

Aspects of ethics in design; the mediocrity tsunami

Klimis Mastoridis

This speech was delivered at the *Art and Social Justice (ASJ)* international conference in October 2011 in Nicosia, Cyprus. The conference, titled *The media connection*, was organized by the "Department of Communications" of the University of Nicosia in conjunction with the "Mass Media and Communications Institute" (IMME). The images printed here constituted part of the presentation. Many thanks to Dr Mary Dyson for her constructive feedback on this.

Please, allow me to start by expressing my gratitude to the Organizing Committee and to all those behind the scenes, who have worked hard over a long period to make this conference possible. We live in very unstable times and to undertake such a task takes stamina and courage. This is also true for the colleagues who decided to travel to Cyprus from abroad in order to participate in this three-day meeting and share their knowledge with the rest of the delegates.

History has taught us that profound political, social and economic upheavals usually lead to unintended consequences: as traditional, widely accepted notions are questioned, new ideologies and different value systems rise; the flood of new ideas and the explosion of creative energy contribute to the establishment of new intellectual and artistic centres.

I would rather prefer to refer to a different set of examples; the current (global) situation, however, forces me to employ the following: the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the World Wars... After all, the fact that I come from Greece, is violently sweeping away the last crumbs of optimism that had been left behind [fig.1].

In turbulent times people tend to think more about how they can contribute to changes; this is a good thing... Many think ahead... This may be even better! However, in order to be able to question, to examine in depth, to offer interesting arguments, or construct comprehensive theories, we need tools; in other words, education and knowledge, in the broader sense, remain a vital investment in human capital and a key to changing a society. Unquestionably, scholars, teachers and educators have to play a significant role here, and, in any case, it is a necessity, but at the same time, their responsibility to discuss, asking questions and seeking answers.

I will attempt to contribute to the conference as a graphic communication educator; my address is about education, or, better, about the lack of it. More specifically, I will talk about design education in relation to design practices.



fig.1

Design is a problem solving process; actually, it is an everyday problem solving activity. Design can make things possible... or impossible [figs 2 & 3].

The same applies to the part of design which is called graphic. Graphic design is about language, the graphic language. Graphic design could be defined as the tool which is employed to convert verbal language to graphic. The graphic language consists of two major pillars, text and image, and should be used to communicate visual (that is, perceived through our eyes) messages as clear as possible [fig.4]. Those, who have been taught how to use that tool are professionals called graphic designers, graphic communicators, information architects, communication designers...

Although this practice seems familiar, let us keep in mind that the term "graphic design" was coined in the mid 1920s but it became widely used only after World War II. Nowadays, schools, colleges and universities offer Bachelor, Master, and PhD degrees in the field of Graphic Communication teaching and researching the practice, history and theory of it.

As it happens even in more "demanding" disciplines, like medicine for example, we may find lay people being occupied with graphic design, acting alongside professionals [fig.5].

Hoping that we now have a more clear idea of what graphic design is about and what professional graphic designers do –or are supposed to do– for a living, allow me to make a step forward and try to

discuss an awkward situation I've been faced with over the last four years.

It all started almost a few days after I found myself in the position of Head of our university's Design & Multimedia Department. The first incident was when I received a phone call by a member of a magazine's editorial team; her proposal, but also her haughty attitude, left me almost speechless – I am quite sure she thought for a moment that I could not find words to express my gratitude! She asked me to send her a couple of cover design proposals for their publication. Then, she explained –implying that this would be some kind of great honour– that she will contact "six more well-known fine artists" and ask them to do the same thing. To my question, who's going to judge the designs and select the one that would get printed, she replied "our art director". I think I managed to mumble something like "I am not a fine artist, thank you" and missed forever the chance to participate in the seven-fine artists contest for the design of a cover page for a weekly free press publication. As a result, not much of my department's activities/events find their way to their pages!

From then on, day after day, I kept receiving numerous phone calls, emails and correspondence from people in the private and public sector, working for profit or for not for profit companies, all of which were –more or less– about the same thing: they asked (or invited) me –and, through me the



figs 2 & 3





fig.4
 — Look, a martlet!
 — There it is...
 — Thank God, spring is here.

department's students and faculty members– to participate in various, so called, “artistic contests and competitions”.

