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Designing Identity

Based on the session curated by
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Designing Identity: Historical Perspectives
Chiara Barbieri, Trond Klevgaard, Tania Messell and David Preston

As four History of Design research students focused on graphic design we are interested in sharing our findings with each other, and in creating collective outputs that draw on each of our projects. Following a few initial meetings, we decided to plan an event that looked at corporate identity, as the topic holds relevance for each of us. The Humanities Research Forum, as an informal space for discussing and presenting developing research, was thought a good venue for an afternoon of work-in-progress type presentations. David Preston delivered a paper on the developing language of design identity in Britain. Examining the rhetoric used by practitioners and critics, he attempted to underline important changes in the way that design identity was practiced and understood in the latter half of the twentieth century. Chiara Barbieri explored the Italian approach to identity design by looking at the companies Olivetti, Pirelli and Cordigliano-Italsider. She examined Italian 'industrial style' and in-house graphic departments in relation to her research on the professionalization of graphic design in Italy. Tania Messell presented a section from her research on corporate identity programmes in France (1950–1975), and used the opportunity to question issues of methodology in the historical study of the practice. Finally, Trond Klevgaard connected the pre-history of corporate identity manuals to his research on functionalist typography in Scandinavia, by discussing a Norwegian propaganda handbook from the 1930s.

The event was opened by David, who presented his research on 'Rhetorical milestones in the development of identity design in Britain'. Tracing the transition from 'house style', through 'corporate identity', to 'branding', he sought to establish a distinction between pre-war identity schemes focussed on logos, and those all-encompassing programmes of the post-war era that ushered in a new

culture of design practice in Britain. David considered the issues around using language as a research tool in and of itself, drawing on Adrian Forty's text *Words and Buildings* (Thames & Hudson, 2004) to underline the importance of the words we choose to use in our own research. He explored the different functions of the keywords we attach to research, and how these words can reveal of our own agendas and ideals, knowingly or not. His study revealed a commonality of language emerging between practitioners and critics, with themes around consistency and standardisation overwhelming any concern for design diversity. Amongst the audience questions were raised about the wider political connotations of such authoritarian design values, which led to a lively but inconclusive debate amongst the participants.

Chiara further expanded the vocabulary of design identity by talking about Italian 'industrial style'.[1] Looking at works by Giovanni Pintori (1912–1999), Erberto Carboni (1899–1984), Ezio Bonini (1923–1988), Eugenio Carmi (b.1920) and the Studio Boggeri for the typewriter manufacturer Olivetti, the tyre manufacturer Pirelli and the steel factory Cornigliano-Italsider, she illustrated the Italian approach to design identity from the post-war period to the mid-1960s. Eloquently defined by the Argentinian designer and design theorist, Tomás Maldonado, as "unity through diversity",[2] Italian 'industrial style' is a recognisable image and a coherent aesthetic, based on a method rather than on a rigid systematization of the visual programme. The talk raised questions about the difference between the use of in-house graphic departments versus external consultant agencies, and explored the prerequisites, causes and consequences of internal management of the corporate image. Chiara ended with three questions to open the discussion that followed the talk: Is there a relation between the professionalization

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1. The term 'industrial style' is borrowed from Carlo Vinti. *Gli Anni dello Stile Industriale 1948-1965. Immagine e Politica Culturale nella Grande Impresa Italiana* Venice: Marsilio, 2007.
2. Tomás Maldonado. *Disegno Industriale: un Riesame Milan*: Feltrinelli, 2008: p.68.

of graphic design in Italy and the development of a more standard-ised approach to corporate image from the mid-1960s onwards? Is the appearance of the identity manualin the 1960s connected to the delegation of the corporate image management to external consultant agencies? Could Italian 'industrial style' be a model for contemporary identity design based on ideas offlexible and generative identities?

Consequently, Tania shared some of her findings about French post-war corporate identity programmes which have previously been neglected in the country's design historiography. In order to fully appraise the introduction of the practice, her work compares the programmes developed by corporations active in different sectors between 1950 and 1975. For the Humanities Research Forum she presented a comparative analysis of the five and dime store Prisunic and the electrical equipment producer Merlin Gerin, whose different requirements affected the design and application of each programme. While Prisunic faced the challenge of creating total environments for its 350 branches, the electrical equipment producer Merlin Gerin indeed relied primarily on clear graphics for its promotional docu-ments, due to the complexity of its products. Beyond the commission-ers' different profiles, the multidisciplinary character of corporate identity programmes (which involves graphics, objects and space to varying degrees) further complexifies their study, as the variables taken into account triple. The talk thus questioned the need for methodological tools to assist design historians to map the introduc-tion of cohesive corporate identity programmes.

