘universal truth’ – a ‘truth’, accessible democratically across all boundaries – national, social, cultural, economic and so forth. And so, the Enlightenment vision was taken up as perhaps the primary initiative for the various creative modernisms. Harvey (1990:18–19, 30, 31) accordingly observes:

By the beginning of the twentieth century... it was no longer possible to accord Enlightenment reason a privileged status in the definition of the eternal and the immutable essence of human nature.... so the exploration of aesthetic experience... became a powerful means to establish a new mythology as to what the eternal and the immutable might be about in the midst of all the

ephemerality, fragmentation and patent chaos of modern life. This gave a new role, and a new impetus, to cultural modernism.

Artists, writers, architects, composers, poets, thinkers, and philosophers had a very special position within this new conception of the modernist project. If the 'eternal and immutable' could no longer be automatically presupposed, then the modern artists had a creative role to play in defining the essence of humanity.... In the absence of Enlightenment certitudes as to the perfectibility of man, [sic] the search for a myth [metanarrative, 'truth']³⁵ appropriate to modernity became paramount.... The myth either had to redeem us from 'the formless universe of contingency' or, more programmatically, to provide the impetus for a new project for human endeavour".

Within all the various modernisms, each attempting their own path to 'universality', one of these strands is of particular significance to modern graphic design practice. Harvey (1990:20) highlights the particular strand of modernism that "became preoccupied with language, with finding some special mode of representation of eternal truths". The reference here is being made to modernist literary work, rendered by writers such as James Joyce and Proust, and poets such as Mallarmé and Aragon and their "tremendous preoccupation with the creation of new codes, significations and metaphorical allusions in the languages they constructed" (Harvey, 1990:21). However, in terms of graphic design practice this is of significant relevance as Harvey draws attention to a notion that occupied much of the graphic design during the modernist era – that is the search for new 'universal' visual language systems suitable for a new modern era.

The inter-war years left a rich cultural legacy in its encouragement and advancement of modern theoretical conceptions of a universalising, 'democratic', visual language. Faith in architecture and design (also graphic design) existed in its assumed ability to realise modern ideals of social reform and utopian beliefs in progress (the legacy of Enlightenment beliefs). The conflict and destruction of the First World War disrupted industrial production, as well as the commercial practice of design, and thus initiated a type of 'wiping clean of the slate' (reminiscent of the avant-garde's destructive

³⁵ Following Lyotard (1984:31) the term *myth* or *metanarrative* can be explained as "a story of mythological proportion". The creation of myths or metanarratives had become a necessary component of modern life, filling the vacuum left by modernity's secularisation, its destruction of 'history' and of other foundational forces.

endeavours) and what Jeremy Aynsley (2001:40) calls “a tabula rasa on which the world could be built anew”. Architecture and applied design, for instance, were called upon to reconstruct the built environment (the reconstruction of buildings, interior and exterior, as well as the rebuilding and re-planning of city ‘structures’) and to provide new modern mass housing systems and functionalist furniture after the devastation of the war. Equally, “international visual communication was also identified as a priority”, as Aynsley (2001:40) puts it; as such, graphic design was called upon to develop a universal, modern, visual vocabulary that could overcome the diversity, complexity and instability (some call it ‘culture shock’) of living and communicating in the modern world. Differently put, it was believed that a ‘universal’ visual communication system could help to cross socio-cultural boundaries in creating a ‘language’ that would, using Anderson’s (1996:6) words, “get everybody on the same page” (Aynsley, 2001:40):

Designers held that this could encourage international understanding and hoped that abstract geometry, simplified sans-serif typefaces and photography or photomontage could combine as a universal language that would transcend differences of culture and class.

So, modernism’s endeavour towards developing a universalising visual language, in the face of the demise of the Enlightenment Project’s original ideals, in many ways became a “new mythology” (Harvey, 1990:31). In doing so, creative modernism defined “a new project for human endeavour”, paradoxically though, one that brought with it much of the original Enlightenment ideals (Harvey, 1990: 18). And subsequently, out of the early experimental, innovative attitude of the avant-garde, a rigid, modernist visual language system began to develop for graphic design, founded on a strict theoretical base that, amongst others features, advocated a strong link with industry, technology and production, the elimination of decoration, and a commitment to social democratising ideals. Modernism in applied design and architecture found its expression in the application of a minimalist, abstracted, rationalised, ornament-free, machine ‘aesthetic’ as exemplified in modern architecture as well as modern graphic design. As such, the graphic design work of the Russian Constructivists, the de Stijl group and especially the Bauhaus (as well as, although in a different way, the later

work produced by designers working within the margins of the International Typographic Style in Switzerland) is exemplary of the mature, modern graphic approach.

2.3 An overview of modernist tendencies

And apart from the general consciousness of flux and change which flowed through all modernist works, a fascination with technique, with speed and motion, with the machine and the factory system, as well as with the stream of new commodities entering into daily life, provoked a wide range of aesthetic responses varying from denial, through imitation to speculation on utopian possibilities. (Harvey, 1990:23)

It may be helpful here, as a review of and elucidation on what has been discussed in the preceding, to highlight some of the primary characteristics of modern design and to expand on some of its theoretical tendencies. Out of the groundbreaking creative theoretical and aesthetic advances of the avant-garde and as a response to the decorative excesses and eclecticism in the nineteenth century, creative modernism came into being. *Modernism* or the *Modern Movement* is defined as terms used “to embrace a diverse range of art movements and ideas that emerged during the first half of the 20th c. [sic] and profoundly influenced the subsequent development of art, architecture and design” (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:136). What should be added is that it also constituted a range of creative and critical responses to the modern condition – to modernity.

Keeping this in mind, one way to conceive of modernism relates to the characteristic tendency, in modernist art as well as literature (for example the novels of Virginia Woolf), to produce art or artworks that display a formal ‘unity’ not to be tampered with and embody a kind of aesthetic order and truth distinct from social life. In this sense modernist art (for example Suprematism and abstract Expressionism) with formal concerns could be called ‘aestheticist’ insofar as it elevated the formal-aesthetic sphere to the level of autonomy in relation to (and distinct from) social reality (Megill, 1985:2, 11–12, 282). At least one strand of modernism, however, encouraged a melding of art and everyday life, in opposition to the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ espoused by the Suprematists for instance. Gropius (director at the

Bauhaus) advanced this notion and advocated the need to “bring art back to the people through the production of beautiful things” (cited in Harvey, 1990:22). As such, modern artists and designers sought to imbue art and design with utility, rationality and functionality, thus providing creative modernism with the capacity to partake in the legacy of the Enlightenment conception of progress and the betterment of social conditions for all. In this way, modernism encouraged the melding of professional or commercial with artistic-creative interests, and developed a functional ‘art’ that brought craft into the realm of professional applied design practices. This in many ways signalled the conception of professional activities such as graphic-, interior-, product-, textile-, and other design practices.

Allied to this, modern design encouraged a link between art and industrial production, patent in the growth of interaction between the artists/designers and industry in the modern era. This is evident in the establishment of various organisations that encouraged this link, such as the Deutsche Werkbund. The early alliance between Peter Behrens and the Deutsche Werkbund, and his work for the Allgemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft (AEG) is paradigmatic in this regard. At the same time the industry link, amongst other factors, motivated and developed a rational, modern, machine-inspired, visual language that advocated the use of abstract, bold, geometric forms, the elimination of decoration and the use of asymmetric layouts. (As an aside, it was believed that symmetry created pattern, which was associated with decoration, and thus eliminated.)

Thus, the modern applied aesthetic was characterised by “clean, geometric forms” and specifically in applied design “the use of modern materials such as chromium-plated steel and glass, and plain surfaces articulated by the abstract manipulation of light and shade”, amongst others (Woodham, 1997:35). Furthermore, modern graphic design featured a restrained palette of primary colours, particularly red, together with a monochrome palette of white, off-white, grey and black as “unambiguous affirmations of twentieth-century life, symbolically attuned to the possibilities of modern materials and manufacturing processes” (Woodham, 1997:35). Added features of the modern design ethos include: a modern vocabulary of form instilled

with a sense of 'functionalism', the quest to eliminate decoration, as well as the creation of standardised forms which accentuate a practical, theoretical and aesthetic link with the machine, modern industry and production technologies (Woodham, 1997:35). The American architect, Louis Sullivan, celebrated for his Chicago skyscrapers, in 1885 famously declared, 'form follows function', which became the founding credo for progressive designers attempting to merge industrially inspired functionalism and rationalism with design and architecture (cited in Livingston & Livingston, 1992:136). Similarly, Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum, 'less is more' became the foundation for the machine-inspired, simple, clean, geometric and minimalist modern design approach that was considered to have universal (democratic) appeal (Meggs, 1998:284).

The democratic ideal, a foremost motivating force for modern design, as highlighted earlier, was based on the legacy of the eighteenth century Enlightenment's faith in reason and, by extension, technology to solve social problems and establish societal harmony. Differently put, the modern 'universalising' design ideal was based on a "widespread utopian belief that mechanization and technology, if properly channelled, could produce a better, less divided society" (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:136). As such, this modern design approach featured a commitment to functionalism and rationalism in realising the democratising, mass-production possibilities of modernism in one of its guises. Modern designers, in the fields of applied design and architecture, endeavoured to provide well-made products for 'mass-consumption' and began to develop new modern techniques, materials and approaches to the design and production of such goods, thus allowing modern technology to provide what Lloyd Kramer (2002:16) calls "material benefits" to society. At the same time, Van der Rohe and Sullivan's maxims speak to the 'universalising', 'democratising' philosophy underpinning the modern design approach. Modernism's theoretical foundation, endeavouring to eliminate individualising characteristics (decoration) and thus to appeal to a wider audience, is compatible with the modern social (and often socialist) theoretical ideal of equality and classlessness.

2.4 Modernism, ('man') and machine

Patent in what has been discussed so far, the implications of industrialisation, resultant urbanisation and modernisation at all levels, had far-reaching effects for creative-cultural and social modernism. As such, the impact of modern industry instilled respectively, apprehension and confidence in various sectors of society and culture, but with particular significance in cultural modernism. An ambivalent tensioning between 'man' and machine became an important theme underlying the modern era (and later also the postmodern) resulting from the conflict between the positive and the negative effects of the industrial revolution. Matters such as the socio-economic conditions of the working classes, and moreover, the aesthetic and technical qualities and standards of mass-manufactured goods, the need for education of designers and the public at large as to the issue of 'taste' amongst others, had emerged in design reform movements, Constructivism, de Stijl, the Bauhaus and modernism generically speaking.

It is interesting to note here, Bradbury and McFarlane's (cited in Harvey, 1990:24) comments on the complex and contradictory nature of modernisms' diverse range of reactions to the condition of modernity, wherein they also highlight the dual reaction to modern industrialisation:

[It was] an extraordinary compound of the futurist and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was the celebration of a technological age and the condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that old regimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escaping from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expression of these things.

Primarily two disparate streams of thought became evident concerning the 'promise of industrial production'. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, an awareness of and growing concern over the poor conditions of the working or labouring classes became an important concern for cultural modernism. On the other hand, the legacy of Enlightenment faith in reason and concomitantly, science and technology, to provide

for the wants and needs of humankind remained, in no small measure spurred on by the growing demands of a rapidly emerging consumer market.

The former approach developed in direct opposition to (and as a result of) the blind and optimistic faith in technology. This backlash becomes evident as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, for instance, in the ideas of the Romantic Movement that places emphasis on the creative individual, in Marx's Communist Manifesto that warns of the alienating, dehumanising consequences of industrialised labour, in Ruskin and Morris's socialist design reform that rejects machine production, and in the Realist literature of writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, Conrad and Mann. Lyon (1994:28) comments that modernity came as a "mixed blessing", and, noting the concerns of prominent modern thinkers regarding the negative consequences of modernisation, elucidates accordingly:

From the earliest social analyses notes of caution and concern were sounded. In the world of production Marx found exploiting capitalists and alienated workers. Durkheim noted a profound sense of unease, uncertainty about how to go on, among those affected by the new divisions of labour. Weber feared that rationalization would eventually crush the human spirit, walling it in behind the bars of the bureaucratic iron cage. Simmel sensed that the society of strangers would produce new social fragmentation and isolation. And so on.

Similarly, Baumer (1977:374–5, 376) highlights the *fin-de-siècle*'s antipositivistic rejection of the Enlightenment's idealistic vision for science and technology, particularly that of Bergson, which in contrast to the machine-oriented quest for 'stability', favours dynamism, instability, and 'becoming':

"We reject radical mechanism," said Bergson. For Bergson and the other antipositivists, mechanism conjured up a particularly revolting set of images: "the tightening grasp of law," in T.H. Huxley's phrase, the reduction of life to physical categories, thus excluding freedom and value and leading in the end to moral irresponsibility.... But for Bergson, mechanistic vision erred above all, in affirming a static nature, which took no account of "time." That is, it regarded future and past as calculable functions of the present.... In either case, "all is given"; the forces by which nature is animated are all fixed and prearranged....

Certain modern avant-garde movements, such as the Berlin Dada group, discussed in a previous essay, had posed challenges to social problems brought about by the mechanised labour conditions of the industrial revolution, and certainly early design reform, in Britain especially, had also attempted to address this (see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern 'graphic design'*, page 41). However it would seem that the concept of 'the machine' in creative modernism had come out largely untouched, in view of creative modernism's affection for it. Sparke (cited in Raizman, 2003:158) notes:

The philosophical leap from the idea of the machine to that of simple geometric form was made by all the Modern Movement protagonists. It was a leap of faith rather than fact but one which, nevertheless, underpinned all aspects of the machine aesthetic, both in theory and practice.

Consequently, the second approach, incontrovertibly committed to industrial production, technological advance and Enlightenment faith in the possibility of progress (even aspiring at the hand of some modernists to levels of utopia) in due course steered the development of aesthetic modernism convincingly in its own favour. Harvey (1990:31) accordingly notes that one stream of modernism "appealed to the image of rationality incorporated in the machine, the factory, the power of contemporary technology, or the city as a 'living machine'". This prevailing modern sense of technological promise had been brought about by a number of contributing factors. Primarily, the material benefits provided by the industrial and scientific revolution in the form of industrial innovation, medical advances and numerous other modernisations, provided significant improvements in the comfort and general well-being of people in the early twentieth century (that is, what Kramer (2002:16) calls "material benefits", see *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19). Weston (1996:60) accordingly comments:

Psychological and social unease would remain major Modernist themes, but the arrival of the new century also saw a renewed sense of optimism, occasioned in no small measure by the seemingly unlimited promise of nineteenth-century inventions which were then going into industrial production and beginning to make a significant difference to everyday life.

This is evident, for instance, in the popular advertising graphics, which became commonplace by the 1920's, depicting "scenes of ideal families, enjoying the benefits of products designed for self-improvement" (Raizman, 2003:62). An example of this is afforded by a trade card promoting *Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup*, executed in the illustrative decorative Style of Victorian graphics, depicting "a carefree mother and child whose happiness is connected with alleviating the annoyance of normal teething" (Raizman, 2003:62). In a different way, Diego Rivera's famous Detroit murals existed as awed tributes to the power of modern technology during the depression years, serving as inspiration for many progressive mural painters in the United States (Harvey, 1990:31).

Furthermore, the veneration of industrial methods, materials and structures in architecture produced monolithic tributes to technological innovation in the built environment in the form of famous structures such as the Crystal Palace (1851) in London as discussed earlier, and the Eiffel Tower (1889) in Paris, amongst others. These architectural structures served to further enhance a public appreciation of the benefit of industrialisation and technology on an emotive (almost spiritual) and practical level. One such an enthusiast of modern construction techniques and the utilitarian 'machine-aesthetic' comments, for instance, with regard to the Crystal Palace, that "it is debatable whether any individual building since has demonstrated more convincingly the architectural potential of industrial production" (Weston, 1996:27). Modernism's veneration of technological feats, though not always shared by all, becomes apparent in the way the Eiffel tower, for instance, figured as a dominant motif in the work of artists such as Pissarro, Chagall, Dufy, Henri Rousseau, Picasso, Utrillo, Van Dongen and Delaunay amongst others. Delaunay, for example, "painted over fifty canvases of the tower between 1909 and 1911" (Weston, 1996:34).

Exhibitions and fairs dedicated to the celebration of technological ingenuity, such as the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* at the Crystal Palace in London (1851), the *Paris International Exhibition* (1889) and *The Chicago World's*

Fair (1893) made an enormous impact at a vast scale on the public at large. These exhibitions and fairs provided pursuits of leisure, entertainment and education, and thus showcased, at a practically and emotionally beneficial level, the worth of technological modernisation. The overwhelming public response to the Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in 1851 recalls the legacy of eighteenth century Enlightenment ideals regarding the potential of technological innovation. Accordingly (Raizman, 2003:52):

The Great Exhibition seemed to promise the fulfilment of universal progress, ingenuity, prosperity, and peace, merging God's own blessings and bounty with human industry and initiative for the universal benefit and enjoyment of humankind.

These factors: the material benefits of technology and scientific innovation, the popularity of international fairs and exhibitions dedicated to technological ingenuity, the application of scientific engineering standards and technology-orientated principles to aesthetics, materials and construction techniques in architecture, together with the positive emotional response to technological and aesthetic innovation, amongst others, created a socio-cultural milieu that was an important inspirational source for artists and designers. These features were allied with a general sense of optimism regarding the positive improvement of everyday life through technological innovations that swept cultural modernisms (Futurism, to name just one) off their feet. This impulse became particularly apparent in the 'function', 'beauty' and 'speed' of modernised transport, as Weston (1996:25) observes:

Lovers of beauty and utility found particular delight in the world of transportation... In England, carriage-driving became fashionable thanks to the Prince Regent and his circle, and the utmost simplicity and lack of any extraneous features were recognized as the mark of elegance and refinement in carriage design. At the century's close Henry van der Velde, the Belgian painter turned architect, ecstatically compared the parade of carriages in Hyde Park to the Elysian mysteries, the procession to the Parthenon, medieval tournaments and legendary feasts of Venetian gondolas, concluding that none compared with 'the harmony and unique rhythm of this festival of modern beauty'.

2.5 The machine, progress and utopia

Projects and prototypes showed sympathy for non-objective abstract art, the marvels of engineering, and rhetoric supported the primacy of social responsibility and reform as motivations for design in relation to modern life in a more egalitarian, industrial world. Each [modern] movement... identified machine-made products with plain geometric shapes and the modern urban environment, linked to strong utopian sentiments. (Raizman, 2003:158)

Creative modernism, broadly speaking, became infused by an idealistic faith in technology, in no small part an extension of the Enlightenment faith in reason to produce a 'better world'. The technological allegiance of modernism impacts in a number of different ways. These include, the explicit exposure of art and design media and making processes, together with the valorisation of the machine as the symbol of a paradigmatically 'modern' era, for instance many modern 'graphic designs' overtly seeking to expose machine made or industrially processed sensibilities. Examples of this, mentioned earlier, include photomontage and collage (see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern 'graphic design'*, page 41). These modernist tendencies also emerge paradigmatically in the way in which modernists, including designers such as El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy and Tschichold, promoted the use of photograms (the product of the direct exposure of objects onto light sensitive plates in the darkroom) as well as the use of 'typo-foto'³⁶ and photomontage, to reveal mechanistic tendencies in the making-processes, underlying the theory and aesthetic tendencies of their graphic designs.

Also apparent in many graphic pieces of the modern period is the valorisation of industrial production evident in overt references to technology in the form of graphic motifs such as "concentric circles, infinitely repeating images, cogwheels and other machine parts" and even the graphic melding of human and machine in the form of robotic figures (Goldstein, 1998:117). This technique can be seen in the de Stijl piece by Van Doesberg, the 1922 cover design, *Mécano No. Bleu, Blauw, Blau, Blue* (Appendix I, fig. 2, page 188) and the Stenberg brothers' Constructivist poster

³⁶ The 'typo-foto' technique as advanced by Tschichold, can be described as "the use of photography as typographic elements in page layout" (Raizman, 2003:194).

Simfoniia bol'shogo goroda (Symphony of a great city) (Appendix I, fig. 1, page 188) (Goldstein, 1998:117).

The general sense of optimism regarding the value of technology is confirmed when Darra Goldstein (1998:117) assesses that these machine-inspired images are hardly unexpected “for an era when each advance in technology held boundless promise as the key to a bold future”. In addition one should consider that (Goldstein, 1998:117):

Much of the success of these images had to do with the avant-garde fascination with the machine as both agent for change and an aesthetic object in its own right. From the use of new technologies that allowed for innovations in typography to using machine imagery as a metaphor for progressive thought, modernist artists [and designers] explored the manifold relationship between humans and machines.

An analysis of Rodchenko’s Russian constructivist film poster, *Kino Glaz (Kino Eye)* from 1924 further affirms the valorisation of technology on a more symbolic level, in a variety of ways (Appendix I, fig. 3, page 188) (Lupton, 1998:51):

A boy, his image doubled by a pair of movie cameras, is depicted from below, an extreme perspective borrowed from the cinema. The boy looks up at a single giant eye whose monocular stare – both arrested and arresting – appears fixed upon some imposing spectacle.

The poster’s stylistic and symbolic features celebrate “the mechanization of vision” – a symbolism that works on a number of different levels (Lupton, 1998:51). Firstly the image of the boy and the camera is flipped and copied, a technique that overtly reveals the technological making-processes of the printed medium, characteristic of modern graphic design. Furthermore, the giant sans-serif letterforms evident on the poster are significant, in that they reject the naturalistic, organic modulation and traditional, classical values of serif faces. These sans-serif letterforms, in addition, emphasise a clean, non-decorative, ubiquitously modern ‘machine-aesthetic’ and convey the idea of technology. This poster is an example of how modern artists and designers exalt mechanical reproduction – in this instance printed and cinematic forms (type and image). Modern designers in the main “sought to expose technology” in their work, as modernism viewed technological processes of manufacture “not as

neutral, transparent means to an end but as devices equipped with cultural meaning and aesthetic character” (Lupton, 1998:52).

The promise of technology and associated utopian idealism is exemplified in a socialist/communist-directed Russian poster, most likely from the early 1930’s, that calls for “Women Workers” to join in “the Ranks of Active Participants in the Industrial and Social Life of the Country!” (Appendix I, fig. 5, page 188) (Goldstein 1998:125). The poster features a woman worker, in what seems to be a thread factory, wearing a presumably compulsory red scarf (accentuated by the surrounding washed-out greys in the rest of the poster) holding thread from a bobbin in the foreground, with repeating rows of bobbins disappearing behind her into the background (Goldstein 1998:125). On a formal (aesthetic) level, repetition is used for dramatic emphasis – to fix the image in the viewer’s mind – on a representational level, it speaks to a utopian idealism as it “promises the infinite through never-ceasing rhythms or endless supplies” (Goldstein 1998:125). This fecundity is strengthened by the background images of happy playing children and the “woman’s nearly beatific expression as she gazes off into a radiant future” (Goldstein 1998:125). As such, the poster is symbolic of the message, “whether in the factory or at home, the woman worker bears a special responsibility for the productivity of the nation, variety and individuality being the price of exceptional productiveness in the conveyor belt age”, as Goldstein (1998:125) observes.³⁷ In the excerpt below, Goldstein (1998:129) reviews the utopian tendencies of modernism’s forward-thinking progressive vision and the role of art and design (cultural, creative *-isms*) in realising this ideal and in ultimately achieving social transformation – “a redefinition” – in modern everyday life:

³⁷ As a slight digression, it is important to note that hands often figure in a significant manner in conjunction with mechanistic motifs, which is indicative of the need for a guiding human intellect, without which mechanics cannot work effectively (Goldstein, 1998:120). As such, the human aspect remains a vital component in the face of the seemingly limitless promise of technological advance. Graphic pieces that feature the human-machine alliance, serve to both reassure regarding the importance of human interaction while at the same time promoting the machine as an indispensable companion for a “bright, prosperous, and graphically uncluttered future” (Goldstein, 1998:121).

This redefinition was part of the larger utopian experience of the early twentieth century, when technology promised material abundance and a carefree future. Although the human potential to change the world had long been the stuff of futurist fantasy, what had merely been prophecy was now reality as technology transformed life daily. As heralds of the new age, the graphic artists of the era celebrated the technology that enabled mass reproduction of their work and the general amelioration of life. At the same time, they did not neglect the importance of human agency. Ultimately, their best works demonstrate the unity between image and idea, between production and reception – the unwavering connection between art and life.

The modern conception of ‘utopia’ featured as subject matter in the work of modern artists and designers, and moreover, was implicated on an intellectual plane in the idealistic conception of technological progress and social idealism. Modernism’s resolute faith in progress was at the heart of the utopian conception – “The Earthly Paradise” – as Baumer, referring to the heyday of modern thought in the nineteenth century, called it (1977:330, 332):

Actually, the only “law” the scientific historians at mid-century could agree on was the law of progress. But this was nearly a universal conviction of the age. “If there is some idea that belongs peculiarly to our century,” a French philosophy professor wrote in 1851, “it is, so it seems to me, the idea of Progress, conceived as a general law of history and the future of humanity.”

In addition, as a logical advancement in the Enlightenment ideology of progress – the idea of ‘natural’ positive growth and development – it is not difficult to pick up on the progressive utopian ideal of ampleness and plenty, as an important foundation for socio-cultural modernism. Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast (2000:89) accordingly explain that an important area of focus for cultural modernism was the idealist Enlightenment-based conception of progress and thus, “at the heart of the entire Modernist spirit was a forward-looking – and decidedly utopian – ethic”. Modernism attempted, in true Enlightenment fashion, to break with traditional conceptions and backward-looking notions, in order to produce ‘art’, products, communications and architecture suitable for a new modern era. As such, modernism, in general, opposed the elite cultural connotation of traditional classical creative practices and “sought both to free art from its bourgeoisie ornamental superstructure and to influence the

politics of contemporary life” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:89). Thus, attempting to merge ‘art’ with life, at least in some of its embodiments, creative modernism’s role was to be re-inscribed as one with socially transformative capacity. As such, the language of modern art and design matches itself stylistically to the functional, rational, standardised and homogeneous, industry-oriented machine-aesthetic, free from any ornamental and individualising characteristics. Accordingly, Harvey (1990:23) illustrates:

...early modernist architects like Mies van der Rohe drew a lot of their inspiration from the purely functional grain elevators then springing up all over the American Midwest. Le Corbusier in his plans and writings took what he saw as the possibilities inherent in the machine, factory and automobile age and projected them into some utopian future.... Tichi... documents how popular American journals like Good Housekeeping were depicting the house as ‘nothing more than a factory for the production of happiness’ as early as 1910, years before Le Corbusier ventured his celebrated (and now much revived) dictum that the house is a ‘machine for modern living.’