Only ten days ago, I had to refuse a proposal made by a supermarket chain to my students: they wanted us to design posters for their new daughter company. As in most cases, the deadline was “yesterday”, a fact that clearly shows the absolute commercial substance of these calls.

Finding the social implications of such a situation alarming, I decided to write a short article; bearing the title “Aspects of ethics in design” it was published in the daily newspaper “Politis” in September 2008. There, I briefly expressed my concerns about the ethical problems that may derive from a practice like the one described above. Plagiarism, piracy, copyright issues, lack of contracts, the fine print in the rules and unpaid labour are some of these problems.

Furthermore, I tried to point out that there will be negative long term effects not only on design education and profession, but on the design culture of the community as a whole.

In small communities, like the one we live in, bad practices could prove to be by far more influential – in a very negative way.

I have decided to employ a more pragmatic example here; This is the avenue in front of the

university... I went out there last Sunday afternoon and walked around 150 meters taking pictures of the street with my camera for fifteen minutes. On the frames below, the printer's hands indicate cars on the wrong side of the street, whereas the arrows show on which side of the road these vehicles ought to be [figs 6 to 9].

It is a common secret that in many cases competitions which are supposedly aimed at students, are mainly directed and even executed by their tutors. This increases the institution's chances to get the “award”, gain status, and promote itself. Needless to say that these “awards” only rarely justify their title as such, the argument being that it's an excellent opportunity for design students to strengthen their portfolio. And as we all know –and students are taught so– the portfolio really matters out there...

However, not all competitions are the same. In fact, there are some, which do not even employ such terms. An example is the International Society of Typographic Designers student assessment scheme. Students from all over the world, who belong to institutes which are members of the Society and participate in the scheme, send their designs and then, after their work is reviewed by esteemed design educators and practitioners, they receive high quality feedback. I would like to make absolutely clear that this presentation does not refer to



Careful, slow down.

TAXI

fig.5

ISTD like assessments, undergraduate degree work placements, or real jobs that students may undertake as part of their courses. It is about practices introduced by parties which actually try to take advantage of the foolish ambitions of people found in institutes that offer art & design studies. And, in my opinion, it is the responsibility of their educators and not of the students to recognize and deal with the ethical problems that arise from such practices.

What makes an institution, a department, and its faculty members to force their students to participate in such contests? What makes them feel proud and promote the so called “awards” they’ve been awarded within an opaque and doubtful system?

Usually, the administration of the educational institutes sees this as a chance to promote the goals and the good standards of their school. For recruitment/publicity purposes they encourage –or even put pressure–, without any consideration, on faculty and students to participate in these ‘competitions’. At the end of the day, the arena hosts gladiators from various art and design colleges and universities, many of whom pay little respect, when duel-

ling, to moral and ethical issues. The fight is even crueller in small communities, where status plays an important role and the market is de facto confined within narrow bounds; alas, the real spirit of pedagogy disappears into thin air.

Let us now consider some other questions which immediately spring to mind: Is there any room for creative collaboration between participants in such contests and competitions? Students and teachers of various educational establishments, instead of sharing ideas and best practices and benefitting through collaboration working on a cooperative and fair basis, fight and compete with each other. The fact that they do not do this openly, publishing their arguments (if any), views, and opinions, is probably even worse. Instead, they become suspicious and when they get a chance, bitterly criticize one another, making almost impossible any future collaboration.

Also, who is judging –and on what criteria– the quality of design and the communication value of the entries? The deadlines are tight, there is no time for research or room for experimentation and crea-



on the wrong side...



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figs 6 & 7

on the wrong side...

