

Postmodernism: The New Typography for The New Reader

Introduction

Nowadays, the debate between Modernist and Postmodernist way of thinking about design is still alive and vivid, although it started several years ago. This essay intends to investigate how Postmodernist design responds better than Modernist to the demands and needs that contemporary society raises. We will explore the origins of Postmodernism and Deconstruction, the new concepts of reader and designer/typographer, and we will analyse how the antithetical views differ in their approach to typographic communication.

a) Postmodernism and Deconstruction

Postmodernism in design came out as a reaction to the structured Modernism that dominated design from around the 30s up to the 70s, when there were the first attempts of new design which spread in the mid of 80s (Poynor, 2003). The crucial shift took place in Typography as “the hook on which Post-modern design hangs” (Robertson, 1993, p.63). As “the most logical visual extension of deconstruction because of its basis in words and text” (Byrne, Witte, 1990, p.117), typography was strongly influenced by Deconstructivism.

It originated from the revolutionary philosophy of Derrida, a French philosopher who at the end of 60s criticized the basis of Structuralism. He proposed a new view about Writing, which was considered from Saussure, the master of Structuralism in Linguistic, only as a translation of the Speech. Speech and Orality, in fact, were the fundamental interest of semiotic studies, as vivid expression of spontaneity and authenticity.

According to Saussure (1916), Sign has got an intrinsically dualism: the signifier and the signified. There was a sort of divorce between meaning and form, whose association has been established from a community of people arbitrarily. Each sign exists on the basis of its relation to the others signs of a bigger system

Derrida criticized the implicit limitedness of the meaning in the Saussurian concept of Sign. He pointed out the elusiveness of the meaning and its continuous shifting, in opposition to the definiteness of the Sign as unity. Sign does not exist only on the basis of its difference from others signs in the system of their relationship, but also on the difference in its inside, in a game of sliding, replacement and changing. Meanings are “sous rapture” and he word “différance” summarizes graphically this concept, as a play between presence and absence, as active process that takes place during the time.

It should be mentioned that Peirce (1931-1935), in the 20s, proposed the concept of “unlimited semiosis” in the transferring of meaning and in the act of signifying. It was, although in a different aspect, the first statement of the elusiveness of the meaning and its interpretation.

b) The new reader and the new typographer

As consequence of this new approach, “the linguistic meaning is unstable and indeterminate” (Poynor, 2003, p.47).

The Deconstructivist revolution implies a new concept of the reader; it asks that As Byrne and Witte (1990, p. 118) said “a reader comprehend and account for complex differences in signification”. Hence, in design, “each layer, through the use of language and image, is an intentional performer in deliberately playful game wherein the viewer can discover and experience the hidden complexities of language.”

This new concept of reader/viewer had already been investigated by Eco (1962)

some years before, when he were dealing with the openness of the meaning with the aim to give reason of the new forms of abstract art. The new reader/viewer was considered to be completely free to explore and interpret what he/she saw, and free from any sort of constraints. Eco proposed a replacement of the binary feature of the “dictionary” that works as a code, with the notion of “encyclopedia”, which suggests “a number of interpretations which are interrelated” and with which “the reader must negotiate their own path through the network possibilities”(Crow, 2003, p. 167). Therefore, a piece of graphic design as well as art, is incomplete until the reader interprets it. Furthermore, The openness implies also a pleasure, the attention on the aesthetic of the sign.

This concept of the reader reached its extreme consequences with the Barthes’ declaration of the Death of the author in favour of the Birth of the reader.

The effects of Post-structuralism in Graphic design were enormous and different. On one side, the emphasis on the openness of meaning “has been incorporated ... into a romantic theory of self-expression” (Lupton, Miller, p.9). On the other side, Deconstructionism gave birth to typography as discourse, that started with Katherine McCoy’s researches at Cranbrook Academy in the mid-80s. She used deconstruction as analysis, in order to understand “dynamics and intentions of communication and finally discover new ways of encouraging the audience’s participation to “open up” meaning, so that audiences could be involved in its construction and interpretation. She wanted to elevate the status of designers within the process of authorship.

Consequently, typography took on a different role from the Modernist’s one, whose aim was to reach universality, objectivity, and functionality. Typography was subordinated to the text and its content. As Ruder (1967, p. 168) said “It is not the typographer’s business to interpret literature in his own way. Literature can speak for itself”; his task was to make easier reading.” However, Ruder himself did not propose the invisibility of the designer (Warde, 1932). In fact, he said that in advertising “it is left almost completely open to the typographer to interpret the copy in his own personal way... The importance of the message... must be brought out by typographical means, for it is the visual impact on the public that matters and not so much the legibility.”

c) Breaking the rules

Postmodernism has become synonym of “breaking the rules” because the majority of rules set by Modernism were refused. One example is the cage of the rigid grids. Grid, “which is all about control” (Lupton p.113), was something sacred for Modernism, , as Muller-Brockmann’s words (1981, p.10-11) confirm: “Working with the grid system means submitting to laws of universal validity.” It was useful to systematize, clarify, “penetrate to the essentials”, cultivate objectivity”. The aim was to achieve the “architectural dominion over surface and space” and simplicity. It can not be denied that grids save money and time, but designers become a mere vehicle for communication. In the majority of cases, as Keedy (2006, p.17) said, it is only a matter of laziness. “Simple methodologies generate simple results... The idea that it is “really difficult to do something simple very well” is a load of Modernist propaganda (crap), but will always be very popular with lazy and unimaginative designers.”