So, with the advancement of modernism, a new type of artist/designer emerged striving to be actively engaged in the building of a new modern social order. Victor Margolin (1997:9) accordingly comments that the “utopian imagination – a means to envision new possibilities for human life” arose in the early twentieth century in Russia, one of the important centres for modernism, with the vision to “transform an entire nation”. With reference to the promise of technology, Goldstein (1998:129) similarly comments that modern artists (and designers) through “unabashed promotion” set out to sell to modern society “something hitherto beyond its reach—whether a commodity, an ideology, or a better way of life”.

One of the ways in which modernism conceived of societal transformation was in its development of a universal visual ‘style’ that scorned decorative tendencies. This tendency to eliminate decoration parallels, albeit perhaps with different theoretical foundations, modern processes of geometric abstraction and also the valorisation of rational, mechanised, industrial processes. Loos (cited in Woodham, 1997:33) an important modern theorist on the ‘evils’ of decoration and author of *Ornament und Verbrechen* (Ornament and Crime) claims:

...the modern ornamentalist is either a cultural laggard or a pathological case. He himself is forced to disown his work after three years. His productions are unbearable to cultured persons now, and will become so to others in a little while.

In addition (cited in Weston, 1996:50):

‘The lower the culture,’ he argued, ‘the more apparent the ornament. Ornament is something that must be overcome. The Papuan and the criminal ornament their skin. The Indian covers his paddle and his boat with layers and layers of ornament. But the bicycle and the steam engine are free of ornament. The march of civilisation systematically liberates object after object from ornamentation.’

Similarly Woodham (1997:33) cites Corbusier in *L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui* (*The Decorative Art of Today*) published in 1925, on the moral implications of decorative design:

Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well-made, neat and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture. It is to industry that we owe the reversal in this state of affairs; a cast iron stove overflowing with decoration costs less than a plain one; amidst the surging leaf patterns flaws in the casting cannot be seen.

So, in aspiring to what Goldstein (1998:121) calls a “graphically uncluttered future” (highlighted earlier), a more subtle effect of the technological leaning becomes apparent. As had already become perceptible earlier in avant-garde abstraction, the machine-oriented modernist approach further encouraged and developed the move away from complex, naturalistic and/or decorative forms, towards simplified, geometric, mechanistic and/or uncluttered forms as a universal visual language for the ‘new’ modern world. One could say that the language of the modern industrial world, revered by creative modernism, and that which goes with it – rationalisation, regulation, standardisation, homogeneity, and so forth – encouraged the progression and ultimate dominance (as evident in the emergence of International Style Modernism) of a mechanistic, abstract visual vocabulary in aesthetic modernism.

3. The language of modernism in architecture, applied- and graphic design

3.1 English and German design reform as background to modernist design

Modernity's achievement was to inaugurate nothing less than a new social order, to introduce unprecedented and often irreversible change on a massive scale. Indeed modernity became the first mode of social organization to achieve global predominance. For many decades the coming of modernity was viewed both by those who lived within it and those who aspired to it as offering overwhelming advantages over other ways of living. Who could refuse the pay packet, the Coke can and the phone? Little wonder that trains, the telegraph and the telephone were seen as symbols of progress. The disruption caused to traditional cultures was viewed as little more than the temporary abrasion caused by transition to new circumstances. Class struggle, for instance, was to Durkheim not an endemic feature of capitalism, as it was for Marx, but the marker of a stage, preceding new forms of cooperation.

But modernity was a mixed blessing. From the earliest social analyses notes of caution and concern were sounded. In the world of production Marx found exploiting capitalists and alienated workers. Durkheim noted a profound sense of unease, uncertainty about how to go on, among those affected by the new divisions of labour. Weber feared that rationalization would eventually crush the human spirit, walling it behind the bars of the bureaucratic iron cage. Simmel sensed that the society of strangers would produce new social isolation and fragmentation. And so on. (Lyon, 1990:28)

As background to the development of modern design, and to expand on the social democratic ideal of design, it is important to outline key ideas in the development of the English and German design reform movements.

English design reform (coterminous with the Arts and Craft movement), pioneered by Ruskin and later his pupil Morris, was highly influential in criticising inhuman industrial working conditions and advocated social, technical and aesthetic reform through the rejection of machine manufacturing and the revival of ancient medieval manufacturing methods and aesthetics. As such, "First to industrialise, Britain was also first to agonize about the consequences" (Weston, 1996:35). Early modernism in applied design fields (craft) surfaced as a type of instinctive reflex reaction to the changing conditions of industrialisation and modernisation; it was only later that

applied modernism embraced these changes. The origins of the Bauhaus (modern design for that matter) can be traced back to the destructive outcomes of the industrial revolution for the living and working conditions of factory workers and artisans, as well as for the aesthetic and technical quality of the factory produced goods (Droste, 2002:10). Also the ambivalence of intense industrialisation is highlighted in that it had set in motion the “social restructuring and the proletarianization of broad sections of the population” yet, it also precipitated “rationalized and cheaper goods production” (Droste, 2002:10). This English design reform (in contrast with later modern German reform standards) saw the actualisation of egalitarian social reform in the rejection of machine manufacturing. Morris and Ruskin shared an intense dislike for modern civilisation (that includes specifically industrialisation) and its products (Droste, 2002:10). It is important to keep in mind, as Harvey (1990:23) explains, that:

...the modernism that emerged before the First World War was more of a reaction to the new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications), and consumption (the rise of mass markets, advertising, mass fashion) than it was a pioneer in the production of such changes. Yet the form the reaction took was to be of considerable subsequent importance. Not only did it provide ways to absorb, reflect upon, and codify these rapid changes, but it also suggested lines of action that might modify or support them. William Morris, for example, reacting against the de-skilling of craft workers through machine and factory production under the command of capitalists, sought to promote a new artisan culture which combined the power of craft tradition with a powerful plea ‘for simplicity of design, a cleaning out of all sham, waste and self-indulgence’...

Weston (1996:36) citing Ruskin, expands on this notion as he comments:

Ruskin loathed machines and the cheap ‘ornament’ they churned out, and saw that ‘it was impossible for men to turn themselves into machines, and to reduce their labour to the machine level’. He thought that in ‘the great civilised invention on the division of labour it is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the man. Divided into mere segments of men, broken into small fragments and crumbs of life.’

It is easy to discern, in the piece by Weston above, Marx’s socialist influence and the concept of ‘alienation’. As a slight digression, it may be informative to outline the

concept of ‘alienation’ as one of the important intellectual ideas that part-constituted the socio-cultural milieu in which the reaction to industrialisation and modernisation emerged. ‘Alienation’, or ‘anomie’, can loosely be described as the way in which capitalist, industrialised production and resultant specialised labour alienates (distances) the factory worker from the creative process of handcrafting and also from partaking in the spiritual (emotional) and the physical (economic) fulfilment and remuneration of this process of the transformation of matter. Ruskin (showing the influence of Marx), for instance, believed that the specialisation inherent in industrialised labour, where workers, as part of a conveyor belt type production, are only responsible for menial tasks and never experience the fulfilment of producing something from start to finish, was undermining humanity. Expanding on the piece that Weston drew our attention to earlier, Ruskin (cited in Raizman, 2003:107) observes:

We have much studied and perfected, of late, the great civilised invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece [sic] of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail.

Morris and Ruskin were strongly opposed to the capitalist system of labour, which they (like Marx) believed alienated factory workers from their own humanity, depriving them of free, purposeful activity, and exploited them for an insatiable lust for profit (Lyon, 1990:29). It is not difficult to see the relevance of the concepts of ‘capitalism’, ‘fragmentation’ and ‘alienation’ for the English design reform movement, as writers and ‘artists’ such as Morris articulated their fears regarding “the march of the machine and its accompanying social organization” and “bemoaned the fragmentary nature of modern life and the dominance of economic values” (Lyon, 1990:31–32). In this cultural, intellectual climate Morris and Ruskin, and English design reform in general, pioneered the socialist tradition and sought to purge design of exaggerated and exuberant Victorian ornamentation (especially the machined kind) as well as the eclectic mixing of styles abundantly used at the time. Instead, they sought to imbue architecture, products – furniture, wallpaper, and textiles, amongst

others – as well as books, with the classical ‘simplicity’ and ‘beauty’, craftsmanship and utility reminiscent of the medieval craft practices, ultimately aspiring to produce beautifully handcrafted items, affordable to the working classes. As an aside, it is hardly surprising then, that Ruskin (against the norm) did not think too highly of Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace (Raizman, 2003:107).

The social-democratic preoccupations of the design reform movement points to an odd irrationality that becomes apparent in the Enlightenment ideals that had dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and whose legacy was still strongly felt in the early twentieth century. Enlightenment vision existed on two levels; on the one hand, faith existed in continued progress and the emancipation of humankind through the domination of nature, via innovation and positive developments in science and technology. On the other hand, Enlightenment vision was to be realised through the emancipation of humankind from irrationalities and the “arbitrary use of power, as well as from the dark side of our own human natures” via the development of rational, modern social systems and structures (Harvey, 1990:12). It is here, with the latter idea, where many modern artists, and moreover designers, dedicated their creative efforts in order to realise the social democratic, often utopian, ideas of a new modern world. Woodham (1997:34) clarifies the democratic model of modernism and its universal internationalising approach:

The modernists’ spiritual affinity for abstract form and new materials was also wedded to a democratic ideal whereby the majority would be able to enjoy an improved quality of life in a hygienic, healthy, and modern environment. This social and utopian commitment was potently expressed in the housing and design programmes implemented by progressive municipalities in Holland and Germany and, with considerable variation in intensity, realization and influence in other countries... At its heart modernism was committed to a social and cultural agenda which was not constrained by national boundaries...

The irony here lies in the fact that faith in technological innovation, the one half of the Enlightenment equation, and the resultant mechanised labour of the industrial revolution in many ways subverted the other half of the Enlightenment vision, the social democratic ideal, through the exploitation of workers and the poor conditions

of labour in modernised industries. This had in many ways provoked the early Arts and Craft movement (that is English design reform) not only in terms of its reform of creative craft practices, but also in terms of its belief in the improvement of social conditions, apparent in the socialist writings of William Morris.

Design reform in Germany was brought about by the emergence of various organisations, exhibitions and schools that brought together artists and industry manufacturers to produce more “collaboration, compromise, and experiment in the direction of a practical approach to industrial production” (Raizman, 2003:129). Amongst others, the formation of the Wiener Werkstätte and various applied arts schools in Düsseldorf, Breslau, Weimar and Berlin, as well as Germany’s participation in international exhibitions in Paris in 1909 and St. Louis in 1904 and, moreover, its initiation of the Munich exhibition in 1908, contributed to advancing arts and craft in Germany and ultimately culminated in the founding of the Deutsche Werkbund, synonymous with the German design reform in 1907. Raizman (2003:129) describes the Werkbund as “a large organization made up of artists and manufacturers... to promote the interests of the German applied arts”. The German design reform did not share the same disdain towards modernity and modern manufacturing as the English. Although it initially also developed with its earliest roots in medieval German arts and craft practices, German design reform progressed to embrace methods of machine production which heralded the later development of the modern machine aesthetic. Accordingly Harvey (1990:23–24) describes how the ideas of English design reform established a foundation for ‘high’ modernism, as evident at the Bauhaus, to develop:

...the Bauhaus, the highly influential German design unit founded in 1919, initially took much of its inspiration from the Arts and Craft Movement that Morris had founded, and only subsequently (1923) turned to the idea that ‘the machine is our modern medium of design.’ The Bauhaus was able to exercise the influence it did over production and design precisely through its redefinition of ‘craft’ as the skill to mass-produce goods of an aesthetically pleasing nature with machine efficacy.

Magdalena Droste (2002:11) similarly points out:

...where the Arts and Crafts workshops in England had rejected methods of machine production, Germany embraced them with open arms... Stylistically, too, the German products of the turn of the century had nothing left in common with the English products of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which were still firmly entrenched in the 19th century.

So, while the respective views on machine production were irreconcilable, the socialist democratic initiative of English design reform was brought over into German design reform in revised form. This revised social democratic initiative endeavoured to put emphasis on nationalism via a search for a common identity through design, whilst also taking into account the economic imperatives of industrial manufacturing in an attempt to improve Germany's economy. The Werkbund, at the head of German design reform, its purpose "to overcome the alienation that had arisen between those who invented and those who carried out", had recognized that in order to most efficiently overcome the ills of industrialisation, cooperation with industry was required in place of the backward looking nostalgic tendencies of the English approach that advocated a return to medieval craft (Heller & Chwast, 2000:73).

As a significant figure involved in the Werkbund (German design reform in general), Muthesius³⁸ sought to develop a harmony that balanced beauty and utility in manufactured products, whilst also however stressing the importance of practicality above individuality. German design reform in many ways founded the principles of modern design in its advancements of such concepts as 'rationality', 'objectivity', 'efficacy' and 'utility' as criteria for assessment standards. It is interesting to see how this trend corresponded with the modern endeavour to establish 'a new myth' (see page 106), a universal 'truth', which could be 'democratically' accessible to diversified modern society, as initiated by the German design reform movement and advanced further by groups such as de Stijl and the Bauhaus amongst others. So, by eliminating the particularities and subjectivities of personal standards and taste, 'high' modernism sought to establish a universally and 'eternally' acceptable standard

³⁸ Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927), sent to Britain to research the successes of English design reform, specifically architecture, from 1896-899, published his findings in *Das Englische Haus* (The English House) and was subsequently appointed as the Minister of Trade for the Prussian government (Raizman, 2003:129).

(surpassing time and space) in aesthetic and theoretical terms, instilled at the level of the consumer and the designer. This process of design reform, as intimated earlier, can also be viewed as another way in which modernism attempted to afford the modern condition with a sense of stability in the midst of the diversity and flux that dominated. The concept of 'beauty' had become too subjective and particular a notion to be used as a standard for 'good' design; instead, 'utility', 'function' and 'efficacy' as 'objective' and universally attainable criteria, developed as determining standards for modern applied design and architecture. As such, in this modernist tendency, it is possible perhaps to "see an extension of the practice of scientific management... applied to a wider range of consumer goods, presuming that a "right" method could be found if efficacy was the overriding criterion for determining final form" (Raizman, 2003:130).

As an aside, it can be pointed out that opposition existed, although in the minority, against this type of standardisation, on the part of individuals who advocated the realisation of the artist/designer's inner creative vision. Accordingly, Woodham (1997:35) describes the bitter "Standardization Debate" between van de Velde and Muthesius at the Deutsche Werkbund congress of 1914. Here, "Muthesius' commitment to *Typisierung* (standardisation), based on economic as well as aesthetic grounds, was opposed by those who felt that this restricted the creativity of the individual designer" (Woodham, 1997:35). Muthesius was an important, though controversial, contributor at the German Werkbund, in fact founding the Munich Werkbund, and had much to contribute to the modern aesthetic in terms of his ideas regarding functionality (Weston, 1996:48):

He thought function needed no 'artistic' cladding and in objects of use favoured *Sachlichkeit*: 'we admire a fine surgical instrument because of its elegance, a vehicle because of its pleasing lightness, a wrought-iron bridge soaring over a river because of its bold use of material. And we are right to do so, for in the muscularity of those slim parts we confirm the triumph of technology which has risen to the limits of mastering of materials.'

To recapitulate, German design reform sought to provide original design work (in contrast to the backward-looking historicism of English design reform) which,

melding the interests of designers with that of modern industrial manufacturing, endeavoured to set new ‘universalising’ standards, objectively assessable, that would be imparted at the level of the designer, producer and consumer.

So, both the English and German design reform (as well as other reform movements that cannot be discussed here) revolved in some way around a response to the industrialisation and machine production processes at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Raizman, 2003:137). These responses often seem to be on opposite ends of the scale – ranging from the anti-machine protests and the nostalgic call for a return to medieval handcraft methods of English design reform to the embracing of the rationalisation, uniformity and standardisation of industrial mechanised production aspired to by later German design reform. Elucidating this idea while also intimating some of the impending aspirations of modern design, Raizman (2003:137) determines:

...[each modernism] constitutes a particular response to the threat as well as promise of industry, the dream of providing the many with what was once the privilege of the few, and at the same time a tendency to deprive designers of the freedom of expression and to limit consumers in their freedom of choice.

3.2 Overview of modern design movements

The shift at the Bauhaus [toward a unity of art and technology] was contemporary with the internationalising efforts of the artist-designers in Soviet Russia and in other European countries, who, under banners such as Constructivism (Russia), l’Esprit Nouveau (France), and de Stijl (Holland), developed a plain, machine-inspired esthetic, [sic] embraced mechanised mass production, and debated the role of design in a classless society. Such radical views were meant to replace the outmoded individualistic values that were viewed as contributing to the belligerence and destructiveness unleashed during World War I. (Raizman, 2003:140)

Through illustrated journals and exhibitions, artists, architects, and designers debated the meaning of ornament, the adoption of universal and collaborative rather than individual approaches to design, often addressed to perceived working class needs. Projects and prototypes showed sympathy for non-objective abstract art, the marvels of engineering, and rhetoric supported the primacy of social responsibility and reform as motivations for design in relation to modern life in a more egalitarian, industrial world. (Raizman, 2003:166)

It is important to note, in advance, that some of the movements described in what follows straddle the division between what is labelled *avant-garde modernism* and *mature* or ‘*high*’ *modernism* in art and design. For example, although some of the movements, particularly Constructivism and de Stijl, are not discussed here under the label of the avant-garde it is still important to consider their involvement, in part, as such. The overview of mature or ‘high’ modernism that follows only includes some of the more pertinent groups, movements, schools or developments within modernism and is hardly exhaustive in its detail.

a) Constructivism

Constructivism was a radical art movement that developed shortly before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 in Russia and was directed by a strong politically underpinned social reform. In search for a new artistic language that could be universally understood, Constructivism originated from a blend of Russian Futurism and Cubism (Aynsley, 2001:56). In addition, seeking to combine art and life, Constructivists believed that abstract forms, primary colours and pure geometry could provide an accessible, ‘classless’ visual vocabulary in a time of high illiteracy (Aynsley, 2001:56). Key contributors include Tatlin, Rodchenko and Lissitzky, who focussed their energies on socially effective pursuits such as industrial, graphic and theatre design, photography and film (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:47). Constructivism’s idealisation of social and utilitarian ideals resulted in the rejection of the Suprematist notion of ‘art for art’s sake’; in contrast, Constructivists harnessed their energies towards visual communications i.e. graphic design, architecture, industrial and applied design in service of the new communist society. Rothschild, (1998:41) for instance explains that Lissitzky, a very important Constructivist pioneer, was resolute about “renouncing private and elite forms of art-making, such as oil painting, for work that was egalitarian, affordable, and comprehensible to the masses”. Correspondingly, Phillip Meggs (1998:264–5) comments:

The constructivist ideal was best realized by the painter, architect, graphic designer, and photographer El (Lazar Markovich) Lissitzky. This indefatigable

visionary profoundly influenced the course of graphic design... Lissitzky saw the October 1917 Russian Revolution as a new beginning for mankind. Communism and social engineering would create a new order, technology would provide for society's needs, and the artist/designer (he called himself a constructor) would forge a unity between art and technology by constructing a new world of objects to provide mankind with a richer society and environment. This idealism led him to put increasing emphasis on graphic design, as he moved from private aesthetic experience into the mainstream of communal life.

Constructivism shared inspirational forces with Dada amongst others, and joined with other avant-gardes at conferences and gatherings. In doing so, the avant-garde reinforced and advanced the universalising trends of modernism that would later culminate in the dominant modern aesthetic of International Style Architecture, and in graphic design, of the International Typographic Style. For instance in October 1922, van Doesberg, founder of the Dutch de Stijl movement, organised a Constructivist Congress at Weimar (home of the Bauhaus) inviting a number of Dadaists to attend and to perform, including Schwitters and Tzara (Rothschild, 1998:41). However, this seemingly broad-minded creative setting did not manage to reconcile the differences between the various modern movements, as some Constructivists believed that Dada was "a destructive and obsolete force in comparison with the new outlook of the Constructivists" (Moholy-Nagy cited in Rothschild, 1998:41). However avant-garde gatherings such as this one, was an important move towards developing "an international modern community" (Rothschild, 1998:41).

Although Constructivism drew inspiration from Futurism and Dada, and used similar vocabularies of abstract geometries and bold typographic forms, it generated a new sensibility, more ordered, structured, uncluttered and legible, yet retaining a sense of liveliness from its original inspirational contributions (Rothschild, 1998:42). From its early beginning it developed into an international movement, characterised by "sobriety, utility, practicality and objectivity" (Rothschild, 1998:42). Its visual character features a non-figurative graphic vocabulary characterised by the use of brightly coloured shapes, utilising materials like glass, sheet metal and cardboard, and it embraced techniques such as "collage, photography, photomontage, bold lettering design and new printing techniques" (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:47).

Two principal positions can be identified within Russian Constructivism (Margolin, 1997:9–10). The first group, which included Rodchenko, placed emphasis on practical, applied issues and as such endeavoured to develop new products for social betterment. The second group, which included Malevich and El Lissitzky, in contrast, was led by more theoretical and philosophical ideals, as Margolin (1997:10) explains:

The first emphasized the creation of new objects as the most important goal of avant-garde practice. The Constructivists, which included Alexander Rodchenko, and Productivists in the Institute for Artistic Culture (INKhUK) within the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, for example, urged artists and theorists to join economic councils and go into the factories to design new products. By contrast, the second position, which was exemplified by Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, and their students at the Popular Art Institute in Vitebsk, gave more importance to the capacity of objects to embody ideals than to perform a useful function.

To encapsulate, Constructivism, in architecture and furniture design, was characterised by an absence of decoration, an emphasis on objectivity, rationalisation, standardisation, and modularity, as well as the use of basic industrial materials. Raizman (2003:178) comments that the designer's role was envisioned as that of a draughtsman/engineer rather than a fine artist. And, that the criteria for Constructivist design, based on the fulfilment of the needs of a collective and egalitarian, classless Socialist society, included "the use of a minimum number of standardized parts, modern industrial materials, and adaptable, flexible construction" which was based on geometric rather than organic form, and exhibited objectivity and anonymity (Raizman, 2003:178). Correspondingly, in graphic pieces – posters, books, advertising and so forth – an approach based on the same concepts of objectivity, rationalisation, standardisation, and modularity was apparent. Colour was limited primary to the bold use of black white and red, while design layouts evolved around purist, elementary, geometrically ordered shapes and non-objective grid-structured compositions that often employed bold contrasts. In addition, Constructivist graphic design exhibited the use of bold, simplified Cyrillic sans-serif scripts and promoted the use of photographs as a form of mass communication, which through the creation of a sense of order, was believed to communicate information more effectively

(Raizman, 2003:175). Lissitzky's 1922 international journal of the new art, *Vesch/Objet/Gegenstand*, translated as "Object" in English, is paradigmatic in this regard as it had to overcome the complexities of communicating in a trilingual format (Meggs, 1998:265).

The Constructivist movement came to an end in the 1920's when the Soviet government began to advocate the need for a National Socialist pictorial art – social-realist painting – in the service of the State, and accused Constructivists of "capitalist cosmopolitanism" (Meggs, 1998:270). At the same time, it seemed as if the public response to the Constructivist aims was at best indifferent. Raizman (2003:179), for instance, comments that judging from the equivocal reactions to Rodchenko's design for the Workers Club and to "later attempts to replace traditional representational textile designs with decorative patterns based upon themes of industrialization", it seemed as if there was very little support for Constructivism. In light of these developments, thus without apparent "public or party support", Constructivist hopes to "unify or at least influence industrial production and further develop the potential contributions of the "artists-constructor," were largely discouraged and the Constructivist industrial-design activities in Russia were marginalized (Raizman, 2003:179). As such, many young Constructivists turned to a new realism, re-embracing classical forms such as easel painting as an appropriate public art, gaining support from the Communist Party and in the process also encouraging public support (Raizman, 2003:179). Rodchenko and other designers began to turn away from industrial-design activities and immersed themselves in the development of graphic communications based on Constructivist ideologies, but that incorporated a measure of realism in the form of photographs and photomontages. Accordingly, Raizman (2003:180) elucidates on the new graphic approach that developed and the inherent decline of Constructivism:

By the mid-1920s tolerance for the universal pretensions of abstract art and its Constructivist progeny during the early years of Narkompros had eroded. The hope for defining a set of official collective standards and an art that contributed to the establishment of the Communist state began to be realized. But sadly for the Constructivists, such standards were not along abstract and non-objective lines. Soviet artists were increasingly made to comply with a

policy demanding an heroic naturalism depicting working-class, athletic, or military activities and designed to provide persuasive and hopeful images to the Russian masses.... One of the most striking examples is Lissitzky's poster for an exhibition of Russian art that took place in Zurich in 1928, with a photograph depicting a male and female youth in three-quarter view who share an eye as they peer into the distance... [Appendix I, fig. 4, page 188]

The innovative new ideas and design methods of 'purist' Constructivism, however, had a profound influence on the subsequent developments in modern art and design. Constructivism was assimilated into the educational ethos of the Bauhaus and, as a result of the school's influence via publications, exhibitions and exchange visits, the legacy of the Constructivist ideal and character extended its reach across Europe and to America. Meggs (1998:270) informs one that "the innovations of this artistic flowering had their further development in the West, and innovative graphic design in the constructivist tradition continued through the 1920's and beyond". Yet, although Constructivism's positive influence lingered for a while still, especially for graphic and industrial design, Constructivists who stayed in the Soviet Union and did not conform to the new aesthetic standards were prosecuted for their 'anti-nationalist' creative practices or beliefs. Meggs (1998:270) explains that artists and designers "who did not leave the Soviet [Union] drifted into poverty and obscurity" or "vanished into the Gulag".

