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Lost in Translation: The Emergence and Erasure of ‘New Thinking’ within Graphic Design Criticism in the 1990s

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This article revisits the early 1990s, identifying examples of critical journalism that introduced the idea of ‘new thinking’ in American graphic design to a British audience. Whilst such thinking is articulated in terms of postmodern and post-structuralist tenets, it will be argued that the distinct visual style of postmodern artefacts belies an eclectic philosophical constitution. In the process of describing emergent American practices at Cranbrook Academy of Art in this period, for example, Ellen Lupton argues for a distinction to be made between intellectual (post-structuralist) and superficial (postmodern) approaches to visual form. This paper indicates, however, that in spite of this initial attention to distinct methodological concerns, there has been a tendency to oversimplify the postmodern story in graphic design writing and to use historical sources in highly selective ways. Indeed, close examination of texts from the period reveals how new thinking in America is underpinned by a complex range of philosophical ideas, with the (seemingly) contradictory impulse of phenomenology, in particular, making a dominant contribution to the mix. This article argues that it is time to reverse these reductive tendencies in British criticism and to reinvigorate its understanding of this transformative period with a return to these postmodern sources.

Keywords: design criticism—design journalism—graphic design—postmodernism—post-structuralism—pragmatic design

This article considers the critical reception of postmodern graphic design within the international journal, Eye, when a wave of ‘new thinking’ crossed the Atlantic and was reviewed by this influential publication in the 1990s. It offers detailed analysis of the first articles to be published on new thinking, discussing the ways in which innovations from the United States were typically identified and reviewed in the UK. This article proposes that these early readings of emergent American graphic design have established what proves to be, retrospectively, an influential critical framework for reviewing postmodernist approaches in Britain. This is especially true of its negative interpretations, which characterize postmodern design as too esoteric and socially detached to function as an effective discourse in design; it is deemed to be too implicated within ‘the art and architecture worlds’, for example, to establish meaningful and appropriate connections with business and the media.

This article demonstrates how the persistence of this early critique poses an epistemological challenge to critics working in the field of graphic design today, a problem that can be largely attributed to the specificity of its original form of publication and distribution. It should be noted, for example, that the early readings of ‘new’ graphic design employ a critical mode that is dominant in Britain, one that has a tendency to summarize debates for its implied audience of graphic design professionals. This paradigm is known as critical journalism and is described by Eye’s founding editor, Rick Poynor, as a...
type of writing that bridges two disparate worlds and, furthermore, a perceived gap in
the publishing market. In the early 1990s, Poynor describes a form of writing that is
constituted of different genres. It is ‘the kind of writing you find in the book review
pages of a Sunday newspaper. It’s often written by academics who’ve made a pact with
journalism. They understand the needs of a general readership, but they still write at
quite a high level’.4 It will be argued that whilst this hybrid approach is appropriate for
a magazine circulating independently of academic publishing, this condensation of
academia with journalism has repercussions for those involved in the development
of critical thinking within parallel, non-journalistic settings (such as the art school or
university). Its reductive tendencies become problematic when critical journalism is
seamlessly (re-) introduced into formal academic settings to form, for example, the
mainstay of curricula reading.5

Poynor states (1994) that graphic design criticism is still a novel idea; indeed, critical
journalism is depicted as stepping into a critical and intellectual vacuum. He states that,
‘I still haven’t heard anyone use the term in Britain’.6 In this respect, this article argues
for the necessity of a return to origins when discussing postmodern practices in the
field of graphic design. Critics need to be particularly wary of the early reviews of new
thinking in America, despite the historical proximity of these texts to emergent prac-
tices. This article will show how, by the very nature of their discourse, critical journalists
have encouraged the elision of ambivalence and contradiction within postmodern
thinking. Furthermore, it will be argued that this reduction of conceptual complexity is
all the more problematic in relation to a type of practice that has ambivalence and
contradiction as characteristics of its methodological approach.7

Through the process of offering close readings of two early texts from the field of crit-
critical journalism in Britain, this article re-establishes the parameters of the initial debate
on postmodern design. Typically, for example, these texts articulate a series of binary
oppositions in relation to postmodern practice, such as style versus content, image
versus text, illegible versus legible, chaos versus systems and, ultimately, the postmodern
versus the modern. Consequently, there is a real danger of critical erosion, whereby the
nuances of philosophical thinking are superseded by a set of common dualisms. This
article will argue that critical journalism tends to generate meanings around postmodern
design that are constructed in paradigmatic relation to the-other-than-postmodern;
that is to say, in relation to a sign that lies at the heart of contemporary discourse, prag-
matic design. Indeed, in the process of reading articles from Eye magazine, pragmatic
design emerges as the dominant yet irreducible marker against which all other emer-
gent practices are situated.8