Too structured design is not necessary to build a good communication. The Modernist designer has got a demiurgic role as guide of the reading process, which

was based on a simplified concept of communication, as proposed by Jacobson (1966). This presupposed that the meaning as finite and the reader as a passive receiver so that his viewing can be controlled by the designer.

The aim to control has been confirmed also by using hierarchy, is supposed to help readers navigate the flow of content. Nevertheless the traditional concept of hierarchy has been revisited because of the spread of the new media as the Internet, whose structure is the hypertext in which parataxis is mixed to hypotaxis. It is liquid space where any forms of linearity has been lost and (Lupton p.69)

According to McMurtrie (1929, pp.40-42), in a sort of Manifesto of Modernism, "The primary function of typography is to convey a message to the comprehension of the readers... Some of these readers may not be particularly interested in the message; hence it is necessary to set it out in type in such manner that it may be read with the greatest possible ease and speed." Moreover, he stressed the importance of clarity and legibility in order to catch readers attention.

Nevertheless, starting from the point that "Invisible typefaces do not exist" (Unger, 1992, p. 108),

Legibility is only a matter of being used to something: "It is the reader's familiarity with faces that accounts for their legibility" (Licko, 1990, p.12). Furthermore, it is "dependent upon the goal: if it's supposed to be legible, it should be, If it's not supposed to be, it shouldn't be" (Scher quoted in Byrne and Witte, 1990). As a result, it depends on the purpose and the intention of the designer.

In the digital era, type design is, and has to be, "quirky, personal and unreservedly subjective" because the aim is to "promote multiple rather than fixed readings, to provoke the reader into becoming an active participant in the construction of the message." (Poynor, 1991, p. 9) Hence, it becomes necessary to "stress the individuality, the originality of each piece of work", above all because we live in a "glocal" society (Bauman), in which the tendency to differentiation has been increased in each segments of life. In fact, designers as Keedy felt the necessity to produce specific typeface to fit specific purposes. Typeface in itself becomes a form that carries meaning, and that it has to be able to engage our intellect (Baines quoted in Felton, 2006, p.15).

Typeface and typography have become images that, differently from Marinetti and Apollinaire, are not necessarily pictorially linked to the meaning they are conveying. This implies that form has not to be unavoidably subordinated to its function. The categories of reading and seeing have to be actively mixed (Lupton, 1996).

Therefore, type can entertain, amuse, persuade, beyond the meaning and its exploration.

It can be said that the context of reception of messages is crucial. We can assume that citizens of contemporary metropolis are bombarded by continuous visual messages and their life-style is characterized by an accelerating rhythm. People who live in metropolis have been defined by Simmel as intrinsically "blasé". This feature makes reference to the huge number of stimuli that people have to be able to manage in order to be not overwhelmed by them. In order to protect themselves, people have developed lower levels of sensitiveness. As a result, they are disenchanted, bored and indifferent towards the several changing images their glance embraces.

It becomes evident that designers have to find very effective ways to attract

audience's attention, and anonymous and neutral posters, that work "directly and vividly" (McMurtrie (1929, p. 40-42), do not seem to be efficient in terms of communication. The messages have to be strong and powerful; they have to engage the indifferent and tired reader, by involving and creating an interaction with him. It is certainly true that a direct communication is functional to the short-time people own. However, the time spent unproductively in Non-places (Augé, 1995) has been increasing considerably. Non-places are emblematic of the transient nature of our society and they offer to advertising huge displaying spaces and the possibility to be read during people wait for travelling and shopping.

According to (McMurtrie (1929, p. 40-42): "The outward form of modern typography is of little importance in itself; the expression of the sense of the copy is vital. Easy comprehension of the message, which in typography represents function, is therefore the determinant of form." Further, "Pretty layouts" divert attention from the message itself to the physical form of its typography, which has not to be considered as an end in itself, but "only as a means to the end that the message be read." According to him, ornaments should be "organic" to the copy, and should promote its comprehension.

It can be argued that in the Post-modern culture, defined by (Mirzoeff, 1999) as "visual", the importance of the sight has grown because of the power gained by the visual media of communication. For this sentences such as (McMurtrie's sound obsolete. In fact, nowadays, form and appealing images are able to satisfy the pre-rational needs of humankind.

Aesthetics is "the way we communicate through the senses" and it is "immediate, perceptual and emotional". The new mantra should be "Form follows emotion", rather than function, and this Aesthetic Imperative represents the "increased claims of pleasure and self-expression" (Postrel, 2003, p.10) against the rigidity, dullness, and boredom typical of Modernist design (Felton, 2006).

As (Keedy (1993) said, the notion of universal "good taste" does not exist anymore: "Everything should be permitted, as long as context is rigorously and critically scrutinized. Diversity and excellence are not mutually exclusive".

Conclusion

As Postmodernism has been spread, the designer/typographer has changed radically his role from being a mere conveyer of meaning to an active participant in the communication process with the reader (Wild, 1992). New typography has understood that in order to be successful, it has to engage, involve and entertain readers. It has to leave them free to explore the opened meaning in the playful and dynamic process of constructing interpretation.

Form has not longer been considered as subordinated to the function, but it contributes to activate the other side of reality: the reader's emotionality.

As a result, both brain and emotion of the reader are successfully engaged in the process which is very different from the authoritative and feedback-less Modernist way of communication.

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