It is hardly necessary to point to the relevance of these Constructivist developments for the consolidation of a basis on which graphic design could establish itself as a distinct discipline. However, apart from its contributions to formal design processes and techniques – its innovative graphic vocabulary of abstract modern forms, together with inventive techniques and methods of bringing together image and text in innovatively radical ways, Constructivism's legacy in exposing the power of visual communication as a motivating social force is arguably unprecedented and unmatched. (See Appendix J, page 189, for a selection of Constructivist pieces.)

b) De Stijl

In 1915 and 1916, theosophist M. H. J. Schoenmaekers published "The New Image of the World" and "Principles of Plastic Mathematics." Suggesting that reality might best be expressed as a series of opposing forces – a formal

polarity of horizontal and vertical axes and a juxtaposition of primary colors – the author posited a new image of the world, expressed with “a controllable precision, a conscious penetration of reality and exact beauty.”... As the primary theoretical influence behind the de Stijl movement, Schoenmaekers’ thinking paralleled the evolution of a reductive visual vocabulary that embraced ideals at once utilitarian and utopian: with this vocabulary, artists such as Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesberg produced work that, in its spare elegance, has had a lasting effect on twentieth-century aesthetics. (Helfand, 2004:para. 3)

De Stijl, originated by painter and designer Theo van Doesberg in the late summer of 1917, developed as a Dutch art movement with particularly significant formal aesthetic and theoretical/intellectual foundations. The movement, firmly directed and managed by van Doesberg, originated alongside the *de Stijl* publication that constituted its primary and central visible cogency, significantly influencing the international avant-garde throughout the 1920s,

The movement’s commitment to a unity of the arts in many ways became instrumental in the paradigmatic modern conception of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or loosely translated from German, ‘the complete work of art’. As noted by Raizman (2003:168), the melding of fine and applied arts was a fundamental precept of de Stijl, together with a related approach that advocated a union of ‘art’ and life. An example of this is the Rietveld-Schröder house, where its complete design – interior, exterior, furnishings and so forth – was founded in de Stijl theory and practice.

The graphic language of de Stijl evolved as an exclusive abstract objective visual language, utilising the right angle as a strict organising principle and demonstrating a meticulous reliance on the use of primary colours in combination with black, white and grey. Mondrian, with his famous primary colour paintings, was an important contributor of and influence for de Stijl, together with other important painters, architects and designers for example Rietveld, van der Leek, Huszar, and Zwart. Mondrian’s emblematic signature designs are even today recognisable as elements

within graphic design projects, for instance Volkswagen's Citigolf campaign from the 1980's.³⁹

De Stijl sought to convey the spirit of the modern age, which after the destruction of war, evidenced the emergence of a new era of rationality. De Stijl artists and designers believed that the new modern era would bring with it scientific, technological and political developments that would "usher in a new era of objectivity and collectivism" (Meggs, 1998:271). The theoretical base of De Stijl concerned itself with the spiritual and intellectual mood of the time aiming to uncover universal laws that underlie and regulate reality (Meggs, 1998:271). A manifesto published in an early issue of *De Stijl* for instance, notes that individualism was responsible for the conflicts that led to the outbreak of the First World War and proposed "a new balance between individual and universal consciousness" (Raizman, 2003:167). As such the disciplined abstraction and the geometric visual language of de Stijl "sought universal laws of equilibrium and harmony for art" as a type of model for the organisation of society – "a new social order" (Meggs, 1998:270). Furthermore, in an attempt to purify art, de Stijl artists and designers excluded "naturalistic representation, external values and subjective expressions" in an attempt to achieve "universal harmony" (Meggs, 1998:271). In effect, this universal consciousness manifests itself in the elemental geometric vocabulary of form of De Stijl that exhibits a democratic appeal in its exclusion of decoration and individual self-expression. An example of the way in which de Stijl achieves harmony between the universal and the particular, the universal being exemplified in "an elemental geometric vocabulary of form", can be seen in its use of typography (Raizman, 2003:169). For instance, the title page (1917–1918), for the *De Stijl* journal, by Huszar features "a limited number of black

³⁹ It is interesting to note here an extract from an article, available online in the *Business Times* section of the *Sunday Times*. Here, Ryan (1997) quotes Jonathan Shubitz, executive creative director at Ogilvy & Mather Rightford Searle-Tripp & Makin (O&M), the company responsible for the development of the Volkswagen Golf marketing campaign as saying:

The original plan was to make it [the car] available in two colours, beige and white... We suggested that VW call it the Citigolf and launch in Mondrian-style bright yellow, blue and red. Within two months of the launch sales hit 200 a month. By 1996 it was 2400 a month.

rectangles of the same width to construct a variety of letters using only parallel shapes and right angles” (Appendix K, fig. 1, page 190) (Raizman, 2003:169). To encapsulate then, like most of the modern avant-gardes, and like the modernist architect Adolf Loos, de Stijl rejected decoration and advocated the use of sans-serif typefaces, with straight lines, the tight rectangularity of geometrically formed blocks, and inventive asymmetrical layouts (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:55). Meggs (1998:271) explains that the visual vocabulary of de Stijl was closely based on Mondrian, van der Leek and van Doesberg’s use of colour that included a limited palette of primary colours (red, yellow, and blue) with neutrals (black, gray, and white). In addition layout principles adhered strictly to the use of rigid geometries of horizontals and verticals, structuring and ordering pages in a purist, minimalist way.

The application of the de Stijl’s artistic and philosophical tenets to graphic design is evident in the 1925 book by van Doesberg (in collaboration with Moholy-Nagy, who designed the cover, entitled *Basic Concepts of Formmaking (Grundbegriffe der Neuen Gestaltenden)* (Meggs, 1998:271). The application of rigid geometric horizontal and vertical structuring to type forms and the layout in general, which eliminated curves and favoured sans-serif typography with strict horizontal and vertical rules, was at the core of the graphic ‘style’ of de Stijl (Meggs, 1998:273). With regard to de Stijl typography, page layout and design, Meggs (1998:273) elucidates:

Type was often composed in tight rectangular blocks. The square was used as a vigorous module for letterform design. A harmony of form is achieved, but banished curved and diagonal lines diminish character uniqueness and legibility. Asymmetrically balanced layouts were composed on an open implied grid. Color was used not as an afterthought or decoration but as an important structural element.

De Stijl was defined by architect H.F. Berlage as “unity in plurality” and as such, concerned itself with developing a utopian style and spirit; not merely concerning itself with the stylisation of things (Heller & Chwast, 2000:279. All subjectivity and emotive expression was considered inviolable and de Stijl instead endeavoured to develop a rational, purist and universalistic theoretical approach and a similarly rational, purist, universalistic and ordered formal visual approach.

The increasingly purist typographic conventions of the de Stijl typography inspired many of the later Bauhaus ideas and provided a foretaste of the International Typographic Style that developed in Switzerland after the Second World War. The *de Stijl* magazine (and with it, the movement) effectively came to an end in 1931, with the premature death of van Doesberg, its founder and guiding spirit (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:55). Nevertheless, many of its artists and designers continued to contribute to international modernism. Meggs (1998:274) accordingly indicates, that van der Leek's approach, which favoured "open compositions of form constructed of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines and shapes separated by spatial intervals" is evident in much of the graphic design work of the 1940's.

The de Stijl approach was perhaps more theoretical/intellectual and purist, as well as elitist than the 'applied' approach of the Constructivists. Despite this its aim was clearly to provide, albeit in and on its own terms, a model for societal structures. In addition this approach can be seen, paradigmatically, following most modern movements' aspirations, as a realisation of the need for a 'stabilising force' within the complexity and flux of modern society and culture, where "the reduction of pure form was considered a symbolic translation of complex cultural ideals" (Helfand, 2004:para. 6). De Stijl's legacy, with regard to the practice of graphic design, is abundantly clear in its approach to the rational ordering and structuring of information and its development of an indispensable range of formal principles that have become part of contemporary design education and practice (Helfand, 2004:para. 2). From the preceding discussions it is unmistakably apparent that the characteristic features of de Stijl contributed substantially to the advancement of a modern visual vocabulary that allowed for the emergence of a modern prototype of a 'language' for visual communication, which in many ways constituted the practice of graphic design. (Appendix K, page 190, showcases a selection of de Stijl pieces).

c) **Bauhaus**

The country of the young Bauhäusler, Germany, had been crushed in the war and the humiliation at Versailles; the economy had collapsed in a delirium of

inflation; the Kaiser had departed; the Social Democrats had taken power in the name of socialism; mobs of young men ricocheted through the streets drinking beer and awaiting a Soviet-style revolution from the east, or some terrific brawls at the very least. Rubble, smoking ruins—*starting from zero!* If you were young, it was wonderful stuff. Starting from zero referred to nothing less than re-creating the world. (Wolfe, 1983:14)

The Bauhaus ('to build house') was a design school that originated in Germany, in Weimar in 1919, and endeavoured to unite art and industry, originating as the most significant educational activity central to the development of the modern movement (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:22)⁴⁰. Under the directorship of architect Walter Gropius, The Bauhaus was significantly influenced by the ideas generated by de Stijl and Russian Constructivism, both movements featuring strong architectural and applied design components. Accordingly, declaring in the Bauhaus manifesto, published in German newspapers in 1919, that “the complete building is the ultimate aim of all the visual arts”, the Bauhaus expressed an overriding commitment towards architecture and applied design, and as such promoted it as an ideal of the *gesamtkunstwerk* (complete artwork) (Meggs, 1998:278). In an effort to eradicate the barrier between conceptions of fine- and applied art, and thus to unite art and life – in this way anticipating what would become one of the hallmarks of postmodernist art – the Bauhaus attempted to “bring art in close relationship with life by way of design, which was seen as a vehicle for social change and cultural revitalization” (Meggs, 1998:285). Staff (which also included women) at the Bauhaus included Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and László Moholy-Nagy amongst other designers, artists and craftsmen. Broad areas of theoretical, creative-artistic and industrial or commercial involvement were evident in the areas of architecture, design, art⁴¹, performance and photography, including applied design workshops in metalwork, weaving, pottery, furniture design, typography and wall painting amongst others.

⁴⁰ For the sake of readability, I have omitted the capitalised syntax that Livingston & Livingston (1992) use to indicate words which can be cross-referenced.

⁴¹ It is important to emphasise that at the Bauhaus no distinction was made between fine and applied art (Meggs. 1998, 178).

In general, the Bauhaus exhibited immense creativity, influence and innovation, advancing the aesthetic fundamentals of modernism in a drive towards geometrically pure forms as foundation for modern visual communication. Hence, although – in its efforts to cross the divide between art and industry – the Bauhaus apparently moved away from the aesthetic hermeticism characteristic of so much modernist art, its own modernism shows in this stabilising gesture towards a universally valid foundation. At the same time the underpinning industry-driven philosophical approach, particularly evident in the later Bauhaus, endeavoured to provide well-made machine manufactured products for a ‘mass’ market. Ideas from Constructivism, de Stijl and other modernisms, were assimilated into the Bauhaus ideology, as the internationalising capacity of these modernisms allowed for a cross-fertilisation of theoretical and aesthetic modernist models. Raizman (2003:182) for instance, indicates that Rodchenko’s Constructivist design for the Soviet Workers Club, featured at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris (1925), was merely one example of the international scope of Constructivism. Furthermore Raizman (2003:181) draws attention to other international modernisms that found expression at the Bauhaus when he comments on the cross-fertilisation of contributions made to journals by various modernists. For instance “El Lissitzky’s essays on modern design were published in issues of *De Stijl*, and his own journal *Vesch/Objet/Gegenstand* contained texts by van Doesberg, Mondrian, Le Corbusier, and others advocating collective standards for design, the use of new technologies, and mechanized industrial production”.

The Bauhaus opened its doors with the optimistic view of representing a new beginning after the destruction – physical, psychological and economic – of World War I. The original Bauhaus, founded by Gropius, under the official title *Das Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar*, developed with strong roots in the Arts and Crafts Movement and Expressionism. Meggs (1998:278) describes these Weimar years at the Bauhaus as “intensely visionary” and, as such, characterised by “a utopian desire to create a new spiritual society” that “sought a new unity between artists and craftsmen to build for the future”. Later, through the influence of the German design reform movement, which in opposition to English design reform (as indicated

elsewhere) embraced the idea of industrial manufacturing, the Bauhaus incorporated a strong machine inspired theory and aesthetic, while the industry link functioned as a driving force. As such, Meggs (1998:279) comments, “the Bauhaus was evolving from a concern for medievalism, expressionism, and handicraft towards more emphasis on rationalism and designing for the machine”. This change in approach is apparent in the redesign of the Bauhaus seal, which initially, with the schools opening in 1919, expressed a very strong medieval, craft and Expressionist affinity. In 1922 the original Bauhaus seal was replaced with a new design by Schlemmer that was expressive of the emergent machine-oriented, modern, geometric focus of the school (Appendix L, fig. 5–6, page 191). By 1923, Gropius endeavoured to further this shift in emphasis towards industrial technological ideals and applied-design, by publicising a new motto of “Art and Technology, a New Unity” in contrast to the 1919 slogan of “A Unity of Art and Handicraft” that promoted medieval craft and Expressionism (Droste, 2002:58) (Meggs, 1998:279).

In 1925, due to ongoing political and governmental pressures, the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, where the school’s ideals, adapted to the industrial approach, became more fully realised. Dessau was a more industrially oriented city and here Gropius designed the new building for the school according to the modernist Bauhaus ethos. It was during the time at Dessau, from 1925 until the school’s closure in 1932, that the Bauhaus character and attitude “came to full fruition” (Meggs, 1998:282). Important industry links were set up and the teaching process took the form of workshop programmes across a broad spectrum of applied design areas, including typography and commercial art (graphic design).

In architecture, applied and graphic design, the search for a universal design language became a driving force for Gropius, as he held that an objective, rational and universal design language could overcome “the dangers of past styles and personal taste” and as such, surmount the differences and resultant disharmony amongst people at societal level (Meggs, 1998:279). The architecture and various applied design endeavours at the Bauhaus featured a commitment to mechanised mass-production and aesthetic rationalisation and standardisation as a means to building a new ‘utopian’ vision for

an egalitarian, harmonious and classless society. Raizman (2003:187) accordingly comments that the ‘white space’ that features prominently – interior and exterior – in sparsely furnished experimental housing projects as well as in the page layouts of graphic designs, together with standardised use of rectangular components for products, furnishings and page layout elements, expressing balance and harmony, is linked to the democratic egalitarian ideal of modernism. Raizman (2003:187) expands on this notion when he comments:

In this way mechanized mass production, involving standardization and uniformity, was, at least symbolically, linked to a universal and egalitarian socialist vision for the society of the future. The machine thus held, for some artists, the promise of an international and enlightened socialist brotherhood, erasing distinctions of class, and embracing a shared modern aesthetic in which decoration and clutter had become outmoded, wasteful, and selfish.

The relevance of the quest for a universal design language becomes patent in the way in which graphic design and typography was taught primarily by Bayer, Moholy-Nagy, and Schmidt. In the early Weimar years, where calligraphy was viewed as an artistic means of expression, not much emphasis was given to commercial applied art and typography. Later, in 1923, with the appointment of Moholy-Nagy, who took the place of the artistically-oriented Expressionist, Itten, the Bauhaus advanced the idea of modern typography as a means to rational, clear and functional design and communication. Raizman (2003:184) comments that Moholy-Nagy brought with him “a strong commitment to mechanized mass production and new material technology in design”. The graphic design approach at the Weimar Bauhaus, although drawing on de Stijl and Constructivism, was inventive, fresh and far more inclusive initially than later, as Meggs (1998:280) comments:

Moholy-Nagy contributed an important statement about typography, describing it as “a tool of communication. It must be communication in its most intense form. The emphasis must be on absolute clarity.... Legibility–communication must never be impaired by an *a priori* aesthetics. Letters must never be forced into a preconceived framework, for instance a square.” In graphic design, he advocated “an uninhibited use of all linear directions (therefore not only horizontal articulation). We use all typefaces, type sizes, geometric forms, colors etc. We want to create a new language of typography... whose elasticity, variability, and freshness of typographical

compositions [are] exclusively dictated by the inner law of expression and the optical effect.”

In Dessau, Bayer, with the support of Moholy Nagy, set up a professional printing studio dedicated to modern communication, later to be called ‘the printing and advertising workshop’ (Droste, 2002:148). This workshop where design, production and printing took place under one roof prefigured the practice of graphic design, or as Brüning (cited in Droste, 2002:148) puts it “made it possible to structure the preconditions for a new job description: graphic design”. The communication design innovations of the Bauhaus emerged out of a concern for the advancement of a rational modern communications aesthetic in the development of a unique modern ‘look’ for the school, involving itself with the development of a ‘corporate identity’, the design and printing of Bauhaus books, catalogues and journals, exhibition posters and invitations, even extending to exhibition design for the Bauhaus travelling exhibitions and conventions, amongst other things.

The modern typographic approach, as particularly evident at the later Bauhaus in Dessau, was characterised by the pursuit of clarity of communication that followed Gropius’s motto of “form follows function” that echoes Sullivan (Meggs 1998:284). This approach eliminated any superfluity, decoration and articulating pages with the use of symbols utilising geometric form, simplified sans serif type, bold photography and a reduced colour palette. Concerns for economy, universality, standardisation and rationalisation brought about innovations in the Bauhaus’s typographic approach, including the use of photomechanical reproduction rather than letterpress, the use of standardised formats, simplified spelling, the elimination of capitalisation, and similar approaches to page layout and the organisation of information. Raizman (2003:187) explains:

In Dessau, Bayer created a series of “universal” sans serif typefaces based upon modular shapes and a limited number of letter forms and decreasing the vestiges of hand-lettering.... He also eliminated capital letters, used in German for all nouns as well as at the beginning of sentences, created regularized heights and greater possibilities for arranging text as an abstract element on the page. The printing workshop was able to introduce page layouts in which typography, photography and heavy rules were all considered

equal and complementary design elements, serving to direct the viewer's attention and impart order to the arrangement of information... sans serif typography is used in a variety of sizes to reflect a hierarchy of information and an asymmetrical balance of horizontal and vertical elements based upon an implied grid.

Meggs (1998:285) further builds on the modern character of graphic design as he comments on added 'standardisations' in graphic communication under Bayer at Dessau:

He experimented with flush-left, ragged right typesetting without justification... Extreme contrasts of type size and weights were used to establish a visual hierarchy of emphasis determined by an objective assessment of the relative importance of the words. Bars, rules, points, and squares were used to subdivide the space, unify diverse elements, lead the viewer's eye through a page, and call attention to important elements. Elementary forms and the use of black with one bright pure hue were favored. Open composition on an implied grid and a system of sizes for type, rules and pictorial images brought unity to the designs. Dynamic composition with strong horizontals and verticals (and, on occasion, diagonals) characterize Bayer's Bauhaus period.

During the final years at the Bauhaus, Meyer, a Swiss architect with a strong socialist background, replaced Gropius as director, and Schmidt replaced Bayer and Moholy-Nagy, who had also left the school to pursue typography in Berlin, as master of the typography and graphic design workshop (Meggs, 1998:284). Meyer brought with him a strong emphasis on economic, functionalist, rationalist and scientific approaches to design and architecture, as he resolved that design "was a product of 'function × economy' " (Raizman, 2003:187). In addition, his position conceived of design as "solely in the service of working-class needs based on objective standards of economy" which marginalised a creative individualistic fine-art approach in favour of a deterministic, almost mindlessly automated design process governed by objective concerns regarding hygiene, climate, economics and engineering (Raizman, 2003:187–188). Schmidt's contribution to graphic design at the Bauhaus was pioneering, introducing a systematic course for the design of functional, restrained lettering and advertising graphics, and expanding these notions to the practice of exhibition design. Meyer considered it crucial that the workshops, particularly the

advertising workshop, earn money from commissions. Thus apart from producing work for clients, the advertising workshop developed as a type of ‘service department’ for the Bauhaus, producing advertising and other design materials for the textiles and wallpaper workshops amongst others (Droste, 2002:180).

By 1930 Meyer was forced to resign, due to conflicts with the municipal authorities. Mies Van der Rohe, by then an established German architect, became director and in 1932 moved the school to Berlin. However in 1933 the school was forced to close due to longstanding political conflicts, which had caused its position to become untenable with the National Socialist (Nazi) Party coming to power in that same year.

From its conception to its demise, the Bauhaus advanced through a systemic process of gradually eliminating the marginal, individualistic, esoteric or spiritual artistic and creative elements evident in the early years, and moving towards a rational, objective, universalised, industrially- and commercially-driven approach that exhibited the use of a formulaic, purist aesthetic approach. The approach to typography, advertising and page-layout at the Bauhaus in many ways, as indicated earlier, signalled the conception of graphic design practice as a deliberately conceived process and activity. Moreover, not only did the Bauhaus contribute by setting standards for the theory, practice and aesthetics of modern graphic design, but also by providing professional training in the discipline, thereby constituting graphic design and advertising as professional activities.

The contribution of the Bauhaus is immense in its legacy to educational processes and methods and its approach to visual theory, as well as its contribution to the development of creative modernism, by establishing “a viable, modern design movement spanning architecture, product design, and visual communications” (Meggs, 1998:285). (For examples of some Bauhaus designs, see Appendix L, page 191.)

d) The New Typography

Its principles were promulgated worldwide in philosophical essays and technical manuals by El Lissitzky, László Moholy-Nagy, Paul Renner, and its most devout (and rigid) adherent, Jan Tschichold. To these designers the rules of the old typography, practiced since the ages of Gutenberg, violated the criterion of fitness for purpose in design. (Heller & Chwast, 2000:89)

It may be helpful here to mention, however briefly, Tschichold's contribution to the advancement of modern graphic communications as 'The New Typography'.

Tschichold had already completed full courses in calligraphy and classical typography at the Leipzig Academy for Graphic Arts and Book Trades, and, only after viewing the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition in Weimar, began to assimilate the modern graphic design principles as espoused by the Bauhaus and Constructivism amongst other modernisms. The visual nature of modern communications as developed by the various modern movements, including Constructivism and de Stijl, but especially by the Bauhaus, was (ironically, in light of modernism's intentions) only appreciated by a limited audience (Raizman, 2003:191). In contrast, Tschichold endeavoured to apply the modern graphic approach to everyday design problems and to explain them to a wider audience, including an industry of printers, typesetters and designers (Raizman, 2003:192).

In 1925, Tschichold produced and published a special insert, entitled *elementare typographie* in the journal *typographische mitteilungen*. Featuring red and black avant-garde graphic designs accompanied by articulate commentary, the insert explained the ideas of modern typography, as it had emerged via contributions from the various modern movements, to printers, typesetters and designers (Meggs, 1998:287). As much of the German printing at the time used medieval textura (old German type) and classical symmetrical layout techniques, Tschichold's publication was considered revolutionary and engendered significant enthusiasm for the new modern approach (Meggs, 1998:287). In 1928 he published a book *Die Neue Typographie* that vigorously espoused the ideals of modern graphic design and was intended as a manual for practising printers, publishers and designers. In many ways Tschichold captured (and promoted) the essence of graphic modernism, formalising

and preserving it in printed form for later generations. Apart from his theoretical contributions, Tschichold was prolific in his own commercial practice, which set the standards for a new typographic modernism in the design and production of books, adverts and posters, amongst others. Raizman (2003:193) elaborates on the tenets of Tschichold's New Typography:

...Tschichold articulated an objective rather than individual or expressive approach to typography. This was based upon principles of clear and direct communication that demanded the use of sans serif typography, half-tone photomechanical reproduction for images, and asymmetrical layout.

Similarly Meggs (1998:288) describes Tschichold's approach to typography, and in doing so, largely captures the essence of modernism in graphic design:

...he sought to wipe the slate clean and find a new asymmetrical typography to express the spirit, life, and visual sensibility of the day. His objective was functional design by the most straightforward means. Tschichold declared the aim of every typographic work to be the delivery of a message in the shortest, most efficient manner. The nature of machine composition and its impact on the design process and product were emphasised.... He believed kinetic asymmetrical design of contrasting elements expressed the new age of the machine. Type should be elementary in form without embellishment; thus, sans-serif type, in a range of different weights (light, medium, bold, extra bold, italic) and proportions (condensed, normal, expanded), was declared to be modern type. Its wide range of value and texture in the black-and-white scale allowed the expressive, abstract image sought by modern design. Stripped of unessential elements, sans-serif type reduced the alphabet to its basic elementary shapes. Designs were constructed on an underlying horizontal and vertical structure. Spatial intervals were seen as important design elements, with white space given a new role as interval and structural element. Rules, bars, and boxes were often used for structure, balance, and emphasis. The precision and objectivity of photography were preferred for illustration.... The essence of the New Typography was clarity, not simple beauty; its objective was to develop form from the functions of the text.

Due to persecution by the German government, Tschichold fled to Basel, Switzerland in 1933 where he worked primarily as a book designer. (See Appendix M, page 192, for examples of Tschichold's 'New Typography'.)

e) The spread of modernism

When the concept of new times will be relevant, when contemporary harmony will be grasped, exalted by a new mentality, conquered by the decision to move forward and not backward, when we shall be turned towards life and not congealed in death, times will be oriented unanimously toward clarity, toward joy, toward limpidity. The hour is near, believe it. It sounds simultaneously in all countries, in Argentina as in France, as in Japan. (Le Corbusier cited in Weston, 1996:167)

Modernism in graphic design had found the height of modernist expression in its alliance with applied design movements and the theoretical egalitarian ideals underpinning them, for instance, in Constructivism in Russia, the de Stijl Movement in Holland, and the Bauhaus in Germany as well as later in the New Typography as pioneered by Jan Tschichold. Further contributions to modern typography, which regrettably cannot be discussed in detail here, were made by graphic designers such as Werkman, Zwart and Schuitema in the Netherlands and Matter in Switzerland, amongst others.

