

Paper
A rhetoric of e|mediated typo|graphicacy

designing
onscreen
typo|graphicacy

Alan Robertson
Unitec Institute of Technology Auckland New Zealand
joetal@kiwilink.co.nz

70 Selbourne Street
Grey Lynn
Auckland
New Zealand

09 . 378 4783 (phone)
09 . 378 4771 (fax)

Introduction

I will present this paper visually, using Macromedia Flash, thereby demonstrating in presentation the concepts, and rules-of-thumb discussed in the paper. The paper itself is a theoretical, discursive snapshot of reflection in|on theory in|on visual practice. By the time you read this preface, some content will have shifted. Indeed, the process of editing-by-design into Flash may introduce new angles, alter discursive continuity, and even, hopefully, inspire seductive refinements to the conceptuality and structure of the argument. It will, in short, constitute an explicit rhetoric of visual performance. And demonstrate (or not!) the efficacy of typo|graphicate designing as an hermeneutic instrument for grasping written, visual, designed, e|mediation.

The rhetoric of e|mediated, visual argumentation must be typo|graphicate, and thus designed. Unfortunately conventional graphic design is shamelessly commercial, stylistic, often pragmatically low-brow (rarely taken 'seriously', except by its practitioners), and by-and-large a wholly-owned corporate subsidiary. It may thus be deemed, in terms of humanities research, say, little more than a practical, not a design art (!). I hope, then, to provoke some support for its vitiated potential by contextualising the paper, with relevant material, within an e|mediated artefact in the manner of a website or 'sightcd' (sightsee disk). Thus the dominant design constraint for the presentation, per se, will be to effectively outline the theoretical salience of the abstract|paper while demonstrating the visual artefact within which it is a significant component.

Event 1 Literate to visual

'Funny Signs' was an Acrobat 'visual lecture' for graphic design students, comprising firstly, a 'paper' on semiotic [de]sign-as-ideology, written and designed as screen-statements of 7-30 words (with occasional hidden rollovers), in large white text on a black background (36 point size on the original Quark XPress). The second part was a 'slideshow' of about 80 of my photographs of signage and graffiti, arranged into categories of 'funniness', such as '+' (by-hand deletions|additions to original signage), and 'juxtapositions' (odd, amusing 'found' signage). The event was an entirely visual, non-performance in silence (soundtrackless, notwithstanding the e|mediated context). It was read, in absorbed silence, by a participating audience: first, 'word-screens', reading in effect as

imagery; then photographic imagery, representing the words of signage. It was the typographic design which at once enabled, yet also challenged the audience to focus attentively on each screen. It is this visual nexus of typographic design-as-image-as-screen|information design which preoccupies me.

Event 2 Visual to literate

After the 'lecture' I attempted to put the 'visual' paper' back onto paper as a 'proper' paper. Since published in *TypoGraphic 56* (Journal of the International Society of Typographic Designers) as 'Typography: the signs of ideas', the argument which had seemed convincing in presentation, didn't read well as literate, linear text. The process of deconstructive typographic designing by which a text is edited-by-design into concise, sequential screen-views did not translate back directly into discursive literacy, even though it had begun there originally. The compact, juxtapositional purposiveness of typographicacy and the almost televisual disjunctiveness of its sequential continuity, which had seemed in presentation to sustain meaning-making and seamless memorability for viewer interaction with the rhythms of argument, were too short, too concise on paper.