As a result, this article identifies pragmatic design as a repetitious element within
graphic design discourse; it can be traced, in underlying and implicit terms, within dis-
cussions of non-idealized (postmodern) forms of professional practice. The central
argument here, therefore, is that new thinking and pragmatic design act as counter-
foils to one another (they contaminate one another). Ultimately, they are neither inside
nor outside the terms of each other but circulate around each other as co-dependent
concepts.9 When postmodernism is asserted in terms of a discrete stylistic moment in
the history of graphic design (a moment characterized by historical rupture, layered
visual artefacts and illegible products of communication), it is pictured against the time-
less precepts of pragmatic design.10 In this way, the reader can begin to recognize the
ways in which the complex philosophical constitutions of postmodern design have
been erased from contemporary graphic design criticism, gradually contaminated by
an idealization of pragmatic design.11

The Emergence and Erasure of ‘New Thinking’
Discussions of new thinking in Britain

This article starts with the detailed analysis of two texts from the field of critical journalism in the early 1990s, which introduce and thereby establish the parameters of discussion around new thinking in Britain. The examples have been selected from *Eye* magazine, the first British publication to analyse creative developments in the United States in depth. According to its founding editor, Rick Poynor, British journals in this period were reluctant to cover the postmodern story. Poynor states how this reluctance to engage with events overseas provided his own publication with a market edge, as it engaged in depth with the latest trends and issues in graphic design. Poynor remembers how the earliest issues of *Eye* magazine were full of American examples, indeed, by his own admission *Eye* only featured ‘very much’ British design from 1995 onwards.

Significantly, Poynor also comments that there were neither British writers nor designers to provide effective commentary on these latest developments. He states that:

> In the magazine’s early days I felt the interesting experimentation was happening elsewhere. When we ran the Cranbrook story in the third issue, in 1991... *I went to an American writer, Ellen Lupton, because there simply wasn’t anyone in Britain at that point who would have been capable of writing the kind of article she produced*. (Emphasis added)

It therefore comes as no surprise that the first significant introductory text in Britain on new thinking was commissioned for, and published in, the third issue of *Eye*; furthermore, it was written by an American author. Entitled ‘The Academy of Deconstructed Design’ (1991), the article ostensibly describes the distinct formal characteristics of new graphic practices in America and is illustrated with a range of print-based examples.

In Ellen Lupton’s account, the new thinking in America is attributed to a small community of designers working in the Department of Two-Dimensional Design at Cranbrook Academy of Art. Describing Cranbrook’s work in this period, Lupton lists the most striking features of postmodern design in terms of: ‘layering, spacing, distorting, interweaving, fragmenting, decentring, bit mapping and so on’. Lupton then identifies two designers who are associated with these techniques: Jeffery Keedy (a mature student) and Katherine McCoy (a tutor and co-founder). In the process, it becomes clear that postmodern graphic design could be perceived as a relatively isolated and highly contextualized practice, rather than an American phenomenon per se.

Whilst Lupton argues for a distinct visual idiom at Cranbrook, she nevertheless identifies a wider cultural movement. Lupton describes how American graphic design is full of examples of postmodern practice, suggesting that it is widely practised in the mainstream. In the wider context, however, Lupton views postmodern design as superficial, stylistic and playful (as a transitory visual genre). When practised by Cranbrook, postmodern design is seen as deep, intellectual and rigorous (as a critical methodology). In fact, Lupton argues that Cranbrook should be clearly identified as poststructuralist (rather than postmodernist) in its tendencies, by which she means critically—rather than merely historically—constituted. She describes, for instance, how Cranbrook Academy is actively engaged in the re-formulation of the graphic artefact and, in this respect, is participating in a larger critical movement that ‘has shifted to scepticism about “meaning” as a fixed and stable entity’.
What makes Cranbrook’s output distinctive, in this account, is its engagement with post-structuralist writing. Lupton makes a feature of the Academy’s distinctive ‘intellectual commitment’.22 One of her central propositions is that graphic design at Cranbrook has a critical attitude as well as a postmodern style; it is post-structuralist in its method before it is postmodernist in its visual mannerisms.24 The article concludes that the work at Cranbrook is actively re-writing historical precedents and esteemed traditions, challenging the (moral) authority of the objective, universal and systems-based principles of modern design. For example, Cranbrook is depicted as an Academy that consciously rejects the aspiration of modern designers to create ‘universally legible sign systems’.25