A significant contribution to modern design was also made by what is called the Isotype Movement that can be viewed as the ultimate expression of the rational and scientific tendencies of modernism in the twentieth century. The Isotype movement, originated by Vienna sociologist Neurath, developed as a “world language without words” and endeavoured to structure, design and produce visual information systems that represented factual, complex information, for example statistical data and maps, using elementary symbolic visuals or pictographs (Appendix N, page 193, showcases two examples of work from the Isotype Movement.) Modernism’s affinity for universality, standardisation, rationalisation and information design was furthermore evident in the design of a new subway system map for the London underground by Beck. Meggs (1998:293) comments on how the Isotype Movement’s approach corresponds with the modernist endeavour to develop a universal, rational visual communication system as a stabilising force, a new myth, in the midst of the flux of modern life:

The Isotype's contribution to visual communication is the set of conventions they developed to formalize the use of pictorial language. This includes a pictorial syntax (a system of connecting images to create an ordered structure and meaning) and the design of simplified pictographs. The impact of their work on post-World War II graphic design includes research towards the development of universal visual language systems and the extensive use of pictographs in signage and information systems.

Similarly, graphic designers such as Ladislav Sutnar were acclaimed for their 'information design' abilities, that is the design and presentation of charts and other complex quantitative information systems (Raizman, 2003:258). Sutnar, together with K. Lönberg published, amongst others, a book entitled *Catalog System Progress*, which "created standards for the graphic presentation of technical information based upon reduced use of text and visual clarity" (Raizman, 2003:258).

Although modernism in graphic design expressed significant rationalising, standardising and minimalist tendencies, the new modern approach enabled graphic designers of vision to develop new, innovative and expressive systems for visual communications. Moreover, although the modernist tendencies that inclined towards stability, rationality and universality seemed to certainly dominate, evidence suggests that the creative, unstable counterpart of Baudelaire's formulation, mentioned earlier (see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern 'graphic design'*, page 41), always seemed to coexist with it.

The modernist graphic design ideal, however, was interrupted by the Second World War and ultimately appropriated into European totalitarianism, as intimated earlier in the discussion regarding Constructivism's demise in Russia. In short, modernism subsequently migrated to Switzerland and Italy and for most part to the United States through the translocation of prominent modernists away from the political upheaval and tyranny of World War II and the subsequent persecution of the representatives of creative modernisms (Aynsley, 2001:41). Meggs (1998:305) describes this journey of Modernist thought:

The rising tide of Nazism in Europe created the greatest transnational migration of intellectual and creative talent in history. Scientists, authors,

architects, artists, and designers left Europe for the haven of North America during the late 1930s, for they realized that freedom of inquiry and expression was in grave danger on the European continent. Among them were the artists Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and Piet Mondrian. When the Nazis closed the Bauhaus in 1933, faculty, students, and alumni dispersed throughout the world and made modern design a truly international movement. Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Marcel Breuer transplanted the functionalist architectural movement to American shores, and Herbert Bayer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy brought their innovative approaches to graphic design.

Subsequent to the spread of modernism, a significant aspect of American modern graphic design's involvement with it was in the art direction of prestigious magazines. In the US, modernism took on a whole new direction as designers, originally involved in the conception of European modernism, now placed in an utterly different social and cultural climate, worked in a style that was less severe, more inclusive, diverse, corporate and consumer-driven, labelled by some as late modern. So – importantly – in America, a turn away from social concerns and other earlier 'authentic' modernist ideals towards more commercially viable interests became evident. Aynsley explains in more detail (2001:41):

The transfer of the ideas of modernism to the pragmatic, commercial climate of America did not lead to a seamless adoption of all of its principles. The ideological commitment to a new society expressed in Europe during the 1920's had informed many of the aesthetic values of early modernism. However removed from its original context, the style at times became a set of borrowed mannerisms. Its central characteristics – a tendency towards simplification; use of signs and symbols as visual shorthand; use of a grid; a bright associative visual language with parallels in modern art – would transform in the United States into a visual language for corporations, just as much as for individual experiment.

It is during this later phase that modernism lost momentum, as it began extending itself into a more diverse consumer driven styling, negating its original stabilising tendencies towards uniformity and universality. Raizman (2003:259) elucidates this American contribution to graphic design as he comments that designers had “expanded the vocabulary and techniques of graphic design in a variety of contexts” as big corporations and publishers (and commerce at large) provided designers “with a wealth of varied opportunities to develop original solutions to the challenges not

only of selling products, but also of building public support for the promise of research and technology to a postwar audience”.

All the while in Switzerland, modern graphic design culminated in what is known as the International Typographic Style (or Swiss Design). Here, modern graphic design developed into a more rigid, stylistic reproduction of early modernism, without the mediating influence of a more eclectic, consumer driven society as in America. Nevertheless, despite this difference of emphasis, here, too, modernisms’ original foundational theories became dissipated and its repeated stylistic overuse resulted in a type of entropy with a perceived sterility and superficiality of style, as it became assimilated into the corporate identification- and promotional needs of internationally expanding commerce.

4. The ‘demise’ of modernism

The modernist dream of transcending the separation of art and life in a rationally planned world lingered on in Europe in the 1960s, but with the ascendancy of America the avant-garde lost its radical charge: it became a commodity, and the ‘style of the epoch’ was appropriated as the corporate identity of big business. The corporate embrace rendered resistance futile. No activity was too outrageous to enter into the museum, no work too slight, minimal, or conceptual to sell. The museum was the natural habitat of Late Modernist art and architecturally innovative museums became the focus of civic pride in many cities. Universities and colleges made an industry out of the history and criticism of Modernism; government agencies supported Modernist art and artists; and galleries packaged the avant-garde – movement succeeded movement, style followed style, as the ‘tradition of the new’ boosted sales. (Weston, 1996:230)

What becomes noticeable in the discussions regarding the various creative modernisms thus far, is an evident tension between an ‘aestheticist’, formal and often formulaic, fine-art oriented approach that seeks to separate art and life (at least insofar as art is endowed with ‘aesthetic’, as opposed to social space), and a more functionalist, socially (even socialist-) oriented approach mostly evident in the applied arts that sought to meld art and life.

As the observation by de la Croix highlighted earlier shows (see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern 'graphic design'*, page 41), and as has been mentioned intermittently thus far (see page 107), modernism was characterised by a dual approach that is at the same time, paradoxically, compatible and contrary. Modernism, on the one hand, endeavoured to produce art-for-art's-sake and as such sought to separate art from everyday life into an aesthetic realm (Harries, 1997:16–18). This approach, which could be termed 'creative escapism', as such, sought to escape from everyday life into a spiritual realm. The Suprematist art of Malevich, for instance, produced a minimalist expression of a rationally ordered world of pure geometric forms and colours (described earlier, see *Essay 2: Aesthetic modernity: The avant-garde and the emergence of modern 'graphic design'*, page 41). This approach (not without an ironic twist) provided an aesthetic model for graphic designers as foundation for a new, modern visual communication system that, because of its lack of particularizing everyday, 'earthbound', representational and individualising characteristics could endeavour to overcome boundaries, including those of class, 'time' and 'space'. The second approach, which favoured functional applied design (as such very much predisposed to the socialist, socio-political, European tendencies evident in the early twentieth century) in contrast to the 'spiritual' and psychological tendencies of Expressionism, Surrealism and Suprematism, attempted to bring 'art' to a functional level in everyday life, attempting to transform everyday life for all. This approach is evident in the tendencies of de Stijl, Constructivism and the later Bauhaus, amongst others (see pages 129–137). Although modern graphic design favoured the latter 'functional' approach, it did however assimilate the aesthetics and styling from the former 'spiritual' approach – i.e. the formal, abstract, geometric minimalism – in order to provide an egalitarian, modern, visual communication system as an idealistic endeavour towards a progressive, utopian world of stability, unity, universality and harmony (in the process subverting the hermeticist implications of art-for-art's-sake modernism). At the same time, graphic designers embraced this rational, geometric and abstract visual styling for its association with mechanised industrial production and its modernising tendencies. Raizman (2003:236) captures some of the tensions designers (here

referring to industrial designers, but just as relevant for graphic designers) were exposed to in the modern era:

...designers struggled to reconcile the collective model of their new enterprise with the legacy of individuality, self-expression, and the craft process that they inherited from the earlier modernism of the pre-war era. Some designers welcomed and incorporated new principles of abstract and elemental geometric form that expressed a universal esthetic (sic). Others embraced uniformity and the rejection of decoration as an inevitable expression of social equality in a new world order. Still others saw the new skills and machine-age vocabulary of form as enabling a new and satisfying versatility for the designer exercising creative ability in a wide variety of media and materials.

The irony lies in the fact that, perhaps as a result of the elitist academic and not easily accessible nature of these modernist practices, modernism seldom managed to reach the mass-audiences that they were targeting, let alone achieve their idealistic social transformative aspirations. Creative modernism had set out to change the world, either by a spiritual, 'aestheticist', escapist transcendence of it, or by a progressive, hands-on, tangible social improvement of it, providing "material benefits" (see *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19), via modern advancements in architecture, applied and graphic design (Kramer, 2002:16). Design reform, as foundation for modernism in applied design and architecture is paradigmatic here, as one recalls modern design reform's attempt to set (stabilising) qualitative standards for 'good' modern design at the levels of design, production and consumption. However, not managing to achieve the transformation of society that it endeavoured to effect at many different levels, modernism, ironically, became 'domesticated' into curricula and museums (Jameson, 1985:111–112, 123–124), and at the same time, its stylistic, formal and functional abilities were digested, despite its earlier social aspirations and, albeit in revised form, incorporated into western capitalist systems.

This 'domestication' of modernism – stylistically, commercially and academically – was prefigured by the development of an internationalising trend in modern graphic design. This trend, labelled the International Typographic Style, in many ways became responsible for the stylistic, aesthetic and theoretical maturing and ultimate

solidification of modernism, despite its original avant-gardist, innovative and idealistic tendencies.

a) The International Typographic Style

This combination of theoretical ideas, exploration of the visual components of graphic expression, and the use of those components for effective communication in an international context gave the movement a reputation for high standards and social responsibility in design. The hegemony of the International Typographic Style as the “voice” of modern graphic design was promoted in museum exhibitions and books, and was contemporary with a similar faith in the modern esthetic [sic] and practical advantages of the tectonic steel-and-glass architecture of the “International Style”. (Raizman, 2003:278.)

As modernism developed and became more accepted, the term ‘International Style’ was adopted in later years to describe the pervasive international dominance of purist functional minimalist modernism in architecture and design. In graphic design this internationalising tendency of modernism culminated in what became known as the International Typographic Style (ITS), also called Swiss design.

The ITS can be described as a specific approach to graphic design that emerged in Switzerland (and Germany) after the Second World War, maturing during the 1950s, and which still has influence in contemporary graphic design practice. For its objectivity and clarifying approach it can be considered an extension of modernism, albeit as a kind of solidification of its earlier innovative, creative tendencies in a rather unyielding formulaic manner, especially at the hand of copycat designers.

Visual characteristics, assimilating various ‘stabilising’ stylistic tendencies from different modernisms (including de Stijl, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus) include: concern for visual harmony and balance through the asymmetrical arrangement of design elements on a mathematically constructed grid system; the use of objective, factually-oriented photography and textual content that is structured in such a way as to maximise clarity and factuality of information, attempting to purge from graphic design the commercial exaggeration of advertising and other media tendencies; the use of sans-serif typography utilising flush-left, ragged-right margin structures, in the

pursuit of an objective, legible, harmonious and timeless visual communication system, which rejected “personal expressions” and “eccentric solutions” in favour of a more “universal and scientific approach to design problem solving”; and ultimately the quest for discipline, ‘quality’, clarity, order and universality in graphic design (Meggs, 1998:320). “In this paradigm, the designer defines his or her role not as an artist but as an objective conduit for spreading important information between components of society”, asserts Meggs (1998:320), thereby illuminating the socially transformative capacity and intentions of the ITS. The movement developed centrally around the teachings at schools in Basel and Zurich, as Heller & Chwast (2000:196, 199) elaborate:

Their country’s neutrality enabled Swiss graphic designers to continue their work during the war... The Swiss design philosophy is actually propagated through two major schools, one in Zurich and the other in Basel. Josef Müller-Brockman typifies the former approach, Armin Hofmann the latter’s. According to Kenneth Hiebert, a Basel School alumnus, that school’s methodology derives from the idea that “abstract structure is the vehicle for communication. It relies on an analysis that rigorously questions and accounts for all parts of the message. The act of searching for an appropriate structure forces the designer to make the most basic inquiry about a message, to isolate its primary essence from the considerations of surface style.” Communication, not seduction, is Basel’s primary goal, one that dictates the need for symbols appropriate to the content of the message. Ideally the method results in a metaphor and message that has universal appeal. As Hiebert writes, the Swiss School is concerned that design be more than “a frivolous cluttering of the environment.”

Early progenitors of the movement included teachers, students and practitioners, Ernst Keller, Max Bill and Théo Ballmer, and later, Emil Ruder, Armin Hofmann and Josef Müller-Brockman (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:105). Also, Anton Stankowski, a German-born designer who worked mostly in Switzerland, was much involved in the generation of functional graphics for science, as well as the design and production of standardised information systems for representing complex data. Significant typographic advances were made by designers including Adrian Frutiger, who designed, for instance, a controlled palette of typographic variations of size, weight and style within a “visually programmed family of twenty-one sans-serif fonts named Univers” (Meggs, 1998:325).

Max Bill is an important early exponent of the ITS, involved in painting, architecture, engineering, sculpture, product and graphic design, studying at the Bauhaus under Gropius, Meyer, Moholy-Nagy, Albers and Kandinsky from 1927–1929. The graphic design approach of Bill is enlightening in showing how the structural elements of ‘aestheticist’ modernism were, in contrast to its fundamental intentions of separating art from everyday life, used to create a visual communication that endeavoured to reduce its formal elements to the task of effecting a rational visual communication in the service of society. Bill was greatly influenced by van Doesberg’s *Manifesto of Art Concret*, written eleven months before his death in April 1930, which called for “ a universal art of absolute clarity based on controlled arithmetical construction” (Meggs, 1998:321). “Art concret paintings were totally constructed from pure mathematically exact visual elements – planes and colors” and as such, have no meaning outside of themselves, Meggs (1998:321) explains. The structure and aesthetic of art-concret conceptions were assimilated into the stylistic, aesthetic and structural features of Swiss modern graphic design (Meggs, 1998:321). Hence (Meggs, 1998:321):

Bill constructed layouts of geometric elements organised with absolute order. Mathematical proportion, geometric spatial division, and the use of Akzidenz Grotesk type [sans-serif type] (particularly the medium weight) are features of his work of this period... He explored the use of the ragged-right margin and indicated paragraphs by an interval of space instead of a paragraph indent in some of his 1940s book designs.... The evolution of Bill’s art and design was based on the development of cohesive principles of visual organisation. Important concerns include the linear division of space into harmonious parts; modular grids; arithmetic and geometric progressions, permutations and sequences; and the equalization of contrasting and complementary relationships into an ordered whole. In 1949 he concluded, “It is possible to develop an art largely on the basis of mathematical thinking.”

Another very strong element of paradigmatic modernist thinking of the ITS, apart from its disciplined structural adherence to ordered, mathematical and rational systems in a search for universality and stability, is found in its debates on standardisation and its search for universal language systems with like-minded intent. As a slight, however important digression, these tendencies recall similar modernist

gestures in academic fields, for instance, the anthropologist, Levi-Strauss's conception of Structuralism (derived from the structural linguist, Saussure's work), which can loosely be described as a search for similar i.e. universal 'structures' underlying societal systems. Structuralism for instance conceived that the ritual of marriage, although demonstrating different surface specifics in societies, primitive and/or advanced, across the world, would utilise similar, 'universal' ritual structures to symbolise the symbolic joining of two people. Other related studies, paradigmatic of the modernist search for 'truth', including Saussure's research into the way meaning is generated through the symbolic system of language (which had revolutionary impact in the academic world) generated similar influence on the practice of graphic design. At the Ulm Institute for Design for instance, unlike previous creative modernisms where this quest had developed in a perhaps more theoretical and abstract manner, the development of a universalised visual system became integrated into course curricula, including: the general philosophy and theory of signs and symbols, as well as the study of semiotics, which included three parts, namely semantics, syntactics and pragmatics, as Meggs (1998:323) describes:

Semiotics has three branches: *semantics*, the study of the meaning of signs and symbols; *syntactics*, the study of how signs and symbols are connected and ordered into a structural whole; and *pragmatics*, the study of the relation of signs and symbols to their users. Also, principles of Greek rhetoric were re-examined for application to visual communications.

The 'popularity' of this internationalising graphic style continued into the 1960s and 1970s led in great part by the contribution of the Kunstgewerbeschulen (art and design schools) in Zurich and Basle, mentioned earlier. Here, through the teaching of Ruder, for instance, legibility and readability of visual communications were highlighted as primary concerns for graphic designers, whilst at the same time advancing the rational, systematic, harmonious and minimalist approach of the ITS. Ruder presented his methodology of graphic- and typographic design and education in a book, written in 1967, entitled *Typography, a Manual of Design*, which generated worldwide interest. Similarly Hofmann, playing an important part in the advancement of the ideas of the ITS, published the book *Graphic Design Manual* in 1965, "that presented his application of elemental design principles to graphic design" (Meggs,

1998:129). Espousing an objective, rational and systemic approach to graphic design problem solving, the publication of the Swiss journal *Neue Grafik (New Graphic Design)* in 1959 provided an important platform for the propagation of the ethos of the ITS (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:105). Hollis (1994:133) comments that, as global platform for the discussion of modern graphic and applied art and design, “the attitude of *Neue Grafik [New Graphic Design]* is characterized by exclusiveness, consistency and lack of compromise”. In addition (Hollis, 1994:137):

*Neue Graphik*⁴² consummated the desires of the pre-war pioneers for objectivity in visual communication; it was an internationalizing force in a new profession, and helped give ‘Information Design’ a typographical language and discipline before the arrival of phototypesetting and computer graphics.

Müller-Brockman emerged as a leading practitioner and theorist of the ITS, seeking “an absolute and universal graphic expression through an objective and impersonal presentation, communicating to the audience without the interference of the designer’s subjective feelings or propagandistic techniques of persuasion” (Meggs, 1998:329). The sophisticated visual communication evident in a series of concert posters designed by him, testifies to his creative and rational design ability to create a visual, structural, harmonious equivalent to the aural qualities of the music performed, in a way that is visually accessible, independent of cultural and linguistic barriers.

The socio-cultural internationalism that had emerged after the Second World War continued and advanced fiercely into the twentieth century. With this spirit of ‘globalisation’ developed systems of international communication, international travel and international entertainment, in no small measure spurred on by the advancing pace of international trade and a strong global economy. In this milieu the need for clarity of communication, as developed by the ITS, became central to the socio-economic needs of an emerging global culture (Meggs, 1998:333):

⁴² Note that the difference in spelling: ‘*Neue Graphik*’ refers to the ‘Swiss Style’ or the ‘International Typographic Style’, whereas *Neue Grafik* refers to the magazine *New Graphic Design*.

There was a need for communicative clarity, for multilingual formats to transcend language barriers, and for elementary pictographs and glyphs to enable people from around the world to comprehend signs and information. The new graphic design developed in Switzerland helped fulfil these needs, and its fundamental concepts and methodology spread throughout the world.

Aynsley (2001:97) draws attention to the effect of the globalising tendencies on graphic design when he comments on the advancement of graphic design practice to a worldwide phenomenon. Branches of various international advertising agencies began appearing in cities all over the world, including the United States, Europe and Japan (which as an example of the internationalising effect “based its professional organizations on the Western model”) (Aynsley, 2001:97). The institutionalisation of graphic design bears evidence of its international stature with the emergence of various international organisations to endorse international standardisation in the field, including the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI) in Paris in 1951, soon gaining international prominence, and ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations), which was formed in 1963 to represent over 50 design associations worldwide (Aynsley, 2001:97).

The theories and formal aesthetic tendencies of modernism were assimilated worldwide via the ITS, especially gaining a foothold in the United States. Here the ITS’s ability to provide rational and effective visual communication was harnessed by the corporate sectors, especially for its ability to produce powerful, arresting and recognisable corporate identity systems. Meggs (1998:335) encapsulates these ideas:

The rapid spread of the International Typographic Style resulted from the harmony and the order of its methodology.... The design movement that began in Switzerland and Germany, then outgrew its native boundaries to become truly international, has practitioners in many nations around the globe.... A growing awareness of design as a logical tool for large organizations after World War II caused a growth in corporate design and visual-identification systems. During the middle 1960s the development of corporate design and the International Typographic Style were linked into one movement.

It seems ironic that the ITS, which emerged out of the need to counter the exaggeration and crass commercialism that was emerging worldwide in graphic

communications, as such directing its efforts to “redefining the role of design and the designer in a global context that was critical of materialism and commercialism” found itself in the service of corporate design (Raizman, 2003:285). Raizman (2003:285) captures the social awareness of the designers within the ITS school when he comments:

Advocates and practitioners of the International Typographic Style saw their work as inherently creative, objective, and socially responsible. Such work embodied a sense of restraint as well as reform, removed from the excesses of commercial art direction at the one end and the indulgence of individual expression for a more exclusive audience at the other.

However, the ITS, despite its egalitarian tendencies, together with the legacy of modern graphic design, provided the basis for the development of corporate communications in the service of capitalist systems, which in turn directly extended itself into the hegemonic commercialism evident in postmodernism. (Appendix O, page 193–194, showcases a selection of work from designers of the ITS)

4.1 International Style Architecture and the ‘death’ of modernism

The theories that underpin the demise of modernism in (International Style) architecture parallel those in graphic design and as such are enlightening. Not much attention has been given to modern architecture thus far, as it in itself demands a great deal of discussion and investigation, which is not possible here. However, suffice to say that modern architecture, in the guise of the International Style, and its intense and exemplary involvement with eminent modernisms, at the Bauhaus for instance, exhibited similar universalising, stabilising and ‘eternalising’ tendencies to that of applied and graphic modernism. Modern architecture was based on a rational, scientifically- and mathematically-oriented, minimalist, geometric and abstract aesthetic and theoretical approach, which utilised strict, formal right angles that eliminated decoration and/or individualising characteristics of any sorts, and demanded functionality. As such, the work of le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright is exemplary as models of International Style Architecture.

Modern architecture, as with most all creative modernisms, was characterised by the modern utopian tendency of valorising technology as a tool for social transformation. Charles Jencks (1987:27) accordingly comments that Mies van der Rohe (or modern architecture at large), “made a number of pleas to the Spirit of the Age, the Zeitgeist of the new industrialisation” and as such inscribed modernism with the capacity to resolve social economic and artistic problems. As Jencks (1987:28) goes on to describe the character of modern architecture, it is interesting (though hardly surprising, considering its unifying and universalising character) to note the similarities with modern design practices, including that of graphic design:

The reigning religion of architectural Modernism could be called pragmatic amelioration, that is the belief that by ‘doing more with less’ as Buckminster Fuller said, social problems would eventually disappear. Technical progress, in limited spheres, seems to bear out this ideology, still a dominant one of Late-Modernists.

Thus we might define Modern architecture as *the universal, international style stemming from the facts of new constructional means, adequate to a new industrial society, and having as its goal the transformation of society, both in its taste and social make-up....* Modernism in architecture has furthered the ideology of industrialisation and progress... the various Modernisms agree... over the abstraction and the primary role of aesthetics, or the perfection of the expressive medium. Modernism as Clement Greenberg has defined it always has this irreducible goal: to focus on the essence of each art language. By doing this, he argues, standards are kept high in an age of secularism, where there are few shared values and little left of a common symbolic system. All one can do in an agnostic age of consumer pluralism is sharpen the tools of one’s trade, or ‘purify the language of the tribe’, as Mallarmé and T.S.Eliot defined the poet’s role.

Without going into much detail, what is pertinent to this discussion relating to modern graphic design, is how the International Style (modern architecture) became perceived as a sterile, clinical, formulaic, superficiality of style, with an intrinsic incapacity to respond to individualising and personal human needs. Modern architects, in their quest to create “truth” in an aesthetic formal sphere, and in their quest for ‘stability’ and universality, developed an architectural approach in the International Style that did not allow for the variability inherent in humanity.

Tom Wolfe (1983) in his book *From Bauhaus to our House* investigates how modern architecture in a rationalist and universalising sense negated human needs. For instance, some buildings by Le Corbusier were designed with furniture, such as tables and chairs, as fixtures in the interior spaces, in order that they could not be moved, thus maintaining the 'stable' and unchanging aesthetic vision of the architect. Similarly, some modern housing projects had strictures in place that did not allow tenants to make any personalising changes to the building facade; blinds were regulated, and in certain instances no window coverings were permitted (Wolfe, 1983:76–78):

Mies would have preferred that the great windows of plate glass have no coverings at all. Unless you could compel everyone in the building to have the same ones (white or beige, naturally) and raise them and lower them or open and shut them at the same time or to the same degree, they always ruined the purity of the design of the exterior. In the Seagram building, Mies came as close as man [sic] was likely to come to realizing that ideal. The tenant could only have white blinds or shades. And there were only three intervals where they could stay put : open, closed and halfway. At any other point, they just kept sliding.... They policed the impulses of clients and tenants alike. Even after the building was up and the contract fulfilled, they would return.... Tired of waking up at 5 a.m. every morning to the light of the summer sun, the owners would add white curtains. But the soul engineer would inevitably return and rip the offending rags down... and throw out those sweet little puff 'n' clutter Thai silk throw pillows in the living room while he was at it.

In the great corporate towers, the office workers shoved filing cabinets, desks, wastepaper baskets, potted plants, up against the floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass, anything to build a barrier against the panicked feeling that they were about to pitch headlong into the streets below. Above these jerry built walls they strung up makeshift curtains that looked like laundry lines from the slums of Naples, anything to keep out the brain-boiling, poached-eye sunlight that came blazing in every afternoon... And by night the custodial staff, the Miesling police, under the strictest orders, invaded and pulled down these pathetic barricades thrown up against the pure vision of the white gods and the Silver Prince [that is Gropius].