Event 3 A published [l]iteration

Furthermore, I had two papers, not one. The second part, about responsibilities of the intellectual professional, which had 'worked' in the 'visual lecture', didn't follow on paper. In its published iteration the paper sketches the hegemonic privileging of reason with written|typographic discourse, from Plato to Kant and Peirce, pointing to the parallel presence of an 'other', peripheral humanistic tradition: a recasting of the Romantic|Enlightenment paradigm-shift (Tarnas 10) within a design context (Wilson). It suggests that e|media may signal a "paradigmatic shift from the stasis of typographic textuality to a 'winged' (Mitchell) remediation", of 'imagic' typographicity and argues that graphic design exemplifies the five arts of rhetoric so deplored by Plato. It concludes with the somewhat breathless hope that e|mediation might instantiate an on-line 'globallocality' of public space and dialogic public language (Arendt, Bauman) to counter the dominating dialectics of technocratic corporatism. Finally it reiterates Lanham's suggestion that e|media has facilitated a kind of secondary visual orality of email (and now txt mssng) in which dialogue returns to the centre of communication. What that paper does not do, is to query the intrinsic rhetoricality of typographic design through application of rhetoric itself as an 'interpretive instrument' (Gaonkar 50) to mediate a prevailing culture of overwhelming rhetorical visuality in which graphic design is uncritically accepted as a powerfully hegemonic medium of 'communication'. Nor does it address the darker implications of a globalised network of 'broadcaught' (Negroponte) media, in which, as Virilio has pithily put it, "interactivity is is to real space what radioactivity is to the atmosphere".

Event 4 Literate to typographicate

In presenting this paper I will attempt to demonstrate the efficacy of typographicate visuality as a rhetorical instrument of public discourse. What you are reading now is visibly, typographically literate, but not visually typographicate. The typography of discursive codex-text (Lanham) must be seen to be read, but it does not exemplify the graphicacy of what we are familiar with as 'graphic design' in consumerist society. I will not argue that grasping 'graphics' is as different from reading writing, as 'reading' books is different from 'viewing' television (a familiar

argument: see Paglia|Postman), but rather, reiterate that the rhetoricality implicit in that difference can be particularly significant in e|mediation. The online screen is a uniquely responsive (interactive?)

visual mediation of otherness, yet one which has evolved within a culture attuned to televisuality (e|media and television share the same screen-format as I discuss below). On television typographic textuality disappears. As Bolter puts it "the text is absorbed into the video image" . In the e|medium, however, graphic design is back on screen not only to enable wayfinding and to distinguish it from, and organise, content-display, but to also devise strategies by which the additional dimension of hermeneutic rhetoricality encompassed by hypertextuality might be visually rationalised . All material is theoretically available, but such complexity demands careful design.

Expressly, as an ideological medium of persuasion in corporatist society, graphic design is complicit in the consumerism of over-expansionist productivism.

Yet paradoxically graphic design visually exemplifies the five arts of the rhetorical *padæia* by which the participatory dialogue of the democratic public sphere was performed. Wit is derived from the invention of unexpected and original conceptual|visual juxtapositions. Argument may well be sustained through copywritten textuality, but moreso through the overall coherence of the visual composition, the design of the three constitutive elements: text, display text, and imagery. It is this 'imagic' coherence which constitutes the true rhetorical heart of the visual 'performance'. (I have coined 'imagic' to describe the peculiar union of image-as-imagery with image-as-perceived-public-reputation, the central principle driving the contemporary rhetoricality of visual 'communication'.) Styling, in the typo|graphic fashion or 'look' of the moment, can be so significant a concern as to either dominate user-perception as the 'true' message (bad 'design'), or to be exploited by poor designers as a substitute for invention and argument (even worse 'design'). And finally the artefact is delivered through a highly finished technical grammar and technology of reproduction.

Constraints of e|mediated typo|graphicacy

Print and 'onscreen' discursive visualities are different 'conduits' through which the visible abstraction of language may be 'delivered' (Reddy 284) as designed visual 'communication'. Print and onscreen e|mediation are privately accessed while presentations (whether e|mediated or not) are publicly (group)read, and often employ conventions such as bullet-point phrases which are rarely intended for contiguous reading, like codex-text, or to be comprehensively coherent as standalone documents. Yet a presentation is onscreen e|mediation writ large, requiring only the addition of way-finding conventions for direct user-access and control. But in designing appropriately for e|mediated graphicacy , there are other visual considerations too.