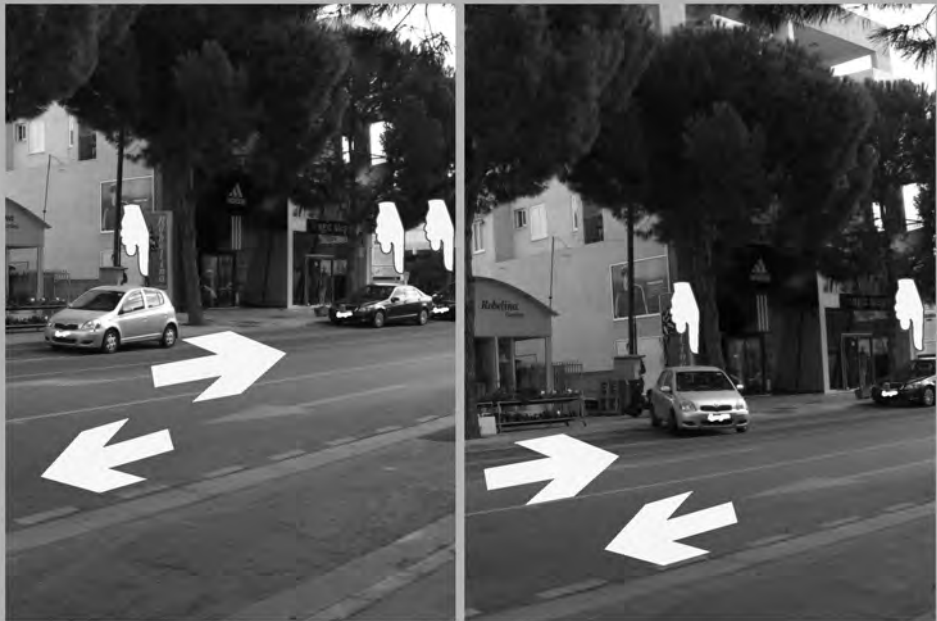


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© Felix Scharmer | OCT 2011

figs 8 & 9



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fig.10

tivity, the judging committees usually consist of the owners, managers and executives of the companies or the directors of the institutions which run the contests, –every now and then you may find an architect or a fine artist in the panel–, and very rarely a professional graphic designer. From my experience until now, I get the feeling that these people are not at all interested in design quality; they do not care about standards... The only thing they want is to see their job done as soon as possible. Again, this is when education becomes a major issue [fig.10].

Who can deny that such an environment demoralizes students as well as their teachers? And even more so, who can deny that such practices undermine the professional status and scorn the work produced by graphic design professionals? On what grounds state museums and departments, large commercial establishments and private companies, government ministries and authorities, entrust their graphic communication policy to 1st, 2nd, 3rd or even 4th year BA degree students? It makes me wonder... Do those, who are responsible for that policy, think that this is the best way to economize? Do these people, who are leading the above mentioned institutions, have any idea of how important is to communicate the image of their establish-

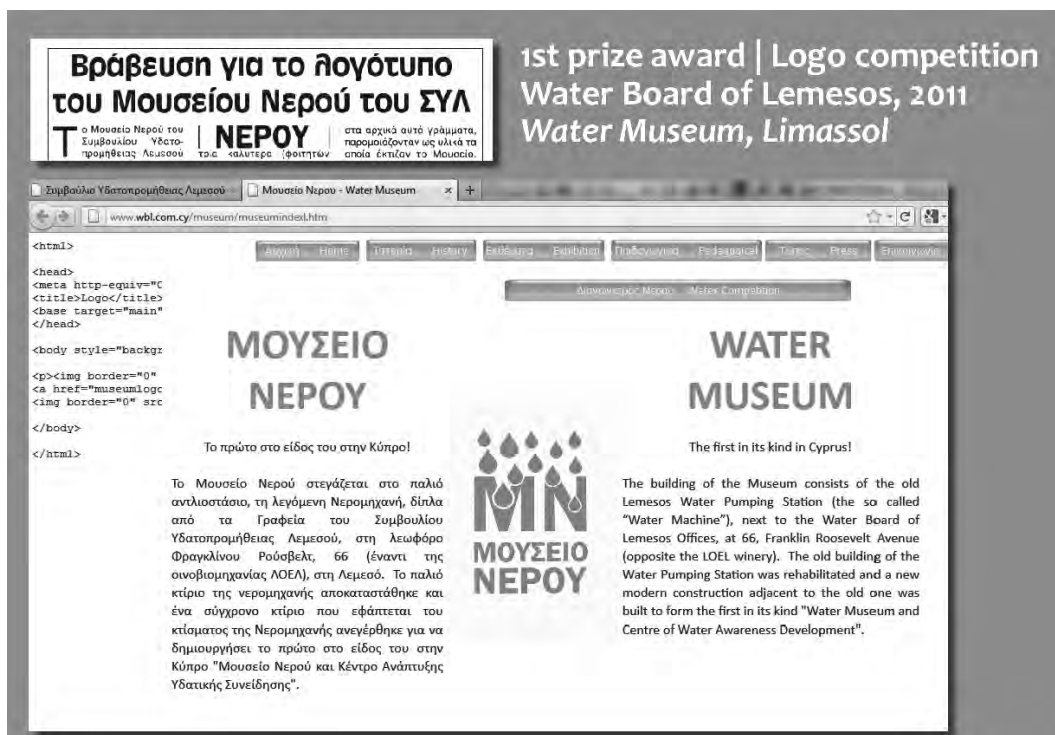
ments in a proper manner? Do they understand that graphic design plays an important educational role, it serves but also cultivates the society? Finally, do these people realize that graphic communication is a mirror image of civilization and that their acts have a profound effect on the history of their community? [figs 11 & 12].