The paradigmatic 'death of modernism' was documented as the demolition of the modern housing development, the *Pruitt-Igoe* scheme in 1972 in St. Louis, Missouri (Jencks, 1991:23). After many years of attempted upkeep, with "millions of dollars being pumped back, trying to keep it alive (fixing the broken elevators, repairing smashed windows, repainting)" as a result of it being "vandalised, mutilated and

defaced by its black inhabitant”, the building (or a significant part of it) was finally dynamited. (See Appendix Q, Fig. 1–3, page 196, for examples of modern and postmodern architecture as well as the demolition of the *Pruitt-Igoe* housing scheme.) Jencks (1991:23-24) describes the aesthetic and theoretical underpinning of the *Pruitt-Igoe* housing development, which ironically won an award from the American Institute of Architects for its design in 1951, as follows:

It consisted of elegant slab blocks fourteen stories high with rational ‘streets in the air’ (which were safe from cars, but as it turned out, not safe from crime); ‘sun, space and greenery’, which Le Corbusier called the ‘three essential joys of urbanism’ (instead of conventional gardens and semi-private space, which he banished). It had a separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the provision of play space, and local amenities such as laundries, crèches and gossip centres – all rational substitutes for traditional pattern. Moreover its Purist style, its clean, salubrious hospital metaphor, was meant to instil, by good example, corresponding virtues in the inhabitants. Good form was to lead to good content, or at least good conduct; the intelligent planning of abstract space was to promote healthy behaviour.

What Jencks documented above as the ‘death of modernism’ in architecture, can be described as a rising sensibility in Western culture that emerged in the 1970s that pitted itself against modernism: against its pursuit of insularity, exclusivity, uniformity, ‘collectivism’, purity, rationalism, and authoritarianism, amongst others. Drawing attention to this climate of change, Meggs (1998:432) comments, “many people believed that the modern era was drawing to a close in art, design, politics, and literature”. Following the faddish stream of *-post* prefixes expanding into all fields at the time (post-industrial, post-nationalist, amongst many others) the term *postmodernism* was coined to describe this emergent anti-movement. It is important to point out that, although postmodernism was (still is) characterised by fierce resistance to modernism, it, at the same time, is viewed by some as a continuation and/or ‘grand’ culmination of the latter; as *Radical Modernism* by Dan Friedman (1994) and *Modernism: An incomplete project* by Jürgen Habermas (1983) respectively puts forward. In addition, postmodernity exhibits reactive responses against both the postmodern and the modern. Tschichold, the modernist pioneer of the New Typography (discussed earlier, see page 145), for instance reacted against modernism by returning to a classical, humanist approach to graphic design, in the second half of

the twentieth century in an attempt to distance himself from German totalitarianism (see Appendix Q, Fig. 5, page 197). He perceived that modern typography's "impatient attitude conforms to the German bent for the absolute, and its military will to regulate and [that] its claim to absolute power reflect those fearful components of the German character [that] set loose Hitler's power and the Second World War" (cited in Meggs, 1998:289). In contrast to the geometric austerity of the new typography, his traditional (neo)classical approach, from the 1940s onwards, featured harmonious, symmetrical compositions, the use of classical serif typefaces, old-style decorative borders and engraved illustrations (Aynsley, 2001:68). Tschichold's reaction to modernism, different to that of postmodernism, could be understood as an attempt to recapture 'premodern' tendencies. However, in this way, Tschichold certainly contributed to the condition of postmodernity – a condition that thrives on a heady mix of difference and plurality and embraces a muddle of premodern, modern and postmodern tendencies. Despite these perspectives that are mostly not considered mainstream, postmodernism can in many ways be seen as a continuation of some of the elements of a modernist tendency. Postmodernity is generally considered to be an era of pluralism, marked by conscious efforts towards diversification – in contrast to modernism. Postmodernity can also be considered as a continuation of the pluralist condition of modernity, but, with the absence of the various modern stabilising endeavours attempting to arrest the flux. Differently put, although both conditions – modernity and postmodernity – are marked by flux, pluralism and diversity, postmodernity (in contrast to the modern tendency to resist the condition), exhibits an attitude of affirmation and complacency, labelled colloquially as 'anything goes', regarding this contemporary condition.

In modern graphic design, unlike architecture, it is not quite as easy to pinpoint a symbolic time and place for its 'demise'. However, similar tendencies negating modernism had become apparent by the 1970s, as graphic designers started to question what they perceived of as, and what in many ways had become, in contrast to creative modernism's original intentions, an ossified set of rules and bureaucratic systems for the 'correct' practice of graphic design. Graphic designers, who for instance, chose not to follow the rational modernist approach, were considered, as

commercial artists (not designers), inferior to those who did. As such, a distinction was made between “the free classic graphic artist with his inclination to drawing or painting” and the superior, “constructivist, functionally minded and intellectual counterpart”. The ‘superior’ counterpart – the ‘modern’ graphic designer – conformed to governing standards and structures, and had become driven by the rational strictures of commerce and industry (Neuburg cited in Hollis, 1994:135–136). As such, “the more refined term *corporate communications* replaced the somewhat pedestrian *commercial art*” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:200). It is against this modern rational corporate-driven conception of graphic design, which subverted eclectic, pluralist, individualist, creative inclinations, that postmodernism rebelled.

As an aside, although this study has focussed on practices that can be considered typically modernist, it is important to note that graphic design, unlike architecture, which was dominated by the International Style, shared a wider range of stylistic influences especially during the second half of the twentieth century. These practices which ran concurrent to the ITS, included the work of designers such as Alexey Brodovitch, Saul Bass, Paul Rand, Cipe Pineles, Lester Beal, and Ivan Chermayeff amongst others, and although influenced to varying degrees by modernism, were considered to be more inclusive, eclectic and expressive (Aynsley, 2001).

So, from the mid- to late-twentieth century onwards, artists, architects and designers began to challenge the “constraints imposed by modernist ideology” (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:136). The Pop art movement that flourished between 1958 and 1965 and the psychedelic poster graphics of the 1960s (and 1970s), together with the expansion of the ITS to incorporate a more expressive and diverse visual approach, prefigured the arrival of postmodernism in graphic design, which by the 1980s arrived in full swing.

5. Conclusion

Over the last twenty years we have found ourselves operating in a historical context in which all factors of cultural disaggregation have been exacerbated, in the sense that any unified hypothesis of design, as method or as language,

has disappeared. The present post-industrial model of society reveals a world in which industry has come to the end of its period of heroic growth, characterized by rationalist and internationalist culture, and in which the homogenous society of equals has been replaced by an assemblage of minorities, of conflicting groups no longer founded on different productive, economic and social functions but on different cultures, religions and traditions. A world which is seeing the return of culture, the transcendent and the traditional as great historical forces. As a result the myth of reason and egalitarianism, so vital to the whole of modern culture and architecture, has entered a period of crises. The myth of unity of all languages and technologies in the project has given way to a “narrative” process of discontinuity and partiality. (Branzi, 1984:9)

The emergence of postmodernism can be viewed largely as a reaction to the ‘domestication’ of modernism, in this case stylistically and academically – the aesthetic and theoretical maturing and ultimate solidification of modernism. Late modernism, despite its originally innovative, idealistic revolutionary and avant-gardist tendencies, in many ways brought with it the rise of the modern, cultural elitism, for instance in its creation of distinct boundaries between what can be considered ‘good’ and ‘bad’ design. The assimilation of modernism into museums, and with it the emergence of modernist cultural elitism, in many ways developed out of this notion of ‘good’ design; an example of this includes Edgar Kaufmann’s ‘Good Design’ exhibitions of the 1950’s that significantly bolstered the reputation of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (Woodham, 1997:31). This rise of cultural elitism is another of modernism’s many ironies, in that it developed out of an initially democratic cultural ideal. Moreover it stands in opposition to the subversive tactics of the early modern avant-garde. In addition, one of the great modern undertakings was to break from the tradition of existing authorities, to recapitulate – “a commitment to scepticism in the face of received ideas and beliefs, however apparently authoritative” (Harrison, 1997:18). Yet, paradoxically, modernism reproduces its own establishment of cultural authorities, perhaps even more potent than those it originally set out to subvert. It is interesting to note here, how history comes full circle in postmodernity, as postmodernism in turn rebels against established authorities set up by modernism in similar fashion as early modernists rebelled against establishment norms at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this regard Fredric Jameson (1985:111–2) comments:

This list [of creative postmodernisms] would seem to make two things clear at once: first, most of the postmodernisms mentioned... emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations. Those formerly subversive and embattled styles – Abstract Expressionism; the great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot, or Wallace Stevens; the International Style (Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies); Stravinsky; Joyce, Proust and Mann – felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandfathers are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy – dead, stifling and canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy go do anything new.... The second feature of this list of postmodernisms is the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, mostly notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture. This is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, and in transmitting difficult and complex skills of reading, listening and seeing to its initiates.

A further domestication of modernism resulted from its assimilation into mass consumer culture at the hand of capitalist economic (and related liberal democratic political) systems, evident particularly after its migration to centres across the world as a result of the Second World War conflict and especially noticeable in America. Here the environment was ripe for the emergence of corporate consumer-directed communication, based in the legacy of modernism, as highlighted earlier. Postmodernism as such corresponds with the emergence of “a new type of social life and a new economic order”, called “postindustrial or consumer society”, or “multinational capitalism”, that is “Late Capitalism”, as Jameson (1985:112), in a catchall phrase, labels this postmodern phenomenon. Jameson (1985:124) explains, highlighting the cultural and economic ‘domestication’, and as such the cultural commodification, of modernism:

If then we suddenly return to the present day, we can measure the immensity of the cultural changes that have taken place. Not only are Joyce and Picasso no longer weird and repulsive, they have become classics and now look rather realistic to us. Meanwhile, there is very little in either the form or the content of contemporary art that contemporary society finds intolerable and scandalous. The most offensive forms of this art—punk rock,

say, or what is called sexually explicit material—are all taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful, unlike the productions of the older modernism [for instance the work of van Gogh]. But this means that even if contemporary art has all the same formal features as the older modernism, it has still shifted its position fundamentally within our culture. For one thing, commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings, and other artefacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising, for example, is fed by postmodernism in all arts and inconceivable without it. For another, the classics of high modernism are now part of the so-called canon and are taught in schools and universities—which at once empties them of any of their older subversive power.

In many ways this challenge to modernism, labelled as postmodernism by most, welcomed and celebrated a new wave of instability and flux, advancing individuality and difference, in a ‘juvenile’ rebellion against authorities and institutions.

Modernism, which for many by the late 1970’s conjured now-negative images, such as functionalism, rationalism, sensibility, logic, reason, objectivity, methodological, mathematical, systematic, bureaucratic, and so forth, gave way to postmodernism.

Similarly, although in a more advanced, academic and formalised way, Hassan (cited in Harvey 1990:43) provides a set of ‘modern-versus-postmodern’ terms in tabular format that highlights the epistemological differences between the modern and postmodern (Appendix P, page 195). Examples include (in modern vs. postmodern format): form and antiform; purpose and play; design and chance; hierarchy and anarchy; art object and process or happening; creation and decreation; presence and absence; centring and dispersal; depth and surface; narrative and anti-narrative; master code and idiolect; determinacy and indeterminacy; and transcendence and immanence.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention (once more, see *Motopomo: The Historical-Theoretical Background to Contemporary Graphic Design Practices*, page 7 and *Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19) to the modernist tendency to generate what Jean-François Lyotard (1984:xxiii–xxv) terms grand narratives (or metanarratives) and his subsequent definition of the postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives”. Anderson (1996:4) explains the term metanarrative as “a story of mythic proportions,

a story big enough and meaningful enough to pull together philosophy and research and politics and art, relate them to one another, and – above all – give them a unifying sense of direction. It is interesting to recall here Anderson (1996:4) who, following Lyotard, cites “the Christian religious story of God’s will being worked out on earth, the Marxist political story of class conflict and revolution, and the Enlightenment’s intellectual story of rational progress” as examples of modern metanarratives. In contrast to this modernist search for essential truth – for a great overarching ‘story’ of mythical proportion that could, in Anderson’s (1996:6) words, “put everyone on the same page” – postmodernity gave way to an acceptance of things simply as they are, an acceptance of individuality and of necessity of diversity, as the “concept of universality... is put into question”. As such, the stabilising efforts of the modern approach gave way to the instability inherent in postmodernity; the universal gave way to the particular; and the ‘eternal’ gave way to the temporary and contingent. It is important to note in passing, however, that some theorists insist on distinguishing between this fundamentally conservative, reactionary (‘anything goes’) variety of postmodernism, and a critical counterpart that is characterised by resistance. The latter, labelled ‘critical postmodernism’, incorporates “transgressive forms of cultural production that activate differences and a critical sense of the right to be different, while keeping alive the question of what it means to be human in a global technophilic culture’ (Olivier, 1995:211).

It was in the early 1970’s that modernism, in a sterile, exclusive, stylistic form without any seemingly relevant theoretical underpinnings and an intrinsic incapacity to respond to consumer needs, was challenged and replaced by the innovations of postmodernism. Designers and society in general began to question and re-examine the ‘expert’ power and authority of accepted institutions and organisations. “Perhaps the international style had been so thoroughly refined, explored, and accepted, that a backlash was inevitable”, Meggs (1998:432) comments. Taking into account the cyclical model of history repeating itself, it should have perhaps been considered probable, that the quest for ‘stability’ would once again give way to ‘instability’, despite modernism’s ‘eternalising’ tendencies.

So, as people began to unpick the stabilising tenets of modernism, a new spirit of inclusion and resultant pluralism began to emerge. Modern tenets, originally initiated as optimistic ‘stabilising’ endeavours (by now perceived of as constricting and limiting) gave way to an expansion of the graphic communication vocabulary. Attentions shifted away from the autocratic modern designer, imposing standards from above, to a postmodern designer who embraces plurality, individuality and difference. An “acceptance of popular culture and open-mindedness to heterogeneity, playfulness, and multiple reading of cultural expressions provide the basis for a new kind of artistic freedom involving greater participation on the part of the spectator”, Raizman (2003:347) accordingly explains. And so, postmodern graphic design emerged as a new, personal and individualistic expression, which embraced historical references, parody, pastiche, bold, bright geometry and eclectic, organically inspired patterning, enthusiastically decorated, exuberantly playful, and inclusive. Furthermore, “a playful kinetic geometry featuring floating forms, sawtooth rules, and randomly placed blips and lines; multiple layered and fragmented images; pleasant pastel harmonies; discordant, letter-spaced typography; and frequent references to art and design history” became typical elements of postmodern graphic designs (Heller & Chwast, 2000:221). (Appendix Q, Fig. 4–19, page 196-198, showcases some examples of graphic design work in the age of postmodernity.) Ironically exhibiting much of the same revolutionary and destabilising tendencies as these of the early modern avant-garde, graphic design, albeit a century later, gave way to a fresh pluralism. Marked by the lack of any great encompassing trend, exhibiting no unifying approach, no so-called ‘grand narrative’, and defying any eternalising and universalising features, however, marked by a distinct change in attitude nevertheless, postmodern graphic design emerged in full force in the 1980s and continued on towards the 1990’s.

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Conclusion

The project of modernity, as Habermas has called it, has become questionable. The claims and assumptions of modernity, among others to render the world and society more reasonable, i.e. more controllable, and thus a better environment to live in, are attacked. The quest for reason is unmasked as the reduction of reason to instrumental reason. Instrumental reason incarcerated the whole world in a circumscribed set of categories for the sake of control. The project of modernity is criticised, and that is putting it mildly, for its colonialization of the life world – for its suppression of that which does not fit into the categories of control of instrumental reason. The Other – that which was previously despised by instrumental reason because it resisted fitting into the mould of modernity – demands recognition. The Other takes many forms: non-European cultures and customs, non-rationality, anti-masculinity, peripheral social mores, marginalised interests. (Snyman, 1995:63.)

In writing this conclusion, it becomes apparent that this study – a theoretical investigation into the journey from the modern to the postmodern in the twentieth century, as historical-theoretical background to the cultural condition of contemporary graphic design practice – does not lead to or put forward any *Grande* realisation of sorts. Rather, in typical postmodern fashion, it provides a variety of ‘narratives’ that together presents the contemporary condition of graphic design as the aggregation (perhaps even ‘synthesis’ in the Hegelian sense; Olivier, 1998:8–9) of a historical, socio-cultural-intellectual journey during the twentieth century⁴³. However, if I have to single out one of these narratives as ‘superior’, I would, perhaps, given its capacity for wider application (though it cannot stand alone), point to the ‘narrative’ that describes postmodernity, in opposition to modernity, as a condition marked by a lack of stabilising strategies. Recalling earlier discussions (*see Essay 1: The socio-cultural background to modernist creative practices including graphic design*, page 19), modernity, marked by various stabilising endeavours, including what Jean-François Lyotard (1984:xxiii–xxv) calls *grand narratives* or *metanarratives*, in the age of

⁴³ Although this study has consciously neglected to investigate the contribution to graphic design beyond the borders of the twentieth century, on account of the inherent constraints of this type of study, it by no means denigrates the value of earlier contributions, (which include a vast range: from cave painting and the invention of writing, through to Gutenberg’s printing press) to the contemporary condition of graphic design.

postmodernity gives way to the pressure against this sort of encompassing, 'autocratic' narratives. Here, in contrast to the efforts of the modern, the postmodern takes exception to any 'totalising', overarching legitimising strategies, and as such postmodernity can be described as "the (provisional) triumph of the many over the one" (Olivier, 1995:201). This 'narrative' provides a very accessible characterisation of the contemporary condition as a counter-product of the modern, one which also allows for the co-existence of a variety of related 'narrative' descriptions of the contemporary condition. After all, as intimated before, the paradoxical thing about the postmodern is its receptivity for the simultaneous functioning or juxtaposition of the most diverse plurality of different (often oppositional) ontological 'models' or 'mini-narratives' (even persistent 'grand narratives' having been reduced to this status).

The condition of graphic design practice within postmodernity can largely be viewed as the product of the absence of modernism's stabilising, unifying, and legitimising gestures (Lyotard's grand narratives). Examples of these types of modern gestures, or grand narratives, in twentieth century modernism, specifically graphic design practice, could include: the quest for a universal visual language that would appeal democratically across cultural and geographic (amongst other) borders; the quest for a single, correct practice of design, one that could prescribe, once and for all, the conceptual, structural and stylistic procedures for 'good' modern graphic design (paradigmatic here, amongst many similar examples, is Tschichold's book *Die Neue Typographie*, which sets out to legitimise modernism, here specifically the New Typography); as well as, more generally speaking, the visual language of modernism as set by various graphic design modernisms, such as de Stijl, the Bauhaus and Constructivism, amongst others. Although strictly speaking exhibiting slight variations to the norm, all subscribed to the same modern visual vocabulary – clean, clinical, abstract, ordered, rational, minimalist, machine-inspired – that despised ornament, subjectivity, affected involvements and expression, and any digression from this norm. And so an unspoken 'code' of conduct for modern graphic design practice emerged, to provide stability and unity, in the face of ever-imminent chaos, legitimising itself as *the* 'correct' way to 'good' graphic design practice.

In postmodernity, via a complex series of subversions of the modernist code (culturally speaking, which included the Pop movement, the Punk movement and Sixties Psychedelia), modernism's various legitimising, stabilising and unifying grand narratives began breaking down, eventually causing it to lose its privileged foothold completely and giving way to a plurality of new *-isms*. And so, the postmodern emerged triumphant, violating and undermining the 'ivory tower' that modernism had become. The postmodern infiltrated every field of high culture and gained free access to the lower orders of popular culture, previously derogated by the modern, as such setting off an explosive proliferation of *-post* prefixes, which made postmodernism, also its syntactical variants, *the* buzzword towards the end of the twentieth century. It was during this time that graphic design started exhibiting surprisingly inventive and daringly rebellious streaks in the work of designers such as Reid, Greiman, Friedman, Brody and Vanderbyl amongst many others (See Appendix Q, fig. 6–19, pages 197–198). With the reception of the work of these designers the modern, unspoken 'code' of conduct for the 'correct' practice of 'good' graphic design dissipated rapidly. This, together with the possibility of change demonstrated by the aforementioned designers, and the concomitant liberation from the stabilising, 'universalising', and unifying strictures imposed by modernism's grand narratives, released the floodgates of pent-up personal expression and creative, rebellious involvement. Here, the postmodern graphic design scene, in no small measure spurred on by the new aesthetic and methodological inventive possibilities, provided by the emergence of the personal computer, became flooded with exuberant, playful and bold graphic images. Postmodernism's diverse attitudinal and stylistic attributes, which defy unifying structures, amongst others, exhibit creative, personally inspired and individualistic imagery, decoratively mannered paint-splatters and brush strokes, ornamental patterning, allusions to ancient and marginalised cultures (previously despised by the modern) irony and playfulness, a renewed sense of history, and an attitude of irreverence, which embraces 'low' and popular cultural elements and eagerly tears down boundaries set up by the regime of modernism.

I would like to turn, for the moment, back to the image of the 'motopomo' with which I introduced this study (see page 7). This image of a colossal, heterogeneous, digi-

electromechanical contraption, which to me constitutes the workings of the contemporary condition of postmodernity (as well as being the product of the journey from the modern to the postmodern), I would imagine, would have looked very different if conceived of in the modern era. Accompanied by the customary sounds of magical harp chords and various fades and image filters simulating ripples of water, the image of the motopomo is diffused and replaced by a much younger version (a 'mo'?) as we travel back in time a hundred years or so. Apart from the obvious lack of digital components, of advanced electronics and of various add-on accoutrements accumulated by the later version, a reduction in size and an overall clean and sparkling 'newness', what is striking is the general sense of control, organization and discipline exhibited, as well as an overbearing sense of optimism and pride bestowed on the early 'motopomo' machine. Yet, the most salient attribute of the early 'motopomo' is the way in which, in this sealed-off environment removed from the realities and contingencies of the real world, it programmes itself and spews out a tickertape list of instructions to the obedient, bureaucratically organised group of like-minded operators – attired in identical white uniforms with primary-colour pocket emblems, and goose-stepping synchronous movements – to produce, via an efficient conveyor-belt production line, structurally 'identical' or at least isomorphic modernisms. Not always achieving success, the strict quality-control measures put in place ensure that any defect or difference is immediately picked up and the defective *-ism* discarded. Problematic, though, is the way in which a new set of instructions always arrives as to what the modernism should look like, what the best way to produce it would be, and even what it 'should' mean. However, in its unrelenting quest for the 'true' modernism, the one correct way of doing things, the 'motopomo' continues ticking away.

In contrast, the later postmodern, heterogeneous version of the 'motopomo' foregoes the unity and stability of singular control (the original ticker tape brain) as it gives way to the uncontrollable, sometimes almost violent drive for destruction, deconstruction, mutation and regeneration. The 'motopomo' now exists as a mangled mass of variously mutated components – rationality, control, discipline and order lost in the contortion and plurality of its parts. Each component functioning with some

variant or customised version of consciousness and control – each possessing some type of ‘mind’ of its own, sometimes demanding sustenance in the form of chemicals, or some sort of interaction with a bored-looking operator – other components merely continue their functioning and production without need for assistance, while their assigned operator plays video games on the control panel. The multitudinous components of the ‘motopomo’ now delivers, unlike in its early days, a peculiarly diverse range of products, and there seems to be no way to predict what its next ‘creation’ might be. Every now and then one of the old operators arrive, still wearing the old uniform – marked now by a greyish tinge to its once white crispness, and a now-frayed pocket emblem, hardly recognizable at this stage– who in a fit of ‘assumed authority’ attempts to rile the group into some sense of systemic order, invariably unsuccessful. The operator typically, with an air of defeat, returns to his post and starts tinkering away at some imaginary defect, attempting to (at least) get part of the ‘motopomo’ back to the way it was. Also, every now and then, some seemingly important-looking person (one can usually judge by the expensive outlandish attire, the flurry of standard-issue clip-board assistants, and camera-toting journalists furiously scribbling and flashing away) sweeps in and views the fruits of the ‘motopomo’s’ new creative independence on one of the many production lines (if one can even call it that). He or she invariably twirls with pleasure executing wild gestures of admiration and approval at whatever that specific machine-component has chosen to spew out at that time, or, depending on disposition, shrieks with disgust and abhorrence, recoiling at the piece, and smashes it to the ground (depending on its material structure, it either shatters or remains intact). Invariably no one really takes notice, as a general air of complacency and an attitude of ‘anything goes’ seems to be the only thing that prevails.

In conclusion, some of the more striking moments in the journey from the modern to the postmodern could easily be imagined if the differences between the early ‘motopomo’ (in its ‘mo’-phase) and the later one are taken into account. However, it is important to note that this image or metaphor for the more prominent (perhaps dominant) features of a culture and the practices comprising it (in this case, focussing on that of the modern and the postmodern) is in constant need of revision in order to

accommodate emergent or new features (in ontological, epistemological or culture-philosophical terms). Taking the most recent developments in various (related) fields of inquiry into account (a task which cannot be attempted here), even the image of the ‘motopomo’ from a postmodern perspective (provided in the introduction to this study), given its anthropomorphic character and its ability to generate additional capacities when needed, points to a cultural future where it would have to display a truly ‘cyborg’ (cybernetic organism; part human, part robot, and/or part machine) appearance. Various literary and iconic representations have foreshadowed the possibility of such a ‘cybernetic’ cultural future (variously evaluated in pessimistic, apocalyptic, dystopian or utopian terms). It seems as if our cultural condition in the age of postmodernity, previously depicted as the ‘motopomo’, exists, in terms of an alternative metaphor, in a ‘cyborg’-state – as such a diverse accumulation, partly cybernetic (a robot) and partly organic, intimating a fusion of elements or modes of being that one would ordinarily regard as being mutually exclusive.

It is precisely this character of a synthesis or aggregation of the most heterogeneous elements in surprisingly inventive, unparalleled ways that can be used as a means to understanding *current* cultural practices such as graphic design. In addition this image of a heterogeneous synthesis of apparently incongruous elements anticipates or prepares one for further creative potential as well as for the possibilities of novel directions that contemporary graphic design practices could take. Differently put, this understanding enables one to perceive already existing practices with more receptivity regarding the possibility for change and novelty – looking at them with new eyes, as it were.

At the same time, though, a word of caution would be in order, as, with this newfound freedom, air of acceptance, and an attitude alluded to earlier as ‘anything goes’, it could be quite easy to lapse into a state of complacency (something that happens all too easily in the age of the postmodern). I would like to stress here the importance of retaining some of the ‘good’ and productive aspects of modernism (for instance the sense of social and ethical responsibility as well as its social activism that modernism

engendered in many graphic designers, and its striving for clarity of communication, to name just two).

In closing, I would like to express the hope that this study will ‘cultivate’ or encourage a (postmodern) receptivity to new forms of innovation and the possibilities inherent in change, as well as an (modern) ability to clarify, reflect, question and contribute to society productively, in all those practitioners of graphic design (as well as of related creative-cultural practices) who may read it, as it has done for myself in the researching thereof.