The e|medium has inherited the landscape-format used universally in traditional image-centred media (cameras, television, cinema). Thus 'landscape' is associated with imagery. Even static, juxtapositional typo|graphic design seems to make more visual sense as 'landscape'. The availability of unlimited free colour reinforces this bias towards imagery (just like television) provoking implicitly 'imagic' expectations in the screen-viewer. For, like print periodicals, screens are both 'viewed' and 'read'. But not only are screens wide they are small in size relative to their resolution. A typical 17" screen is A4 on its side, yet its equivalent legible resolution is extremely coarse by comparison with paper. Screen-wide, single-columns of small, print-size html text, then,

will be even more unreadable than on paper. Because visual 'real estate' is limited onscreen, instincts are to pack every visible pixel with as much 'information' as possible, thereby ignoring the dual medium-specific virtues of either unlimited virtual screen-size, and/or virtually-unlimited screen availability. Worse it denies any need for design-sense. As Edward Tufte has noted, the problem in dealing with information overload is not its complexity, but rather the quality of its designed organisation. As such, 'authoring' e|media is as much about designing as writing, and interrogates conventional perceptions of what either writing or typo|graphic designing entails.

Rhetorical typo|graphicate visuality

Writing itself is a design-mediated act, a design art. For the writer|rhetor, inventing a rigorous, seemingly rational, 'well-arranged' argument is construed as the primary objective. Yet in any design art the objective is a crafted seamlessness between intention and artefact; an integration of form and content in which neither can be imagined without the other. So too the arts of visual rhetoric exemplify the inventive ambiguity of human art-making in which inventive synthesis and the rule-following of practical craftship are integrated. And, as the seams between intention and artefact in discursive rhetoric seem particularly transparent (Kaufer) so are they in typo|graphic designing: after all, people have been reading type for five hundred years.

Rhetorical reasonability encompasses more than logic. A rational, well-designed argument will also deploy all the subtleties of a formal 'styling' embedded in the personal 'knowing' of the rhetor, combined with a sense that the performer is knowingly 'delivering' the performance, is a performing presence. Presumably these latter qualities were the intangible audience-rhetor links excised by Peter Ramus from 'serious' writing only a hundred years after the invention of type (Ong, Lanham). By so doing not only was that holistic integrity sundered by which rhetoric had been performed as a design art, but the abstract myths of 'neutrality', 'authority' and 'rationality' became elided with typographic literacy. Because it was self-contained, self-referential and abstract, typographic textuality aspired to an 'objectivity' which eschewed any taint of the 'subjectively' rhetorical. Not only did print beget the myth of the 'original' author (Poster), but also the myths that neither 'originality' nor 'neutrality' nor 'objectivity' were not in themselves intrinsically rhetorical conceits.

Visible, typographic rhetoric has been flawed almost from the outset, with a bias towards the mechanistic model of human communication, and the distancing abstraction of a privileged authority. But reading and writing are the social use of symbols to produce cultural significance; indeed, to produce reality. Communication produces experience because words give meaning to experience. In making and finding meaning through interpretive action "things are the signs of words" (Burke 359). Social reality is a construct, a participative, aesthetic performance of making-action and reality-production (Peters|Rothenbuhler). This is a different view of human communicative action than the information-transmission of 'communication theory' in which the transmissive 'message-package' seems somehow privileged over receptive-re-construction. And of course, the 'visual communications' of mass-media are premised on this non-participative, top-down, producer-centred model. Consumerist graphic design is literally and functionally rhetorical, yet its true rhetoricality is implicit within its visuality. As an ubiquitous and overtly persuasive form of cultural production, its hegemonic power operates through the paradoxical invisibility of its visuality. Graphic design is so critically unquestioned

and so popularly accepted not just as normal as print, but as the defining 'image' of what print means as a 'communication' medium, that it is itself the message; and the message is the rhetorical visuality of the imagic.

Designing typo|graphicate animation

The 'dynamic rhetoric' (Bonsiepe 75) of animation introduces more than an additional disciplinary dimension. Animated typographic 'figures of speech' (Bonsiepe 72) facilitate a particularly explicit visual rhetoricality. For example, in a very short animation 'What is 'creativity' in graphic design?' (in my visual lecture 'The End of Graphic Design') animated typography deconstructs and re-presents internally coherent textual complexity as subtle variations on the same key concepts. E|mediated animation also enables text to oscillate as dense and static linearity, typo|graphics, and a time-base, imagic fusion of form and content; simultaneously subject to both televisual disjunctivity and the associative discontinuity of user-controlled hypertextual non-linearity.