Having described the way in which Cranbrook’s formal experiments broaden graphic design’s visual and intellectual vocabulary in the contemporary scene, Lupton ultimately shows herself to be critical of Cranbrook’s approach. It should be noted that Lupton’s article is a highly subjective account, encapsulating the bold interpretative spirit of Eye magazine’s early editorial policy. Despite an initial appreciation of the intellectual aspirations of Cranbrook designers, Lupton accuses the Department of Two-Dimensional Design of ultimately nurturing an ‘artistic, self-contained genre’ that fails to look beyond the graphic artefact to the world of business and media.26 Indeed, Lupton accuses the work of being inaccessible, claiming that it speaks exclusively to its own audience of artistic designers.27 Having described the way in which Cranbrook’s formal experiments broaden graphic design’s visual and intellectual vocabulary in the contemporary scene, therefore, Lupton offers a dim view of its contribution to design history, showing herself to be ultimately critical of new thinking.

It should be noted that, in this regard, Lupton’s article encapsulates the independent interpretative spirit of Eye magazine’s early editorial policy.28 The article works within the emerging framework of critical journalism, which had begun to assert itself in relation to the dry academic world of design history and the superficial news coverage offered by the design press.29 Poynor wished ‘to attract readers and hold their attention’ (with a new kind of design writing), in a way that ironically mirrors the aspirations of Cranbrook design (to hold a viewer’s attention with a new kind of thinking). Poynor describes how, from the outset, Eye magazine consciously asserted a direct connection with the professional field of graphic design, bringing the opinions of practitioners-turned-writers to the fore of contemporary commentary.30 He states that the aspiration is to educate designers and members of the public about alternative views of, and possibilities for, design.31

Lupton’s article therefore maps out significant territories in graphic design discourse and, in its turn, is marked by its own set of ideological priorities and concerns. One such intellectual trace is an inclination towards the production of oppositions, the most explicit of which is an opposition established between postmodern and post-structuralist design.32 Nonetheless, Lupton also develops a wider series of dualistic antagonisms, which move beyond the postmodern/modern, and include the intellectual/pragmatic, the stylistic/content-driven and the expressive–subjective/functional–objective axis of design.33 In the second half of the article, Lupton then takes an interpretative turn and makes a strong argument for developing socially responsible modes of graphic practice. Indeed, she refers/defers to pragmatic design as a professional (and socially accountable) counterpart to the aesthetic (and conceptually playful) attitude of post-structuralist design. Lupton describes how, unlike Cranbrook design, a pragmatic approach keeps in touch with ‘real-life’ situations.34 In particular, she celebrates pragmatic design for being highly responsive to the rapidly changing relations of consumer culture and
for working with familiar visual idioms (drawn from everyday life). By implication, postmodern design is now reviewed as esoteric and alienating.

Having instigated a discussion of postmodern design, therefore, Lupton concludes with a treatise on pragmatic design. She argues that pragmatic designers operate with the most socially pertinent discourses for design and pay attention to audiences in accountable ways. In the process of describing postmodern tendencies, pragmatic design emerges in relation to its antithesis, that is to say, in direct and antagonistic relief to the academic approach of post-structuralist design itself. As a result, a pragmatic approach is thus subtly delineated as an idealized form of graphic practice. Lupton’s sympathies are clearly situated in the pragmatic arena; indeed, an uncontested assumption emerges at the heart of Lupton’s account, whereby the commercial world of business and the media is always already conceived as the most appropriate and available discourse for mediation by graphic designers.

What appears to be missing from Lupton’s account, however, is a sense of the wider complexities of this story of historical, moral and aesthetic transition. Within the imperatives of critical journalism, one can detect the subtle erasure of intellectual ambiguity, as one type of graphic practice is simply set against another. As Lupton’s account reveals, pragmatic design is typically and irreducibly located between high modern and postmodern systems of communication. Common sense seems to determine that pragmatism should be understood as a classic approach to design, one that is situated at the interstices of rupture and tradition. Indeed, the anonymity of pragmatic designers has the ultimate effect of conferring a ubiquitous authority on their practice, which (apparently) can neither be reduced nor explained.