Trond then talked about the *Håndbok i agitasjon og propaganda (Handbook for Agitation and Propaganda)*, issued to local elected representatives in 1934, by the Norwegian Labour Party (Det Norske Arbeiderparti). This item is interesting because although the practice of corporate identity is considered by many to begin with Peter Behrens's work for the AEG (Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft) from 1907 onwards, the first corporate identity manuals are not considered to have appeared before the late 1950s. Some efforts have been made to single out precursors to the manual. One well-known example of this is the prolific American graphic design writer Steven
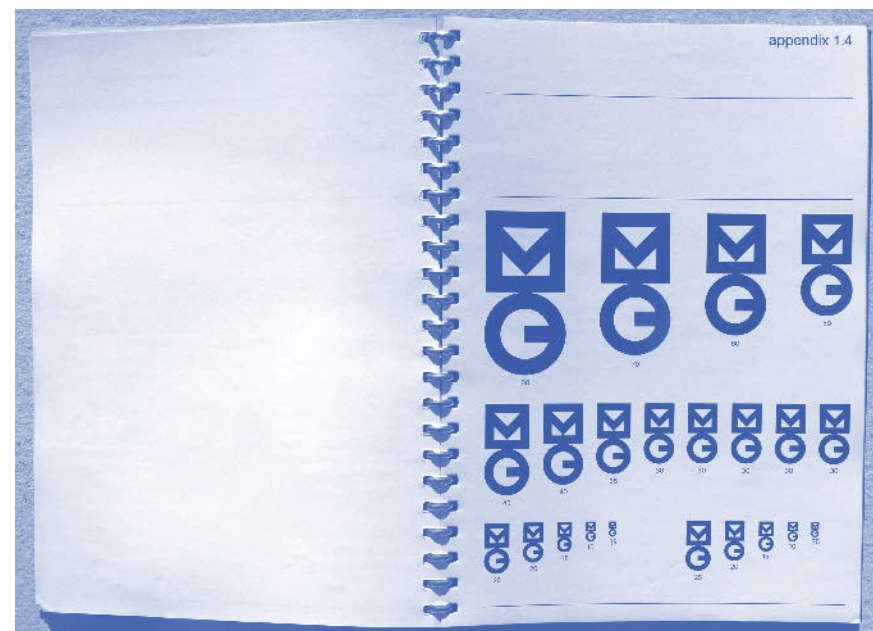
Design manual by Gérard Guerre for Merlin Gerin, 1967. Courtesy of Gérard Guerre.

Heller's work on what he terms the "Nazi graphics standards manual" – the *Organisationsbuch der NSDAP (Organisational Handbook of the NSDAP, 1936)*.[3] However, as Heller freely admits, this book does not contain many of the traditional trappings of a modern manual – such as how to construct the logo, its measurements, and guidance on correct and incorrect usage across a number of applications – all of which are included in the labour party handbook. Its creation was spurred on by the 1933 publication of *Trepil mod Hagekors (Three Arrows Against the Swastika)*, by the Russian émigré Sergei Tschachotin (1883–1973, later known as Serge Chakotin), on Danish–Norwegian socialist publishing house Frem Forlag (Forward Publishing House).[4] Before fleeing to Denmark in 1933, Tschachotin had been working as head of propaganda for the Reichsbanner, the militant wing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). In his book, he argued that social democrats should learn from the Nazis' propaganda success and emulate their methods, focusing on emotional rather than rational appeal. Though influential, *Trepil mod Hagekors* does not explain why the agitprop handbook looked the way it did. Trond argued that the visual similarity it shares with a modern manual may have a practical explanation. The Norwegian Labour Party expected local members, many of them with little visual training, to produce their own materials. At the same time it wanted these materials to have a consistent appearance across constituencies, so some guidelines were needed. In this sense the agitprop handbook served a similar purpose to a modern manual, and that it therefore was devised along the same lines should not be so surprising.

As a continuation of this thought-provoking event, the group is currently planning a one-day symposium on the subject of graphic design and design coordination, scheduled for June 2015. Given the prevailing gap on the topic in the field of history of design, it will seek to approach the subject through a number of enquiries ranging from methodology and terminology, to design management and design professionalization.

Chiara Barbieri is an MPhil/PhD candidate in the RCA/V&A History of Design programme, her research explores the professionalization of Italian graphic design by looking at vocational institutes, design studios and mediating channels, from the early-1930s to the late-1950s.

Trond Klevgaard is an independent graphic designer and an MPhil/PhD candidate in History of Design at the RCA/V&A for which he is researching functionalist typography in Scandinavia.

Tania Messell holds an MA from the RCA/V&A History of Design programme during which she investigated early French corporate identities, and currently pursues a PhD on the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) at the University of Brighton.

David Preston is an independent graphic designer and Senior Lecturer at Central Saint Martins, his PhD research in History of Design at the RCA/V&A explores the influence of emergent programmatic approaches to visual identity in post-war Britain.

3. Heller, Steven. "The Master Race's Graphic Masterpiece." Design Observer, August 2, 2011. http://observatory.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=24358.
4. A German language version was also published: Tschachotin, Sergei. *Dreipfeil gegen Hakenkreuz*. Copenhagen: Verlag Aktiver Sozialismus, 1933.