Concluding

Designing text to be both graphic|discursive, and static|dynamic opens structural gaps by means of content-derived visual juxtapositions which liberate meaning, clarify associated concepts, reveal otherwise inchoate links, and designate visual hierarchies of emphasis. As a simultaneous instantiation of meaningful formality, by design, typo|graphicacy can mediate the paradoxical 'fissure' at the heart of rhetoric: that "division of the logos into form and content" (Hariman 227). It can emancipate a hermeneutic understanding of the analytical processes and constraints to which it is itself subject, thereby transcending the sleight of hand by which 'commercial' graphic design conceals its complicity in the hegemonic dissemination of top-down consumerist message-making. But only if it is explicitly designed for this purpose. And it can expose the 'designing' consciousness behind all literacy, the implicit rhetoricality of all communication. Then it serves a hermeneutic of ethical communications, a kind of 'information design' which supports audience understanding, reasoning and reflection, outside the hegemony of a mechanistic media construct which excludes "context, history, expectations, goals, values, priorities, feelings, preferences and differences of intelligence" (Frascara). It is in the deceptive visual simplicity of good graphic design that the knowing, ironic oscillation of postmodern discourse is most convincingly suasive, revealing what Thomas Frank and Judith Williamson identify as the true rhetorical agenda of visual 'communication': its 'hipness'; its capacity for engendering a shared knowingness of transgression. In short, what makes it 'cool'.

Bibliography

- Arendt H 1978 *Between Past and Future* London: Penguin.
- Bauman Z 1998 *Globalization: the human consequences* London: Polity.
- Bolter JD quoted in Lanham 1993, p213.
- Bonsiepe G 1998 *Interface: an approach to design* Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie.
- Butler F 1989 *Eating the Image: the graphic designer and the starving audience in Design Discourse: history, theory, criticism*, Margolin V ed Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frank T 1997 *The Conquest of Cool* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frascara J 1997 *User-Centred Graphic Design* London: Taylor & Francis.
- Gaonkar 1997 *The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science*, in *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: invention and interpretation in the age of science*, Gross A & Keith W eds, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hariman R 1989 Rhetoric of Inquiry and the Scholar, in Simons H ed Rhetoric in the Human Sciences, London: Sage.

Hofmeester K & Charon de St Germain E eds 1999 Presence: New Media for Older People Amsterdam: Netherlands Design Institute.

Kaufner DS 1997 From Tekhne to Technique: rhetoric as a design art, in Rhetorical Hermeneutics: invention and interpretation in the age of science, Gross A & Keith W eds, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lanham RA 1993 The Electronic Word: democracy, technology, and the arts Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lanham RA 1992 The Implications of Electronic Information for the Sociology of Knowledge, paper given at the conference: "Scholarship, and the Humanities: the implications of electronic information" Irvine Ca.

Mitchell WJT 1995 Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Negroponte N 1997 Being Digital London: Penguin.

Ong W 1982 Orality and Literacy: the technologising of the word London: Routledge.

Paglia C & Postman N 1991 She Wants Her TV! He Wants His Book! Harper's Magazine, March, p44.

Peters JD & Rothenbuhler EW 1989 The Reality of Construction, in Simons HW ed Rhetoric in the Human Sciences. London: Sage.

Poster M 1996 The Second Media Age Cambridge: Polity.

Reddy M 1979 The Conduit Metaphor: a case of frame conflict in our language about language Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (284-324).

Tarnas R A New Synthesis Resurgence Oct|Nov 1999

Tufte E 1990 Envisioning Information. Cheshire, Conn: Graphics Press.

Virilio P 1995 The Virilio Reader, ed J Der Derian, Oxford: Blackwell, p17.

Wilson, C St J 1995 The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture London: Academy Editions.

Williams R (1983) Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society. London: Fontana.

Williamson J 1979 Decoding Advertisements: ideology and meaning in advertising. London: Marion Boyars.