It will now be demonstrated how this tendency towards the erasure of intellectual ambiguity within this account of new thinking is characteristic of critical journalism in the 1990s, which continues to develop a summative and binary thesis towards postmodern design. The second example of critical journalism in Britain was featured in Eye magazine in 1992, a year after Lupton’s original account. This is also the year after Jon Wozencroft launched the experimental font periodical, Fuse, announcing in the first issue that, ‘abuse is part of the process’. Thus, critical journalism in Britain was now developing within a buoyant and changing professional scene.

Against this backdrop, another feature was published by Eye magazine, written again by an American practitioner-turned-writer. In ‘The Layered Vision Thing’ (1992), Mike Mills continues the dyadic motif of post-structuralist versus postmodern design, focusing on the example of Cranbrook and arguing, like Lupton, for the wider recognition and value of post-structuralism as a critical methodology. In fact, this example actually accuses Cranbrook designers of selling this methodology short.

Mills demonstrates enthusiasm for Cranbrook’s ambitious intellectual approach to design and acknowledges the widespread professional antagonism being expressed towards its new thinking. He notes that ‘There is a general suspicion that postmodernism is a conspiracy set loose by pretentious academics and ambitious designers inclined to overestimate the meaning of their work’. In fact, he notes that within this professional climate it is all ‘too easy’ to go along with this negative viewpoint, in a way that draws attention to the antagonistic and polarizing tendencies within graphic design discourse in this period.

Mills suggests that this general suspicion of postmodernism is based on an anti-intellectual impulse within professional circles and implores designers to pay more attention to this
model of new thinking and ‘its rich potential for design practice’. Mills reminds the reader that post-structuralism—as a set of discrete intellectual ideas—invites a radical questioning of conventional attitudes towards creative practice, challenging objective and rational accounts with ideas about the instability of meaning and the importance of social and cultural context in the interpretative process. He argues that:

Post-structuralist critics have shifted our attention away from the intentions of the designer and have critiqued the idea that a cultural product (whether a novel, a car or a typeface) has an ‘essential’ and ‘transhistorical’ meaning. Instead they treat books, cars and typefaces as ‘texts’ which are continually filled with new meanings by different cultures and changing historical contexts in which they exist. Mills notes how post-structuralist writing can highlight the changing interpretations of a specific artefact through time, encouraging an understanding of Helvetica, for example, as social text rather than stable graphic archetype. According to Mills, one is left with the feeling that despite its academic roots, post-structuralist work can be employed creatively to challenge the dominant notion of what counts as ‘good’ design. Like Lupton, he attributes such work with a critical purpose; it is more than just a visual style.

Despite this enthusiasm for post-structuralist writing, however, Mills is critical of its deployment at Cranbrook. Mills asserts that one orthodoxy in design (the modern) is merely being replaced by another (the postmodern), arguing that it contradicts the spirit of post-structuralism to view an artefact as always already subversive; surely this would depend on the contexts of reading (and the interpretation of the reader)? As a consequence, Mills argues that in spite of its progressive ideals about the agency of audiences, Cranbrook design demonstrates strong authorial intentions, anticipating specific types of outcome (such as subversion or innovation). In this respect, the Cranbrook approach is depicted as hypocritical; it is characterized as having the same self-reflexive formalist tendencies as its modernist forebears. Mills therefore sees the work at Cranbrook as focusing exclusively on visual techniques and authorial experimentation. Yet again this interpretation of new thinking is critical of the postmodern approach and, in the process of presenting this view, proposes a series of binary oppositions. This time the antagonisms are played out through aesthetic, intellectual and formal approaches to design, which are set out against social, commercial and audience-aware practices. In the end, Mills calls for a coherent and concerted deployment of a ‘writerly’ post-structuralist theory within graphic design, one that goes beyond the ‘readerly’ aesthetic domain of formalist experimentation. Despite this call for a rigorous deconstruction of the institution of design, even Mills fails to use post-structuralist thinking in his own radical terms. He does not take the opportunity, for instance, to question or contextualize his own reading of the Cranbrook approach. In the process of alluding to inconsistencies in this approach, Mills overlooks the possibility that these inconsistencies may simply be the effect of its postmodern character and post-structuralist engagements; that is to say, he fails to consider the possibility that these inconsistencies are evidence of a varied epistemological constitution, one that encourages a playfulness with visual language, intellectual discourse, cultural value and social context. Surely, these eclectic theories, ideologies and intentions can be viewed as positive attributes of postmodern design, making the very open-ended fluidity of texts possible? Could it be that Cranbrook is the epitome of new thinking not simply because there is a high level of motivation from specific post-structuralist texts but also because it emerges out of a complex network of historical and intellectual origins?
There is a strong indication, having looked at these examples, that an epistemologically eclectic approach to graphic design will always struggle to be valued as a meaningful discourse, especially in a critical climate where new thinking is instinctively placed into a cause-and-effect relation with the idealized form of pragmatic design. It will now be argued, however, that an emergent postmodern discourse of multiple readings corresponds to a complex discourse of multiple origins. By returning to a primary historical text, this article now demonstrates how so-called postmodern/post-structural design draws lines of intellectual flight from a wide range of philosophical constitutions and traditions. Furthermore, new thinking is revealed to work with, as well as against, the epistemologies of modern and/or pragmatic design.