1. References

- Lyotard, J-F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Tr. Massumi, B. & Bennington, G. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Olivier, B. 1998. Contemporary Art and Hegel’s thesis of the Death of Art. In: *Critique, Architecture, Culture, Art*. Port Elizabeth: University of Port Elizabeth, pp. 7–22.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A Rashid and Gelman

Design work by Karim Rashid



Figure 1. Cover design for the book, *Evolution*, Rizzoli 2004.



Figure 2. Cover design for the book, *I want to change the world*, 2001.



Figure 3. Interior design for Totem Gallery, *Futurism*, undated.



Figure 4. Interior design for Totem Gallery, *Futurism*, undated.



Figure 5. Interior design for Totem Gallery, *Futurism*, undated.



Figure 6. Product design, *Kake* (one-off project), undated.



Figure 7. Product design, *Cybear*, undated.

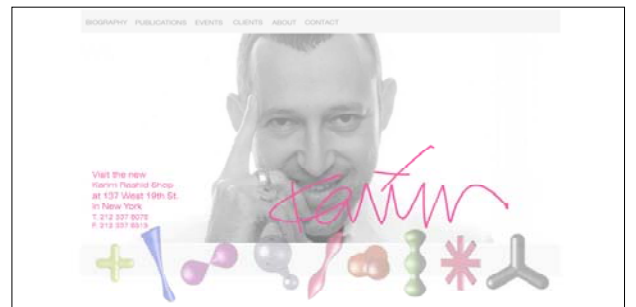


Figure 8. Opening page for website: www.karimrashid.com, 2005.

Appendix A continued
 Design work by Alexander Gelman



Figure 9. Absolut Vodka poster, *1/2*, undated.



Figure 10. Absolut Vodka poster, *Gelman*, undated.



Figure 11. Absolut Vodka poster, *Film*, undated.



Figure 12. Absolut Vodka poster, *Off*, undated.



Figure 13. Dell Computer advertising campaign, undated.



Figure 14. Dell Computer advertising campaign, undated.



Figure 15. Dell Computer advertising campaign, undated.



Figure 16. Dell Computer advertising campaign, undated.



Figure 17. Illustration for *The New York Times* newspaper, 1999.



Figure 18. Advertising campaign for JanouPakterInc, *Recruiting the Future*, undated.



Figure 19. Portrait of Alexander Gelman, undated.

Appendix B Timeline: Premodern, modern and postmodern

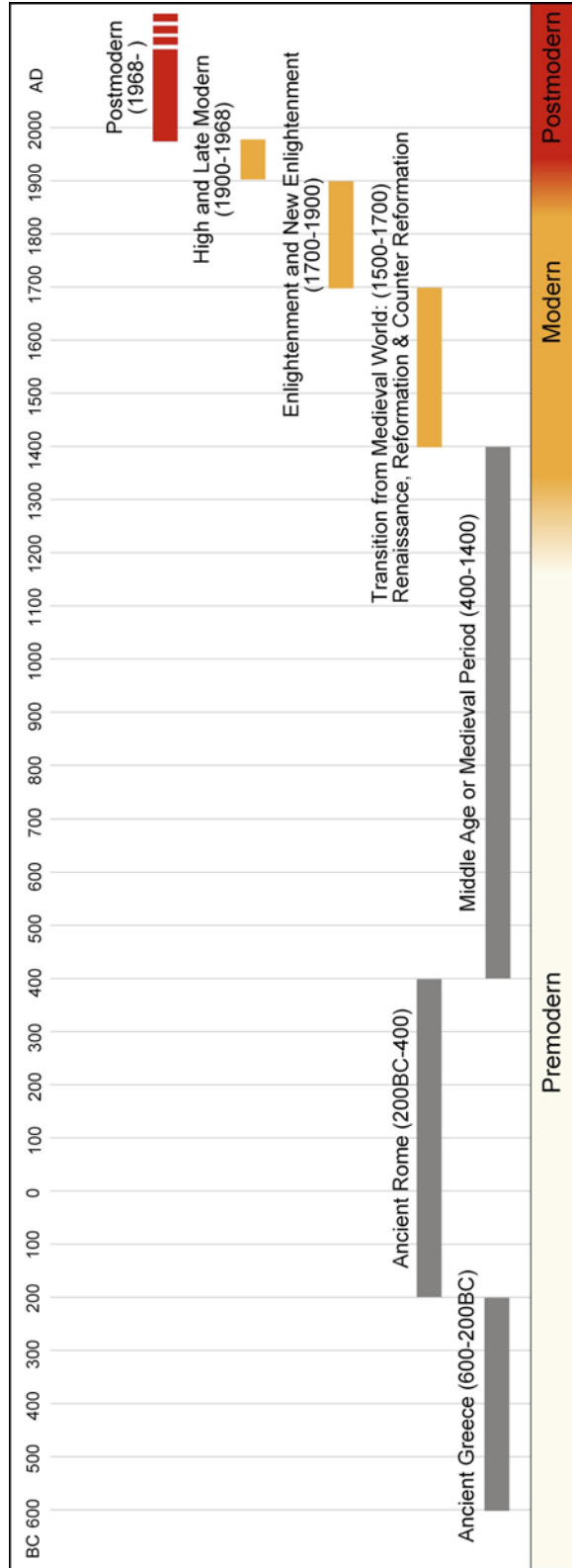


Figure 1. A bird's eye view on the some of the distinguishing eras in the development of civilisation from Premodern to Postmodern time is evident in this simplified timeline.

Appendix C Timeline: Twentieth century art and design movements

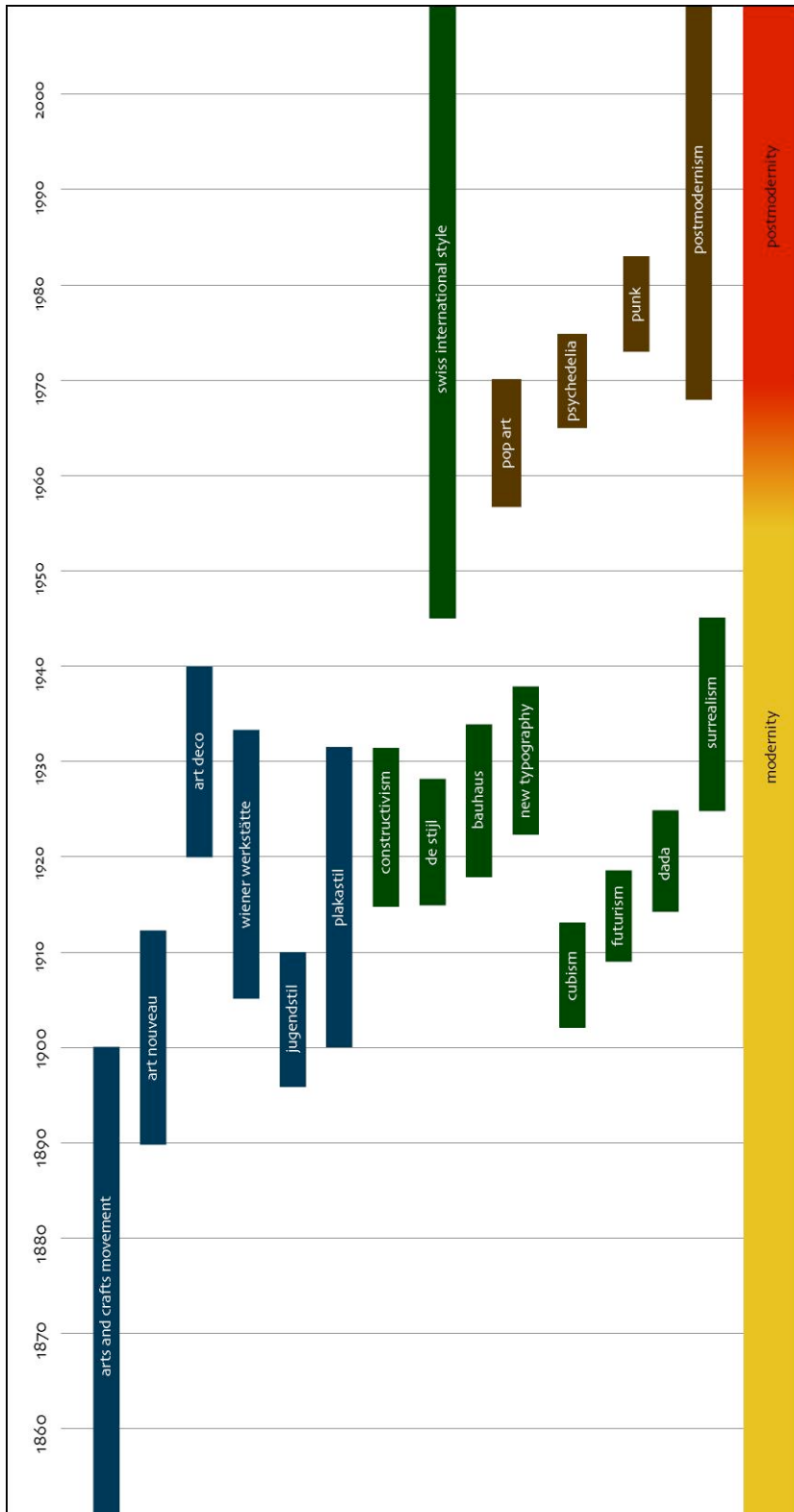


Figure 1. An overview of a selection of art movements from the twentieth century, including modernisms and postmodernisms.

Appendix D Expressionism



Figure 1. Käthe Kolwitz, *The Survivors – make War on War!* Poster, 1923.



Figure 2. Ernst Kirchner, *Headpiece*, 1923.



Figure 3. Franz Marc, *The Storm*, Magazine cover, 1912.



Figure 4. Hans Hoerl, *The Action*, Magazine cover, 1924.



Figure 5. Conrad Felixmüller, *The Way*, Magazine cover, 1919.

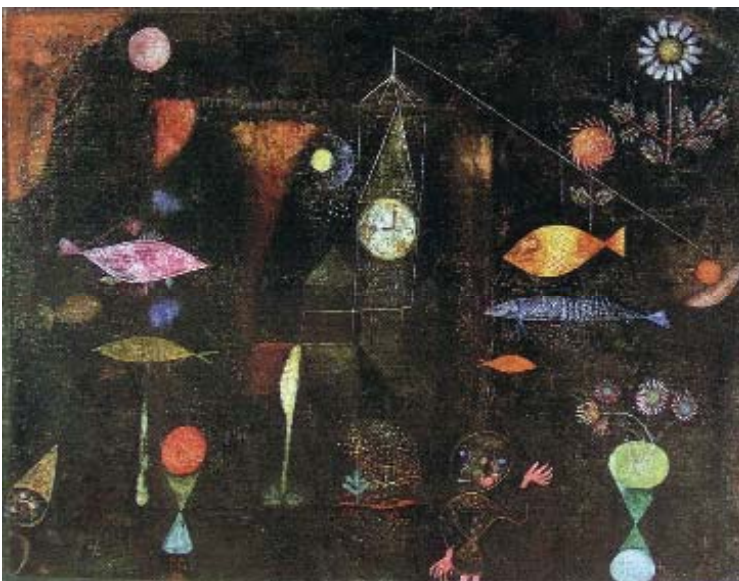


Figure 6. Paul Klee, *Fish Magic*, Painting, 1925.



Figure 7. Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation No. 29*, Painting, 1912.

Appendix E Cubism



Figure 1. Lege African Mask from the Republic of Congo, undated.



Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Man with Violin*, 1911-1912.



Figure 3. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1907.



Figure 4. Fernand Léger, *The City*, 1919.



Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair-Caning*, 1911-1912.

Appendix G Suprematism



Figure 1. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915.



Figure 2. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915.

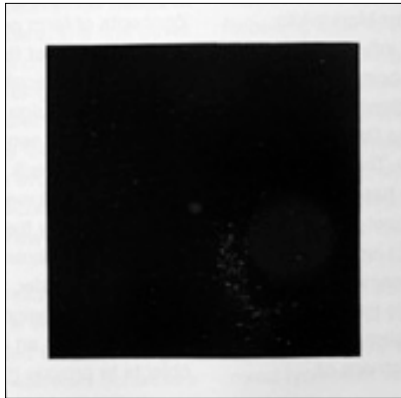


Figure 3. Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square*, c.1913.

Appendix H Dada

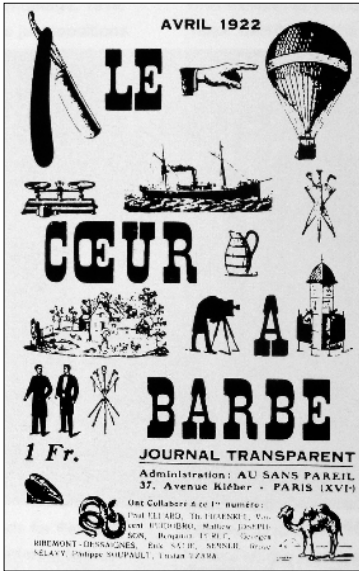


Figure 1. Dada magazine cover for *The Bearded Heart*, 1922.

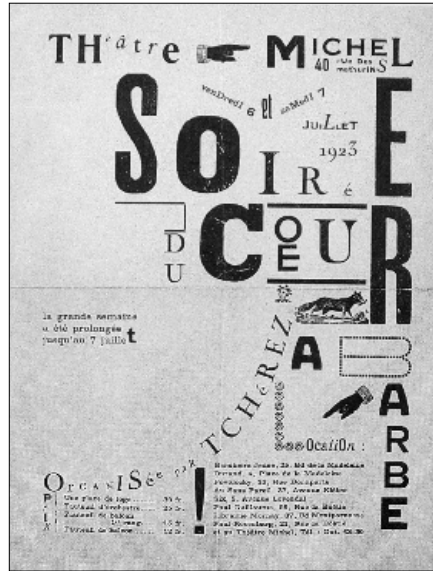


Figure 2. Event Poster for *The Evening of the Bearded Heart*, 1923.

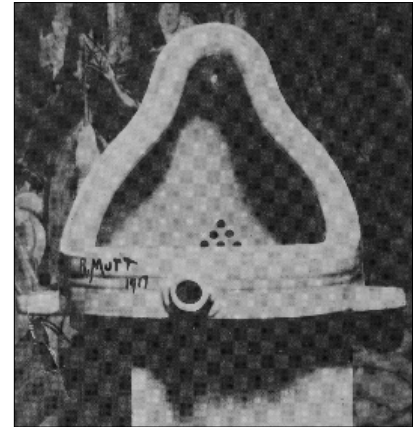


Figure 3. (Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz) Marcel Duchamp, *Urinal*, 1917.

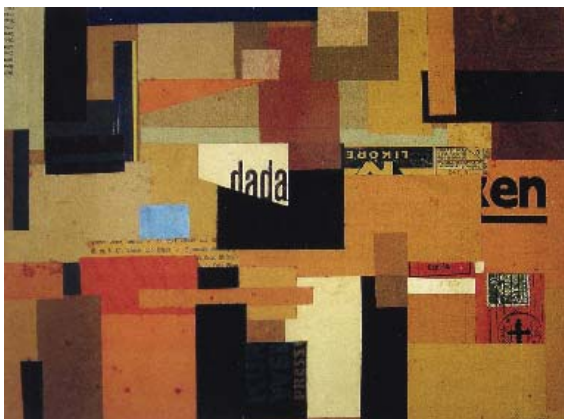


Figure 4. Hannah Höch, *Collage*, 1922.

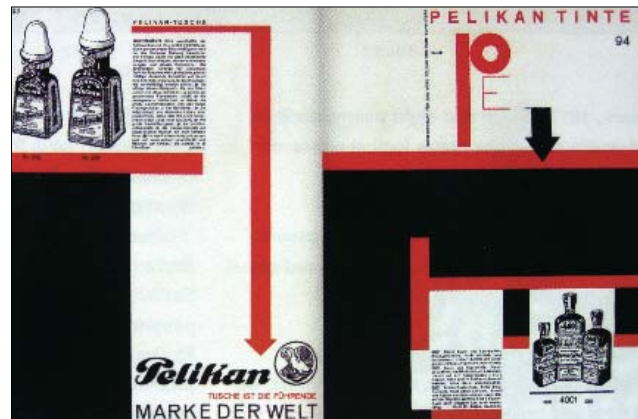


Figure 5. Kurt Schwitters, Pages from *Merz 11*, Advertising for Pelikan, 1924.



Figure 6. Kurt Schwitters and Theo van Doesberg, *Little Dada Evening Poster*, 1923.



Figure 7. John Heartfield, Cover for *AIZ*, 1933.



Figure 8. John Heartfield, Cover for *AIZ*, 1933.

Appendix I Modern graphic design



Figure 1. Stenberg Brothers, *Symphony of a Great City*, Poster, 1928.

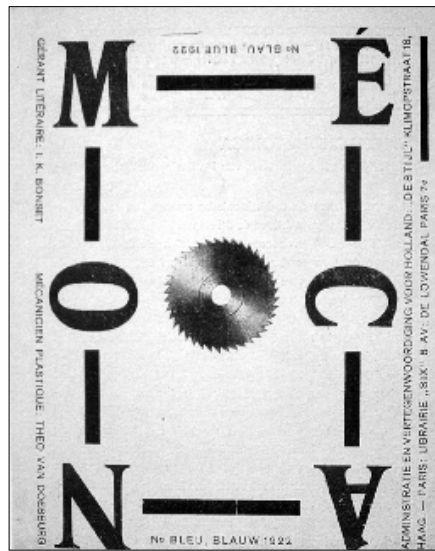


Figure 2. Theo van Doesberg, *Mécano No. Bleu, Blauw, Blau, Blue*, Journal, 1922.



Figure 3. Aleksander Rodchenko, *Kino Glaz*, Poster, 1924.

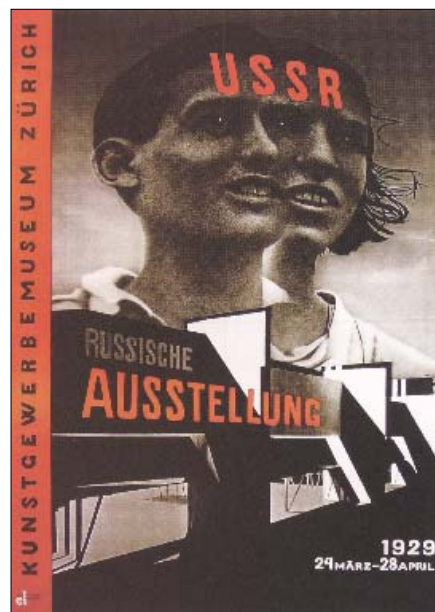


Figure 4. El Lissitzky, *Russian Exhibition*, Poster, 1929.



Figure 5. Natal'ia Pinus-Bukharova, *Women Workers - Into the Ranks...!*, Poster, undated.

Appendix J Constructivism

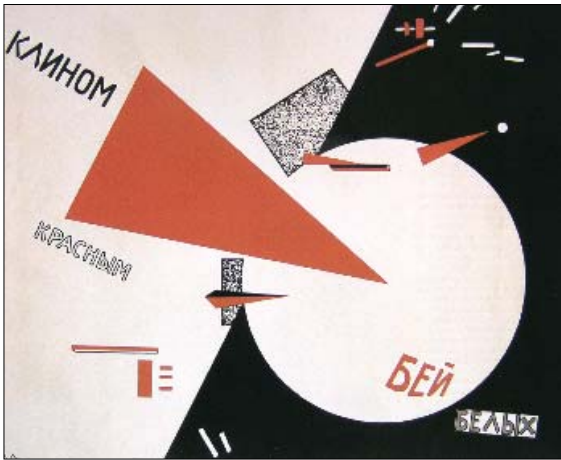


Figure 1. El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919.



Figure 2. El Lissitzky, *Poster for Pelikan ink*, 1924.



Figure 3. El Lissitzky, *Title page for Veshch*, 1922.



Figure 4. El Lissitzky, *Book cover for The Isms of Art*, 1924.



Figure 5. El Lissitzky, *Title page for The Isms of Art*, 1924.

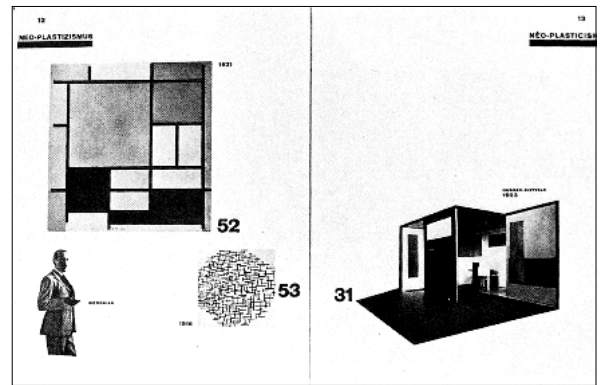


Figure 6. El Lissitzky, *Pictorial spread for The Isms of Art*, 1924.



Figure 7. El Lissitzky, *Cover of For the Voice*, by Mayakovsky, 1923.



Figure 8. El Lissitzky, *Cover of For the Voice*, by Mayakovsky, 1923.

Appendix K De Stijl



Figure 1. Vilmos Huszar, Cover design for *de Stijl*, 1917.



Figure 2. Théo van Doesberg and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Book Cover, 1925.



Figure 3. Vilmos Huszar, Title pages for *de Stijl*, 1918.

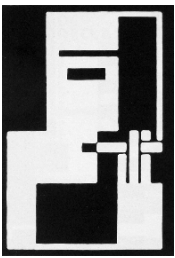


Figure 4. Vilmos Huszar, *Miss Blanche Egyptian Cigarettes*, Poster 1926.

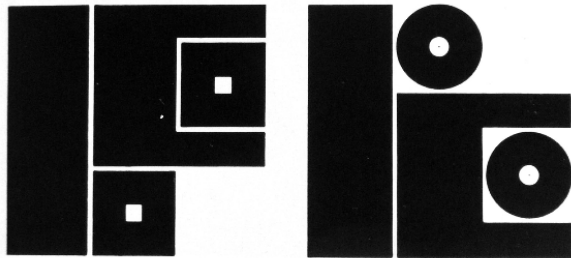


Figure 5. Piet Zwart, Logos for IOCO, 1922-23.



Figure 6. Gerrit Rietveld, *Red/Blue Chair*, 1918.



Figure 7. Théo van Doesberg, *Alphabet*, 1919.



Figure 8. Gerrit Rietveld, *Schröder House*, 1924-25.



Figure 9. Théo van Doesberg, Exhibition poster, 1920.

Appendix L Bauhaus



Figure 1. Herbert Bayer, Cover design *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar 1919-1923*, Poster, 1923.



Figure 3. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Brochure cover for the series of four Bauhaus books, 1929.



Figure 4. Herbert Bayer, Sample of *Univers*, 1926.



Figure 2. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Dust jackets for four Bauhaus books, 1924-1930.



Figure 5. Attributed to Johannes Auerbach, First Bauhaus Seal, 1919.



Figure 6. Oscar Schlemmer, Later Bauhaus Seal, 1922.

Appendix M The New Typography



Figure 1. Jan Tschichold, Cover for *elementare typographie*, Insert, 1925.

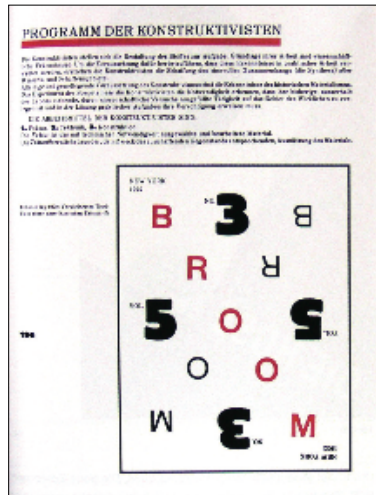


Figure 2. Jan Tschichold, Pages from *elementare typographie*, Insert, 1925.

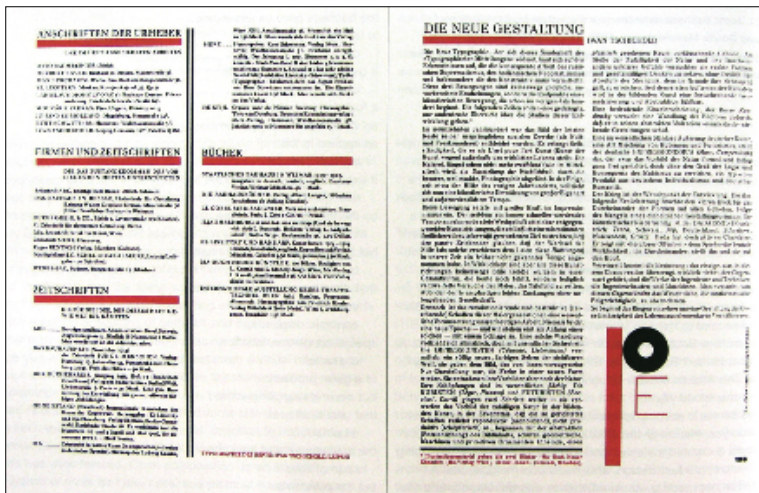


Figure 3. Jan Tschichold, Pages from *elementare typographie*, Insert, 1925.

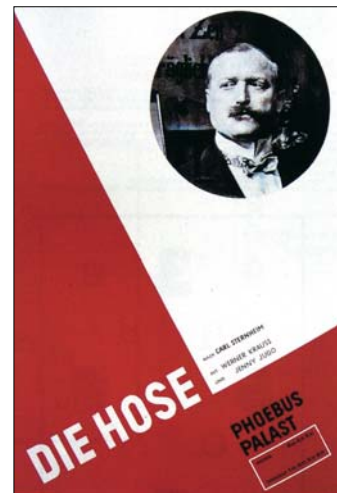


Figure 4. Jan Tschichold, *The Trousers*, Cinema poster 1927.



Figure 5. Jan Tschichold, *The Professional Photographer*, Exhibition poster 1938.