Steven Heller is one of the most prolific figures in the fields of graphic design education, research and practice and the author or editor of a large number of books on design and popular culture. In a message, sent in September 2008, he was making explicitly clear that he condemns the competition practices followed by corporations which get intellectual property for free. It is more than obvious that one of the main issues we talk about here is “unpaid labour”, which may well disharmonize the working environment of the graphic design profession. I have even been contacted in order to ask my students to implement various EU funded projects, whose planning and organization was undertaken by private companies. They wanted the work to be done by unpaid university students and make a profit with the smallest possible investment.

Think this for a moment: We ask our students to undertake projects which otherwise would have been given to professionals. Most of the times, our



figs 11 & 12



Some get their job done for free, others think of different rewards, like status and fame, others just make money...

**If the client moans and sighs,
make his logo twice the size.
If he still should prove refractory,
show a picture of his factory.
Only in the gravest cases,
should you show your client's faces.**

Alan Fletcher

students deliver design work for free, the bait being the enhancement of their portfolios. But how long will it take until our students become professionals? And then what?

Allow me to repeat that it is not the students' responsibility to recognize and deal with the ethical problems that arise from such practices. It is, however, our duty to educate students and make them aware of the risks and hazards associated with these practices.

I think most of you will agree with me if I say that design teachers and academics, –as everybody else nowadays in other fields too–, are under pressure to produce –year after year– a mass of work that will help them either retain their position or apply for promotion. Occasionally, their anxiety to produce something that would be part of the so necessary mass, makes them head down the wrong path. Many times, almost blindly they follow those, who after having studied these “academic” weaknesses take advantage of this situation.

Nowadays, the environment has become so polluted with low quality design and art exhibitions which, at the end of the day, pay a good sum to the organizer, fulfil the self assumption of the participants who may add a couple of lines to their cvs, and leave everybody with a badly designed and produced catalogue which is sold even to the contributors... Furthermore, with so many bad things

taking place around us, it comes as no surprise that many of these events, exhibitions and contests, are supposed to take place for good causes; this makes really difficult any serious critical approach with regards to the quality of the work produced or exhibited. Events that take place in order to mobilize people and make them care about devastated communities, calamities and disasters, turn out to be part of the business system which promotes emptiness.

So, if art and design teachers –unconsciously or not so unconsciously– fall into the trap, then, who is going to protect and inform students? One thing is for sure: we won't see any reaction from all those who really benefit –or they think they do– from such practices. Some get their job done for free, others think of different rewards, like status and fame, others just make money. It is questionable whether there is a real contribution to the fields of art and design, to the community and to its culture... and even if there is some real value, then, most probably it is ephemeral.

I don't want to take up more of the conference time. It should be clear by now that action, based on principles and ideology, is needed. We have a duty to teach our students to be responsible designers and informed community members. It seems that we owe this to ourselves as well...