Appendix N The Isotype Movement

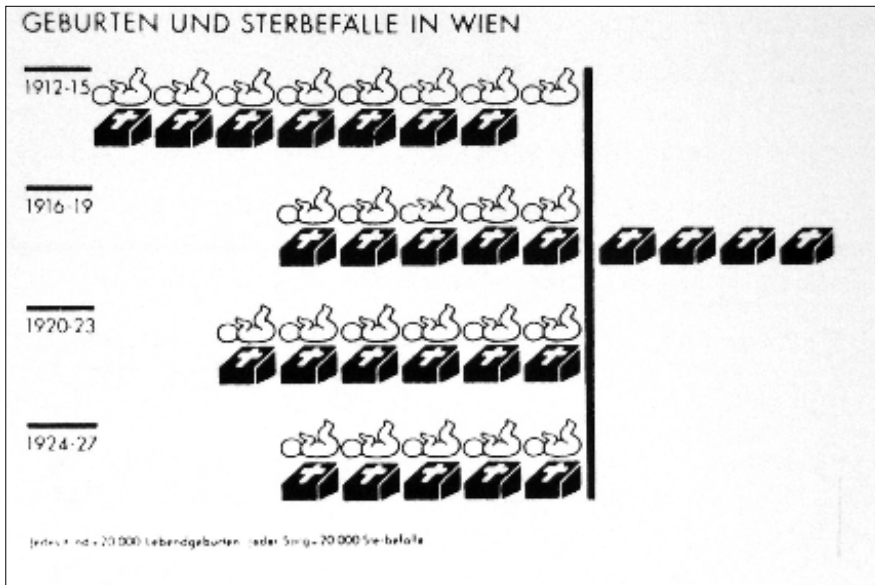


Figure 1. Otto Neurath, *Births and Deaths in Vienna*, Chart, 1928.

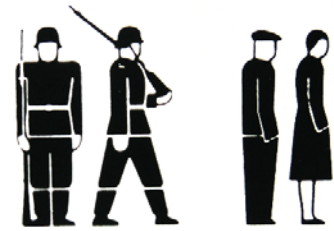


Figure 2. Gerd Arntz, *Pictographs for Isotypes*, early 1930's.

Appendix O The International Typographic Style



Figure 1. Théo Balmer, Poster for a travelling exhibition of industrial standards, 1928.

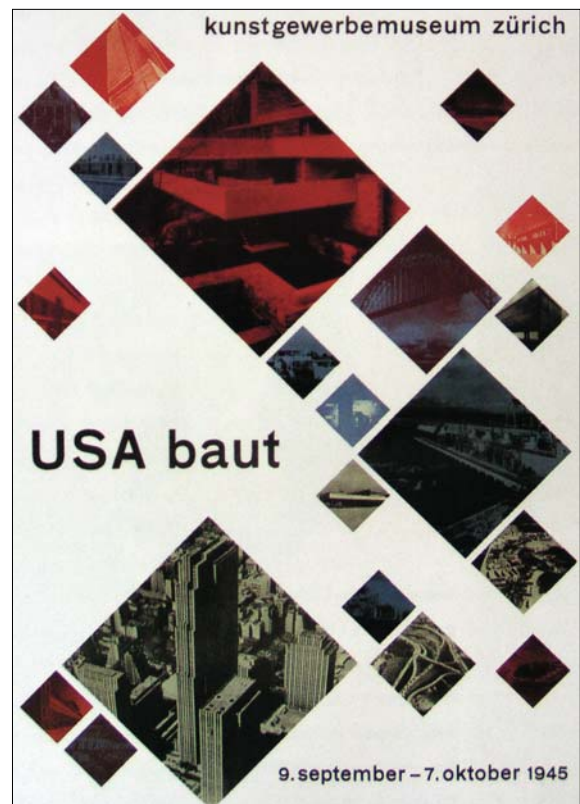


Figure 2. Max Bill, Exhibition poster, 1945.

Appendix O continued The International Style

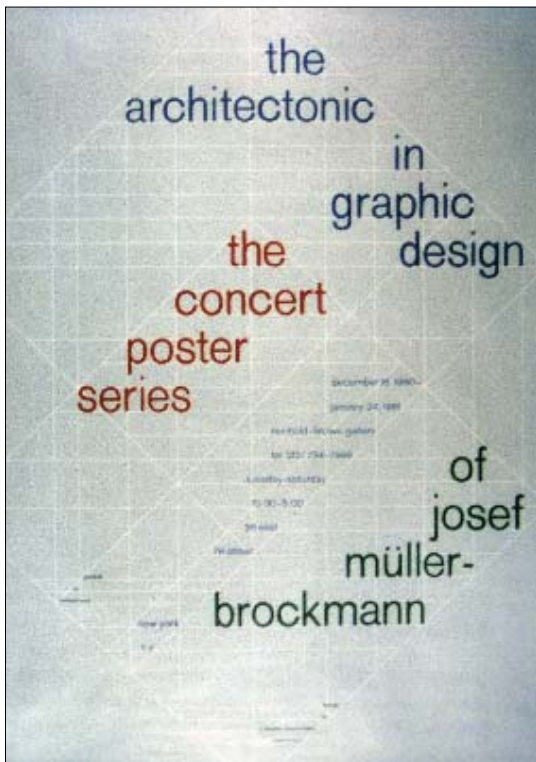


Figure 3. Josef Müller-Brockmann, Exhibition poster, 1980.

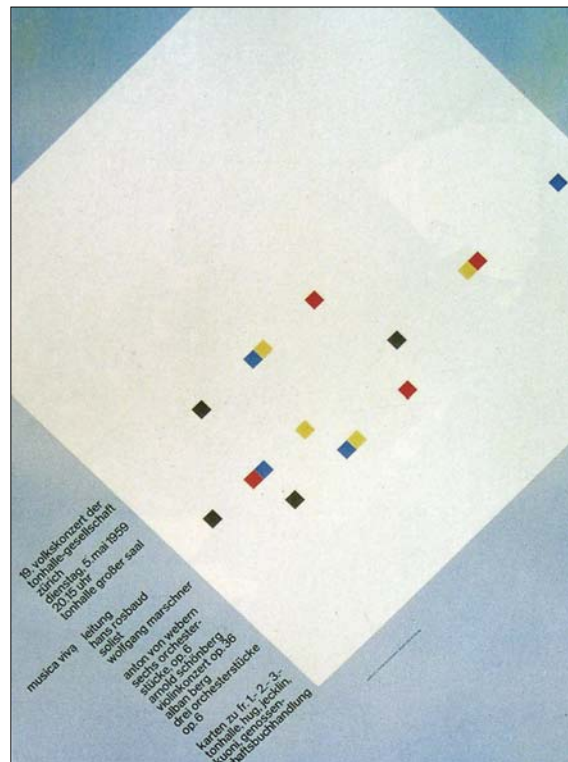


Figure 4. Josef Müller-Brockmann, *Musica viva* concert poster, 1972.

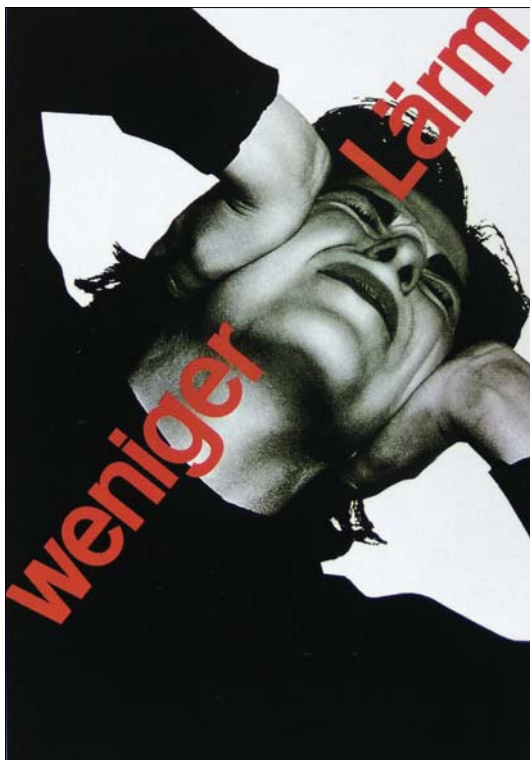


Figure 5. Josef Müller-Brockmann, *Less Noise* Public awareness poster, 1960.



Figure 6. Josef Müller-Brockmann, *Musica viva* concert poster, 1958.

Appendix P Modern vs. Postmodern

modernism	postmodernism
romanticism / Symbolism	paraphysics / Dadaism
form (conjunctive, closed)	antiform (disjunctive, open)
purpose	play
design	chance
hierarchy	anarchy
mastery / logos	exhaustion / silence
art object / finished work	process / performance / happening
distance	participation
creation / totalization / synthesis	decreation / deconstruction / antithesis
presence	absence
centring	dispersal
genre / boundary	text / intertext
semantics	rhetoric
paradigm	syntagm
hypotaxis	parataxis
metaphor	metonymy
selection	combination
root/depth	rhizome / surface
Interpretation / reading	against interpretation / reading
signified	signifier
lisible (readerly)	scriptible (writerly)
narrative / <i>grande histoire</i>	anti-narrative / <i>petit histoire</i>
master code	idiolect
symptom	desire
type	mutant
genital / phallic	polymorphous / androgynous
paranoia	schizophrenia
origin / cause	difference-difference / trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
metaphysics	irony
determinacy	indeterminacy
transcendence	immanence

Figure 1. Schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism.

Appendix Q Postmodernity



Figure 1. Gordon Bunschaft, Modern Architecture (Corporatism). *Lever House*, New York, 1951-52.



Figure 2. Minoru Yamaskai, *Pruitt-Igoe Housing*, St Louis, 1952-55 (demolished in 1972).



Figure 3. Michael Graves, *Public Services Building*, Portland, Oregon, 1980-1982.

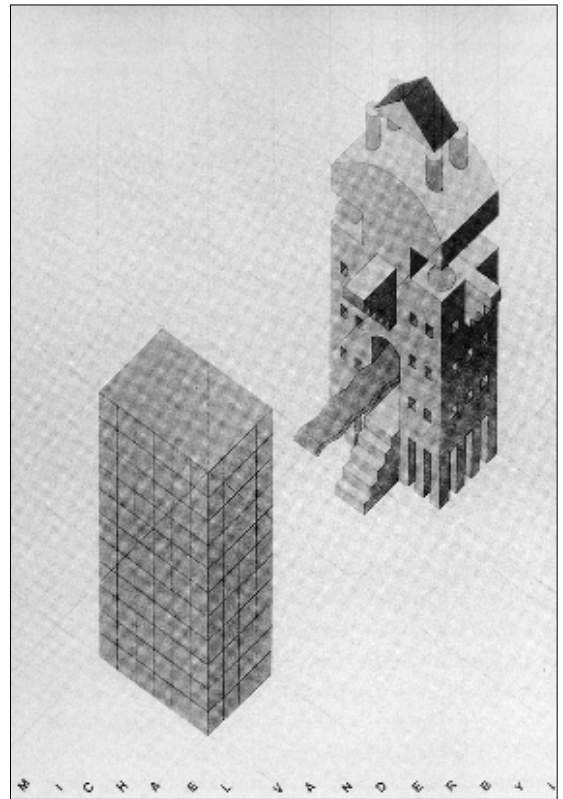


Figure 4. Michael Vanderbyl, Postmodern architecture poster, 1984.

Appendix Q continued Postmodernity

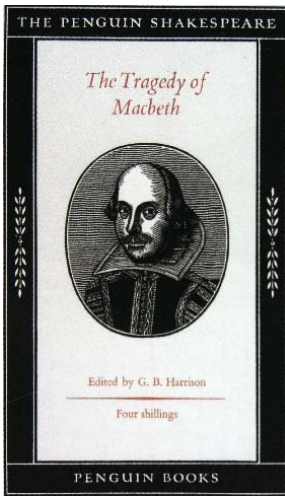


Figure 5. Jan Tschichold, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Cover design, 1950.

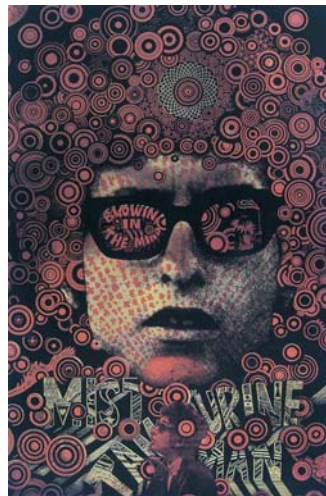


Figure 6. Martin Sharp, *Mister Tambourine Man*, Poster, 1967.

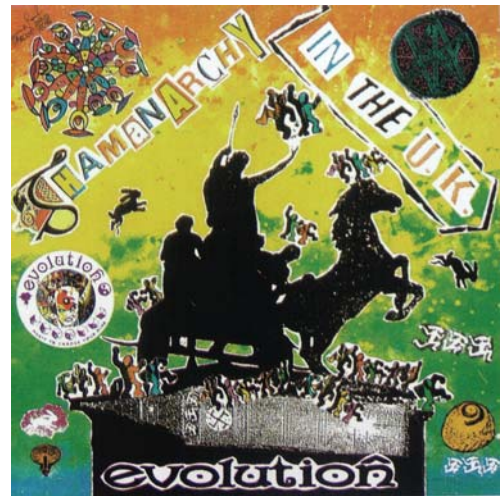


Figure 7. Jamie Reid, *Shamanarchy in the UK*, CD and record cover, 1992.



Figure 8. April Greiman and Jayme Odgers, *Wet*, Magazine cover, 1979.



Figure 9. Paula Scher, Poster for CBS records, 1979.

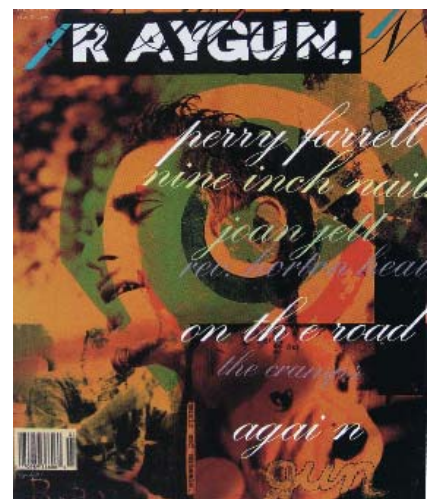


Figure 10. David Carson, *Raygun, No. 17*, Cover design, 1994.

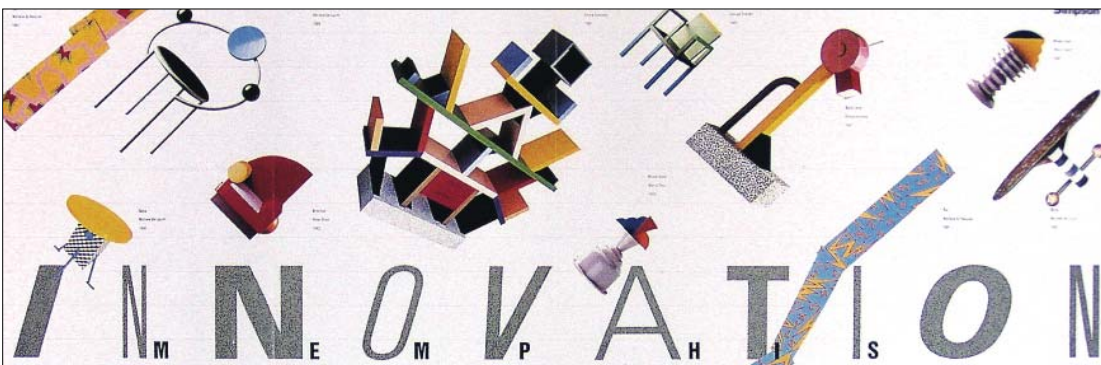


Figure 11. Michael Vanderbyl, Promotional mailer for Simpson Paper Company, 1985.

Appendix Q continued Postmodernity



Figure 12. April Greiman and Jayme Odgers, Poster for California Institute of the Arts, 1979.



Figure 13. Rudy Vanderlans, Cover for *Emigre* 11 magazine, 1989.



Figure 14. Jeffery Keedy, *Emigre* Type Specimen Series Booklet No. 4, 2002.



Figure 15. Neville Brody, Cover design for *The Face*, No. 42, 1983.

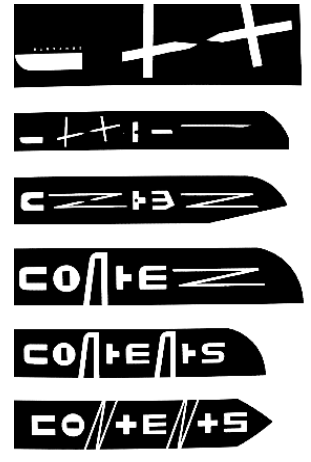


Figure 16. Neville Brody, Contents page logo *The Face*, Nos. 50-55, 1984.

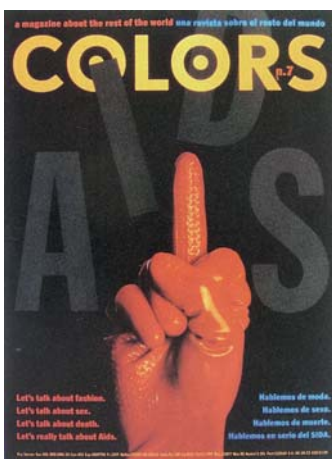


Figure 17. Tibor Kalman, Cover for magazine *Colors*, No. 7, 1994.



Figure 18. Adbusters, *Wash your Blues Away*, Subvertisement, 1997.



Figure 19. Cyan, Spread from Scardaneli's book *Death Tempts Me* (utilising fluorescent printing ink), 1999.

Appendix R The Cultural Context of Contemporary Graphic Design⁴⁴

1. Introduction

Graphic design in the contemporary era (postmodernity) seems to be in a state of diversity and pluralism as designers produce work without any unifying stylistic or theoretical principles. Although designers frequently draw inspiration from stylistic and attitudinal trends at a street culture level in order to produce designs that have market appeal (to economic ends) seldom do they take the time to analyse contemporary culture at a theoretical level. As a result contemporary graphic designs often emerge as empty consumerist styling that celebrates the ‘postmodern moment’ in contemporary culture, or alternatively as a rational, simplified, objectively planned approach that resists the status quo in favour of earlier modernist approaches. This essay, as a theoretical investigation of contemporary culture, attempts to contextualise graphic design within this culture, by analysing its main features and characteristics as highlighted by leading cultural theorists. This is done in order to encourage graphic designers to become more self-aware and to reflect critically on the work that they produce.

“Everybody’s doing it, but nobody is home.”
Lorraine Wild interviewed by Louise Sandhaus (2000) for *Eye* magazine.

At the outset it is important to note that at the core of the graphic design profession lies the concept of visual communication. A graphic designer organises signs, symbols, images and/or words on a surface in order to communicate a visual message

⁴⁴ This article appeared in the *South African Journal of Art History*, and (together with two other articles: *A Cultural Context for Contemporary Graphic Design* and *Design, Image and Text Equivalence: An Interactive Approach* that appeared in *ILISO: The Institute for Social and Systemic Change*) precipitated the study, which has here resulted in a dissertation on the historical-theoretical background to contemporary graphic design practices.

to an audience. Steven Heller (2000:9) further qualifies the activity of the graphic designer as the organisation and communication of messages in order to “establish the nature of a product or an idea, to set the appropriate stage on which to present its virtues, and to announce and publicize such information in the most effective way”. Richard Hollis (1996:10) draws attention to the fact that “graphic design constitutes a kind of language with an uncertain grammar and a continuously expanding vocabulary; the imprecise nature of its rules means that it can only be studied not learnt”. Yet when one takes a step back to view the context in which graphic design operates, it becomes apparent that these superficial generic stylistic characterisations do not reflect an understanding of the link that always binds disciplines and practices to their cultural context. By default, they therefore often point to deeper issues at play when one traces the intricate strands of reciprocal influence between society and a cultural practice like graphic design.

2. Graphic design in the age of postmodernity: Modernism, postmodernism and ‘everything in between’

The closing decades of the twentieth century experienced an intense pluralisation and fragmentation in graphic design. It seems as if the revolutionary rebirth of the profession through the advent of digital technology, together with Millennium fever, caused its life to flash before its eyes as designers feverishly ‘flew’ through almost an entire history of styles and ideas and even added in a couple of new ones.

While Paula Scher, for example, revisits the typography of Russian Constructivism, Futurism and Dada in the Great Beginnings self-promotional booklet in 1984, April Greiman experiments with a new digital technology in “Does it all make sense?” a fold-out, life-sized self-portrait for Design Quarterly magazine, which expressively overlays digitised (often low-resolution), type, image, illustration and icon.

Meanwhile Vaughan Oliver designs record covers for the music industry in a surreal moody trademark style that Jeremy Aynsley (2001:212) describes as “poetic interpretations that aspire to be equivalents of music”. The Cranbrook Academy of

Art, under direction of Katherine and Michael McCoy, draws influence from the early writings on postmodernism in the fields of design and architecture (amongst others) as well as the writings of linguistic theorists such as Roland Barthes, and produces ‘deconstructed’ work with multi-layered visual and verbal messages that destabilize reductive, clear communication. David Carson further subverts the ‘clarity’ and ‘stability’ of modern communication in his role as designer and art director for Ray Gun, a magazine devoted to nineties alternative music, blurring the distinction between artist and designer as he ‘paints’ rather than designs expressive cinematic pages for the magazine. In contrast the London-based design practice 8vo, formed in 1982 by designers Simon Johnston, Mark Holt and Hamish Muir, launches the magazine Octavo as a personal initiative (Thrift, 2000:66). Octavo primarily showcases a modernist typographic approach, which advocates a ‘rational objectivity’ and clarity of communication, through the use of sans-serif fonts and geometric ordering of information using a strict grid system. (See examples of work by these designers on page 216.)

This complexity evident in design practice, although seemingly contradictory at first, points to a transitional period in graphic design, as by the end of the 1970s, it was felt that the modern era was drawing to a close. At this time a younger generation of designers started to expand the possibilities of the International Typographic Style, a movement that epitomised modernist thinking in Switzerland and had dominated much of design worldwide during the 1960s and 70s. A period of rethinking and questioning marked the emergence of this early postmodernist strand, evidenced in the work of Rosemarie Tissi and Siegfried Odermatt, amongst others, as the visual predictability of the modern aesthetic was challenged (Meggs, 1998:435). By the 1980s postmodernist graphic design had established itself firmly, emerging first in Switzerland, then in the US and finally spreading to other centres worldwide. Graphic designers working in this new postmodernist idiom “sent shock waves through the design establishment” as they rebelled against the functional, rational and objective modernist approach (Meggs, 1998:432). A personal, subjective and intuitive attitude was embraced and design during the eighties was characterised by an intense interest in play, visual wit, surface texture and colour. Postmodernist styling, as seen in the

work of designers such as April Greiman, Dan Friedman and Michael Vanderbyl, to name only a few, is characterised by “a playful kinetic geometry featuring floating forms, sawtooth rules, and randomly placed blips and lines; multiple layered and fragmented images; pleasant pastel harmonies; discordant letter-spaced typography; and frequent references to art and design history” (Heller & Chwast, 2000:221).

This postmodernist graphic design of the eighties evolved into a consumer style in the nineties due to its inherent anti-establishment qualities that appealed to a youth market. And so the nineties became marked as a time of searching for a ‘new’, ‘individual’ style. This unique style was expressed in the ‘edgy’ deconstructed design of the students at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, the work of Neville Brody and the magazine layouts of David Carson amongst others. Ironically these individualistic visions and initiatives that were truly revolutionary were “quickly implanted into the body of commerce” and became part of a to and fro interchange between innovation and assimilated style which is described in the following passage (Heller & Chwast, 2000:236, 8):

It was a period when styles were frequently appropriated to meet market demands. It was a time when disorder was considered ‘edgy’, and then order even edgier. Edginess became the rallying cry for a revolution that really signified adherence to a new conformity.

A further irony was that this new ‘conformity’ brought with it the hybrid of a radically new visual approach, which pushed boundaries and exemplified diversity, pluralism and ‘chaos’ on many levels. At the same time the digital revolution certainly played its part in advancing a new visual aesthetic, by not only revolutionising the ways in which designers worked, but also by making possible “an unprecedented manipulation of colour, form, space and imagery” (Meggs, 1998:455). Whereas the industrial revolution had fragmented the design process into a series of mechanical steps, which the designer had limited control over and as a result diluted his or her personal vision, the digital revolution put the production process squarely in the hands of the designer. Postmodernist design thrived on computer graphics experimentation and encouraged the pluralism and diversity already evident at the

time. In complete contrast to what was happening around them, several designers resisted this postmodern insurgence and continued in the modern tradition, albeit in new guises, even though the modern era had experienced its prime decades earlier. Other designers fostered a counterstyle which, working against the chaotic complexity that accentuated design in the mid-nineties, and returning to a modern origin, featured a minimalist approach while incorporating aspects of postmodernist thinking.

Design historians have resorted to using thematic captions for the numerous groupings of styles and/or theories, in order to make sense of this undeniable, often contradictory state of multiplicity in contemporary graphic design. For example, on the contents page of *Graphic Style: from Victorian to Digital* (Heller & Chwast, 2000:7), the following are some of the subtitles that appear: “American New Wave”, “American Punk”, “Deconstruction”, “Fontism”, “Controlled Chaos”, “Rave”, “Kinetics” and “New Simplicity”. Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast (2000:8) further expose this multifaceted, contrasting nature of graphic design when they describe the time from 1985 to 2000 as “a period when designers looked backward and forward, invented and mimicked, cluttered and economised”. The juvenile rebellion that exemplified much of the graphic, fashion and product design of the eighties and the grunge aesthetic of the nineties, has mostly been replaced by a more sophisticated, cool and stylish visual in the twenty-first century. Yet, although the graphic design scene has certainly ‘quietened down’ significantly since the eighties, there still is no sign of a unifying stylistic or theoretical tendency emerging, as Wild (cited in Sandhaus 2000:13) makes apparent in the following piece:

Now the number of people who practice graphic design (whether or not they call it that) has increased hugely. The field is geographically diverse, pluralistic, democratic... not so ingrown. We are told that the business world now realises that we are essential and that there is strength in numbers. But that has come at a price: a fracturing of the design community into sub-groups, like narrowly focussed chat rooms, with little general dialogue or agreement on common goals or anything so antiquated as “good design”.

Today graphic designs often emerge as empty (and even cynical) responses to the consumerism and information overload prevalent in society with very little indication

of ethical reflection, and seemingly with no real understanding of what it is responding to. Jessica Helfand (2000:6) describes how designers seem to be “caught between the spirit of acceleration that typifies contemporary culture (make it fast) and the economy of means that has come to characterise all things modern (keep it simple)”. Similarly Monika Parrinder (2000:9) explains that designers usually respond to the information overload prevalent in culture today by either attempting “to make sense” of it (hence the emergence of graphic designers labelling themselves information architects), or by creating designs that “attempt to block it out, by delivering ‘experiences’ not information”. Andrew Blauvelt (2000:38), on the other hand, advocates a “complex simplicity” as a mediation point between the two opposing stylistic and theoretical streams evident in contemporary graphic design, namely expressionistic pluralism and retrograde simplicity. Later on in the document it will become clear that these opposing stylistic streams correspond with the modern moment, on the one hand, and the postmodern moment on the other, and that Blauvelt’s “complex simplicity” as mediation point between these opposing streams can be interpreted as a ‘poststructuralist’ moment that refuses assimilation to either side.

The value of insights and contributions to debates that graphic designers contribute in journals such as *Eye*, *Design Week*, *Graphis* and *Emigre* is invaluable (Parrinder, 2000:8). These contributions initiate the development of a clearer understanding of how graphic design functions within the larger structure of contemporary culture. In addition they serve to monitor the design profession with the aim of providing a forum to address problems that may arise in a fairly open environment where a varied mix of skills and knowledge can connect. Practising graphic designers are not necessarily ‘uncritical’, but even those who think ‘critically’ about their own work are not necessarily theoretically critical and informed. A distinction also needs to be made between the designer who is culturally aware, to an economic end – who uses his or her knowledge of contemporary culture in order to speak to the consumer in a language that will encourage consumer behaviour – and the designer who is critically aware, to theoretical and ethical ends. There certainly are graphic designers who are theoretically skilled and whose work indicates a sophisticated ethical understanding of

the culture in which they practice. Yet, with reference to the graphic design profession at large, there still seems to be a need for further analysis of contemporary culture, for taking a step back in order to view the larger context in which graphic design operates, and to clarify how this relationship between encompassing culture and cultural practice functions reciprocally. As Andrew Howard (2000:10) indicates:

the graphic design profession is not equipped with the right theoretical tools – common analysis of politics, economics and culture – that would make it easier to understand how visual communication influences the way we think socially and what we think about”.

The following extract by Philip Meggs (1998:xiii), although written to accentuate the importance for graphic designers to know and understand their past, is equally relevant to the argument that intelligent, effective and appropriate graphic design necessitates a knowledge and understanding of contemporary culture and of the relation between culture and cultural practice.

If we ignore this legacy, we can run the risk of becoming buried in the mindless mass of commercialism whose molelike vision ignores human values and needs as it burrows forward into darkness.

There are many complex, interwoven strands of influence from contemporary culture that work, some directly and some reciprocally, in shaping graphic design. These can loosely be classified as historical, political, technological, economic (capitalist), and cultural. The latter includes cultural sensibility, cultural theory and cultural practice (used here in the narrower sense of the word to include creative cultural activities such as art, architecture, fashion, cinema and graphic design). Aynsley (2001:202) points out that not only digital technology played a part in constituting graphic design at the end of the twentieth century, but “broader ideas from culture, philosophy, fashion and ‘style’ were just as important for graphic design”.

3. Theoretical concepts: Modernism, postmodernism and poststructuralism

Cultural theorists and commentators, such as David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard amongst others, provide in-depth critical reconstructions (and sometimes deconstructions) of the contemporary cultural landscape, in order to facilitate understanding of its various components and characteristics. It is important to note, though not surprising, that a consonant relation seems to exist between contemporary graphic design and contemporary culture, as this article attempts to show. Terms from cultural theory that are central to understanding postmodernity (contemporary culture) and which will be discussed in the following sections are premodernity, modernity and its counterpart modernism, postmodernity and its counterpart postmodernism and also poststructuralism, which will only be mentioned briefly.

Postmodern. By simple analysis of the word one is able to gain some insight into what it represents. It can be assumed that in terms of history the word refers to an occurrence after the modern era. On a timeline the zenith of the modern era, which first emerged in recognisable form in the eighteenth century, could be placed around the first half of the twentieth century, while postmodernity emerged from the late sixties but especially during the last three decades of the century (Harvey 1990:38). Furthermore the word postmodern does not draw attention to what it is, but rather to what it is not, an indication that it does not really know itself. And perhaps most importantly the term postmodern does not seem to reference the modern in an affirming manner, such as a term like late-modernism does, but rather in a more opposing manner which indicates a breaking away.

These precursory observations are confirmed as one explores what has been written on this complex subject. Walter Anderson (1996:3, 6) refers to Stephen Toulmin's observation that we are living in a new world, "a world that does not know how to define itself by what it is, but only by what it has just-now ceased to be". Anderson goes on to explain that the term 'postmodern' is a makeshift word – one that we are

using until we can decide ‘what to name the baby’. Our attention is therefore drawn to the fact that the culture we are living in is in a transitional stage, which is characterised by varying degrees of uncertainty. Fredric Jameson (1985:112) points out that postmodernism emerges as specific reactions against the established, dominant forms of modernism. As a result there will be as many postmodernisms as there have been modernisms to react against. Jameson reinforces Anderson’s view when he highlights that it is quite a complex task to describe postmodernism as a coherent movement, as its character is not constructed from within but from the modernisms that it is seeking to displace. With reference to graphic design history, Heller & Chwast (2000:221) confirm Jameson’s position in the following extract:

Despite the Post-Modern label, design style in the eighties must be defined as a sum of its various parts. Evidence definitely exists of a common period vocabulary, or at least a kindred aesthetic sensibility and artistic cross-pollination, visible in all media and applied to diverse products. Yet the aesthetic continues to evolve primarily from the styles of specific designers... propagated through the media as popular fashion. Only time will reveal its true nature and significance.

It is important to recall the distinction that should be made between ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity’, and likewise between ‘modernism’ and ‘modernity’. ‘Postmodernity’ and ‘modernity’ can be explained as concepts that refer to cultural conditions, whereas ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ refer to artistic or critical responses to these cultural conditions. For example art and design such as the Bauhaus, De Stijl, or the Swiss International Style (International Typographic Style) represent a modernist response to modernity. From this example it should be clear that modernism and postmodernism refer to critical, creative responses to a cultural condition and are therefore critical concepts, whereas modernity and postmodernity refer to different cultural conditions and have definite ‘periodising’ connotations. It follows logically that postmodernity historically is preceded by modernity and that premodernity precedes modernity. It is interesting, though complex, to note that contemporary culture, or postmodernity, can feature moments of premodern, modern and postmodern cultural practice, existing side by side. In the following extract Anderson (1996:6) explains in a striking manner the differences between

postmodernity, modernity and premodernity in terms of a culture's experience of universality (sameness, generality) or lack thereof in various stages of history:

People in premodern, traditional societies have an experience of universality but no concept of it. They could get through their days and lives without encountering other people with entirely different worldviews – and, consequently, they didn't have to worry a lot about how to deal with pluralism. People in modern civilisation have had a concept of universality – based on the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant would figure out how to get everybody on the same page – but no experience of it. Instead, every war, every trade mission, every migration brought more culture shocks. Now, in the postmodern era, the very concept of universality is, as the deconstructionists say, 'put into question' ... Postmodernity, then, is the age of over-exposure to otherness – because, in travelling, you put yourself into a different reality; because, as a result of immigration, a different reality comes to you; because, with no physical movement at all, only the relentless and ever-increasing flow of information, cultures interpenetrate. It becomes harder and harder to live out a life within the premodern condition of an undisturbed traditional society or even within the modern condition of a strong and well-organized belief system... We are living in a new world, a world that does not know how to define itself by what it is, but only by what it has just-now ceased to be.

Historically the premodern world can be described in terms of life in tribal cultures, or small isolated villages, and as Anderson (1996:5) elaborates, "premodern societies weren't necessarily simple or primitive, but people in them were relatively free from the 'culture shock' experience of coming into contact with other people with entirely different values and beliefs". The modern world arrived with the advent of modern science and the industrial revolution and through colonial conquests, travel, war and other means of contact, not only became exposed to the diversity of cultures, but also reacted 'against' it. The modern world is characterised by a modernist search for a 'universal' (sameness) to re-establish unity among humankind, in the face of this newfound plurality of cultures. The postmodern world on the other hand embraces the diversity and is 'aware' that a search for a 'universal' is pointless. Poststructuralists apparently realise that to choose between the 'universal' and diversity would be a loss of one or the other, and propose therefore a both/and logic or approach where the 'universal' and diversity (the particular, plurality) can coexist. The dominance of the one or the other in modern and postmodern logic is replaced in poststructuralist

reason by a tensioning in thinking the universal and the particular together. As pointed out earlier, it is fascinating, yet complex, to recognize that within the contemporary era, referred to primarily as postmodernity, there are pockets of postmodernist, poststructuralist, modernist and even premodernist thought patterns (cultures, worlds) that coexist.

In contrast to Anderson's explanation of these concepts, the poststructuralist as Jean-François Lyotard (1984:79), author of the influential book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, observes that "the postmodern is the modern in its nascent state and that state is constant", and that "every work of art is first postmodern before it is modern". This may seem paradoxical at first, but what it means is that in order to create a modernist artwork or design, one that embodies the universal (stability), there first would need to be an experience of diversity of possibilities (flux). In other words stability (the modernist 'gesture' of stabilisation) cannot be understood or experienced unless it is viewed against the background of flux or instability that precedes it. Here is a wonderful example of Lyotard's poststructuralist logic at work, which refuses to submit to either extreme, be it modern or postmodern. Lyotard's use of the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern', unlike those of Anderson, is primarily as critical concepts, and can be used to describe postmodern (and sometimes also poststructuralist) tendencies that appeared at various stages in history, before the advent of the postmodern era as we know it today. It is important to emphasise that both Lyotard and Anderson's use of the terms, together with varied descriptions from other postmodern theorists, are valid in that they complement each other in creating a greater understanding of the complexity of the postmodern condition.

In his early work Lyotard is still quite positive about the diversity, or 'difference', as he describes it, which characterises the postmodern condition. He concludes the essay included in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* with a call for people to "activate the differences" (1984a:82). Later in his career, as is evident in his writings in *The Inhuman*, Lyotard (1991:6) becomes less optimistic about postmodernity. He points out very pessimistically that "the ideology of development"

is positioning itself towards global domination. By implication this ideology subverts genuine difference.

Other mainstream characterisations of contemporary culture make use of descriptors such as ‘heterogeneous’, ‘fragmented’ and ‘multi-layered’, to emphasise the pluralism and complexity of the present-day world. Graphic design as part of the contemporary cultural landscape and in a position of reciprocity with it, finds itself not untouched by this state of flux and pluralism. David Harvey (1990:44) states that what appears to be the most patent characteristic of postmodernity (contemporary culture) is “its total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic”. A similar point is illustrated in the following piece, but with reference to contemporary graphic design (Heller, 2000:9):

Our relatively recent past is notable for a myriad of styles that occupy comparatively brief, concurrent periods and come and go with such speed that a kind of cultural detonation results when one collides with another.

Anderson (1996:2) refers to postmodernity as “a burst of cultural chaos and creativity... a rampant pluralism” and graphic design historian Phillip Meggs (1998:432) refers to “an era of pluralism” and “a growing climate of cultural diversity”. A warning is necessary here, however. It is easy to be misled by the modernist search for the universal into thinking that modernism itself exemplifies only rationality, stability, order and structure – this is not so, as Harvey (1990:22) points out, “Modernism internalised its own maelstrom of ambiguities, contradictions, and pulsating changes at the same time as it sought to affect the aesthetics of everyday life”. It is important to emphasise that diversity and flux have been experienced in both modern and postmodern culture, the difference between modernism and postmodernism being in the way that artists and cultural practitioners respond to this condition. Whereas postmodernists, or at least those described by Hal Foster (1985:xii) as ‘reactionary’ postmodernists, are quite content to experience, or even to celebrate flux and diversity, modernists were intent on ‘resisting’ the condition they found themselves in.

Modernists such as Charles Baudelaire were already aware of the ‘postmodern condition’ (at least as an awareness of flux or ‘becoming’) as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, although he did not use the term itself (Harvey, 1990:20). Baudelaire understood the role of a successful modern artist as a twofold process, firstly to record the fleeting, the ephemeral, diversity and flux of everyday modern life and secondly, to find and extract from it, that which is universal and eternal. In other words the modern artist’s task was to find an answer to the question: “how to represent the eternal and the immutable in the midst of all the chaos” (Harvey, 1990:20). Modernists used various strategies such as stabilisation, ‘domestication’, and formal reduction in order to make accessible and ‘universal’ the multiplicity of the world in which they lived. For instance the graphic design of the Swiss International Style was intent on presenting information in an objective, structured and clear manner of ‘universal’ appeal, through the use of photography, sans-serif typography, the exclusion of ornament, ranged left type settings, narrow text columns and composition based strictly on the grid system (Heller & Chwast, 2000:196). Kenneth Hiebert explains that the methodology of the Basel School, one of two major schools that promulgated the Swiss design philosophy, is derived from the idea that “abstract structure is the vehicle for communication” and that furthermore (Heller & Chwast, 2000:199):

It relies on an analysis that rigorously questions and accounts for all parts of the message. The act of searching for an appropriate structure forces the designer to make the most basic enquiry about a message, to isolate its primary essence from considerations of surface style.

The modern ethos, especially as expressed by Baudelaire, is clearly detectable in this piece as one recognizes ‘the diverse’ in “an analysis that rigorously questions and accounts for all parts of the message” and ‘the universal’ as “the primary essence” of the message.

Harvey (1990) provides another framework through which the qualities of modernity and postmodernity are revealed in terms of the ‘Enlightenment Project’. The Enlightenment Project, which is synonymous with modernity, is characterised by a

utopian belief in progress. Theorists critical of the postmodern, such as Jürgen Habermas for example, believe that modernity, or alternatively the Enlightenment Project, has not been given the opportunity to run its full course and prove its worth. Referring to Habermas, Harvey (1990:12) expounds the task of the Enlightenment Project as (supposedly) the positive upliftment of humankind:

That project amounted to an extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers ‘to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic’. The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life.

The Enlightenment Project, which lasted historically from the late eighteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, is described as a way of bringing all the diverse people in the world to see things in the same way – in a rational, lucid, coherent way, a way based on ‘reason’ (Anderson, 1996:4). In brief, the Enlightenment Project was based on the belief in linear progress, freedom and the creation of a better world through the power of science over nature, the uncovering of absolute truths and the development of ‘rational’ forms of social structures. Enlightenment thinking was anchored in the belief that there existed a single correct way of interpreting the world. In light of this, Harvey (1990:28) describes postmodernity as the cultural condition after the breakdown of the Enlightenment Project. This means that “the idea that there was only one possible mode of presentation began to break down” and was replaced by “an emphasis upon divergent systems of representation”. Shifting to a different register, we see this in practice as a radical transformation within late modernity, starting in the early twentieth century in the art of Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, Duchamp, Klee, de Chirico, in the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg and Bartok amongst others, and in avant-garde art and design movements such as Vorticism, Constructivism, Dada and Futurism (Harvey 1990:28). In graphic design it is important to note that movements from the first half of the twentieth Century, namely Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Dada, De Stijl, Bauhaus, and Swiss International Style, form the zenith of the modern era. Accordingly, even though most of these movements may fall under the late-modern label, this does not indicate a dissipation

of modernist theory. It is possible to see in the existence of these different movements a preparation for the multiplicity so typical of postmodernism, with the difference that each of the modernist movements was committed to the belief that it had somehow grasped the 'essence' of art or design.

Parallel to Harvey's (1990:28) perception of postmodernity as the condition of the world after the collapse of the Enlightenment Project, Lyotard (1984:xxiv) describes the postmodern era as a time of "incredulity towards metanarratives". Modernism places strong emphasis on the search for universal truth in various spheres, especially in the areas of science, which Lyotard gives special attention to, and politics. Lyotard indicates that the status of knowledge in Western societies is in crisis and that this is an important factor in the emergence of postmodernity. Following Lyotard, John Storey (1998:174) describes the postmodern condition as:

...the supposed contemporary rejection of all totalising thoughts: Marxism, liberalism, Christianity, for example, that tell universalist stories (metanarratives), which organize and justify the everyday practices of a plurality of different stories (narratives).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001:69) in the book *Empire* provide an enlightening, paradigmatic historical sequence regarding the birth of modernity. The birth of modernity historically took place during the fifteenth century, at the time of the Renaissance. Hardt and Negri (2001:70) identify three moments in this constitution of European Modernity:

...first, the revolutionary plane of immanence; second the reaction against these immanent forces and the crisis in the form of authority; and third the partial and temporary resolution of this crisis in the formation of the modern state as a locus of sovereignty that transcends and mediates the plane of immanent forces.

The "revolutionary plane of immanence", that Hardt and Negri refer to as the first stage in the development of modernity, became apparent in the Renaissance and stands in opposition to the medieval reliance on a transcendent authority. Simplifying somewhat, the "revolutionary plane of immanence" can be explained as the 'creative

forces' that work within people to bring about a realisation and acknowledgement of human power to 'generate' and in this way destine life, independent of a higher transcendent force such as God, or the church. To summarise, "In those origins of modernity, then, knowledge shifted from the transcendent plane to the immanent" (inherent, intrinsic) (Hardt and Negri, 2001:72). Consequently it is this birth and celebration of individual human power, which destroys any ties to the unifying and mediating influence of an external power, that brought about a diverse creativity in the form of a revolution. The second phase of modernity emerges in the form of crisis, as a counterrevolution (against the revolutionary plane of immanence), which seeks to "dominate and expropriate the force of the emerging movements and dynamics".

Hardt and Negri (2001:74) elucidate:

This new emergence, however, created a war. ... This is the second mode of modernity, constructed to wage war against the new forces and establish an overarching power to dominate them. It arose within the Renaissance revolution to divert its direction, transplant the new image of humanity to a transcendent plane, relativize the capacities of science to transform the world, and above all oppose the reappropriation of power on the part of the multitude. The second mode of modernity poses a transcendent constituted power against an immanent constituent power, order against desire. The Renaissance thus ended in war – religious, social, and civil war.

It is this second mode of modernity – in other words, 'the modern' – that emerges as 'victor' in the struggle and which directs the development of modernity throughout history, a development characterized by crisis on the one hand, and on the other, its counterpart – the attempt to resolve the crisis. In a political framework Hardt and Negri identify the formation of the modern state as a temporary solution to the crisis of modernity. More importantly however, is that it is the first mode in the development of modernity, the revolutionary plane of immanence, with its emphasis on the power of the individual (within a community) and its spawn of diversification, which corresponds with the moment of the postmodern. In addition, this historical framework for the origin of modernity provided by Hardt and Negri (1991:25), accurately confirms Lyotard's (1984:79) poststructuralist observations that the postmodern is always present in the modern and that the modern is constantly "pregnant with its own postmodernity". This serves as a reminder, as we take a step

back, away from the detail, of the cyclical nature of history – the inherent action–reaction mode that is so patent in the development of the modern out of the postmodern and of the postmodern in turn, again, out of the modern.

Metanarratives, the Enlightenment Project and other modernist expressions all have unifying, integrating, stabilising endeavours in common. A conveyor belt process can be visualised where the inclusion or exclusion into ordered rational realms of modernity is weighed against universal appeal, a process that does not make room for difference, particularity, distinctiveness, or the individual. Postmodernism, as a critical practice or activity, is seen as a backlash against the dominance and perceived monotony and sterility of modernism. Graphic designers emerging in postmodernity perceive styling based on the modernist philosophy as limited and predictable, and believe that modernism has declined into a superficiality of style, with an inability to respond to consumer needs (Livingston & Livingston, 1992:136).

In conclusion, if one compares the formal features of contemporary culture, which incorporates the modern and the postmodern ‘moments’, with the stylistic diversity evident in contemporary graphic design, similarities are apparent. These ‘moments’ in contemporary culture find their counterparts in this creative cultural practice, as designers seem to move between extremes of exclusive minimalist approaches (the modern) and more inclusive eclectic and elaborate approaches (the postmodern) and at times find the means to ‘balance’ them. Furthermore Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the generative nature of the historical relation between modernism and postmodernism, along with Lyotard’s critical explanation that positions this relation at the origin of creative practice, points to a future in graphic design practice where the dynamism of the modern/postmodern relationship will continue producing new design styles and approaches. So, instead of a resolution in the direction of a new, ‘ordered’ modernist design, or a postmodernist design dominating, we can expect to see more of the dynamic that is already occurring in the movement between these poles. The ‘new simplicity’, as discussed earlier in the document, that emerged relatively recently in graphic design, is an approach which favours modernism, yet ironically this approach adds to the multitude of diverse approaches and styles which can be described as the

‘postmodern condition’ of graphic design (following Harvey and Lyotard). And this condition is undoubtedly one of plurality and difference.

4. Images



Fig. 1. *Great Beginnings* promotional booklet by Paula Scher announcing the design partnership with herself and Terry Koppel, 1984.

Fig. 2. “Does it all make sense?” A foldout sheet, nearly two by six feet, for *Design Quarterly*, no. 133, by April Greiman, 1986.

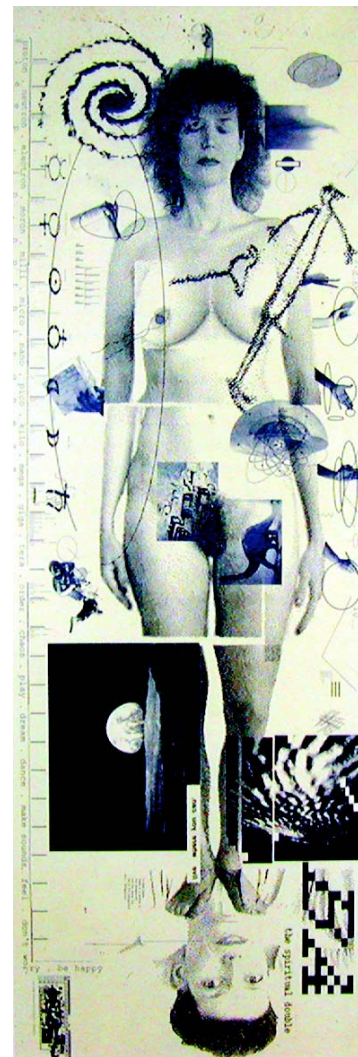


Fig. 3. Poster and catalogue for exhibition entitled *Vaughan Oliver*, 1990.



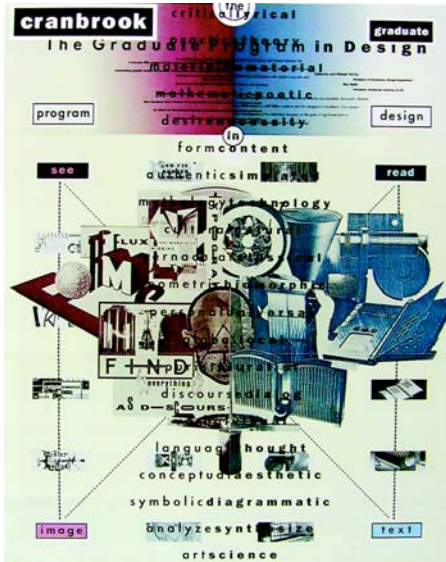


Fig. 4. Poster by Katherine McKoy which promotes the graduate programme in design at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1989.



Fig. 5. Spread from Ray Gun, art directed by David Carson, from the article "Nine Inch Nails", 1994.



Fig. 6. Cover and spread from the first issue of Octavo, by Simon Johnston, Mark Holt, Michael Burke and Hamish Muir, 1986.

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Karim Rashid. [Online image]. Retrieved January 4, 2005. Available from Internet
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Figure 6. Karim Rashid, Product design, *Kake* (one-off project), undated.
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Figure 9. Alexander Gelman, Absolut Vodka poster, *1/2*, undated. *Design Machine: Strategic Brand Building*. [Online image]. Retrieved January 4, 2005. Available from Internet URL <http://www.designmachine.net/absolut.html>

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Based on a table available in:

Livingston, A. & I. 1992. *The Thames and Hudson encyclopaedia of graphic design and designers*. London: Thames and Hudson, p.210–211.

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Lavin, M. (ed.) 1998. *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 11.

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Lavin, M. (ed.) 1998. *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 21.

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Lavin, M. (ed.) 1998. *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. xx.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 264.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 266.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 265.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 266.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 272.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 271.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 272.

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Heller, S. & Chwast, S. 2000. *Graphic style: from Victorian to digital* (New edition). New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, p. 110.

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Heller, S. & Chwast, S. 2000. *Graphic style: from Victorian to digital* (New edition). New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, p. 111.

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Heller, S. & Chwast, S. 2000. *Graphic style: from Victorian to digital* (New edition). New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, p. 110.

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Heller, S. & Chwast, S. 2000. *Graphic style: from Victorian to digital* (New edition). New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, p. 110.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 280.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 283.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 283.

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Aynsley, J. 2001. *A Century of Graphic Design: Graphic Design pioneers of the 20th century*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p. 62.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 279.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 286.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 287.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 286.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 292.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 322.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 331.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 330.

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Aynsley, J. 2001. *A Century of Graphic Design: Graphic Design pioneers of the 20th century*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p. 125.

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Glancey, J. 1990. *The Story of Architecture*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, p. 196.

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Jencks, C. 1991. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. London: Academy Editions.

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Glancey, J. 1990. *The Story of Architecture*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, p. 196.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 444.

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Aynsley, J. 2001. *A Century of Graphic Design: Graphic Design pioneers of the 20th century*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p. 68.

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Aynsley, J. 2001. *A Century of Graphic Design: Graphic Design pioneers of the 20th century*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p. 161.

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Poynor, R. 2003. *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*. London: Lawrence King Publishing Ltd, p. 23.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 446.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 446.

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Meggs, P. B. 1998. *A History of Graphic Design* (Third edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 458.

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Aynsley, J. 2001. *A Century of Graphic Design: Graphic Design pioneers of the 20th century*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p. 212.

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Aynsley, J. 2001. *A Century of Graphic Design: Graphic Design pioneers of the 20th century*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p. 215.

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