The origins of Cranbrook discourse

This article will now demonstrate that there are other ways of reading the same critical–material practices. These ways not only facilitate a deep discussion of postmodern design but also initiate an investigation into the binary tendencies of critical journalism itself. A close reading of an historical source from this period (one that was used for references by Lupton and Mills themselves) will show how Cranbrook designers were not simply ‘detached’ from the social–historical world of consumer culture but, alternatively, embraced the academy actively as a vital discursive space. This section works with the assumption that the art school context provides a temporary respite from the immediate and pressing concerns of business and the media, and an opportunity to play with less familiar kinds of language, values and discourse. Closer analysis of an original Cranbrook text clearly indicates how its associates are engaged in both a peripatetic and eclectic approach to practice; they are experimentally and methodologically playful rather than resolutely aesthetic and progressively strategic. For example, a quote from Jeffery Keedy in Lupton’s own article states that:

It was the poetic aspect of Roland Barthes which attracted me, not the Marxist analysis. After all, we’re designers working in a consumer society and while social critique is a good idea, I wouldn’t want to put it into practice.\textsuperscript{50}

According to Lupton, this statement can be taken as evidence of a commitment to critical theory and towards poetic–aesthetic modes of graphic practice. The statement is interpreted as posing a challenge to pragmatic approaches, and hence to commercial and business oriented modes of design. In fact, this statement also exhibits an ambivalence of position, whereby the experimental designer clearly expresses the limits of aesthetic–poetic practice and concedes how graphic design is inevitably oriented towards the consumerist sphere (or the pragmatic). From this perspective, the quote highlights Keedy’s tactical and temporally sensitive sense of engagement with post-structuralist ideas. It would appear that he enjoys the way in which the aesthetic–poetic domain can postpone the inevitability of meaning; it affords an act of deferral that suspends an immediate and responsive engagement with markets \textsuperscript{[1]}\textsuperscript{51}. 

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\textsuperscript{51} The quote is from a private correspondence with Jeffery Keedy at Southampton Solent University on November 11, 2013.
Furthermore, Keedy appears less interested in the Marxist critique of post-structuralist writing than his critics allow. Within the quotation is an expression of ambivalence towards a permanent state of subversion. Hence, even Cranbrook designers—supposedly caught up in the detached academic world of radically esoteric texts—demonstrate an awareness of the world beyond the immediate sphere of a postgraduate art school. Indeed, Keedy's words suggest that one can have an interest in art, architecture, critical theory and academia without excluding a wider range of discourses, such as commercial imperatives and professional commitments.

This scope for ambivalence and contradiction within new thinking is further evidenced by a close textual reading of a catalogue, first published in 1990, alongside a touring exhibition of Cranbrook's work. Entitled, Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse, this catalogue forms the basis of the early critical readings in Britain, with both Lupton and Mills invoking tracts from this primary text. Indeed, these readings draw on a highly selective range of extracts from the catalogue (focusing on Katherine McCoy's entry to the exclusion of others). As a result, one can detect notable oversights, simplifications and imbalances within these accounts.

In ‘Transgression and Delight: Graphic Design at Cranbrook’, Lorraine Wild (a Cranbrook alumna) argues that designers at the Academy, far from being detached academicians, were interested in generating active dialogue with audiences. According to this view, active audience participation was of central importance to Cranbrook's approach, with Wild describing student projects in terms of a search for deeper understanding of 'subjective visual interpretation' on the part of both producer and viewer. Wild acknowledges that, whilst the work achieves a characteristic visual aesthetic, Cranbrook's distinctive visual style is motivated by a desire to engage with the process of constructing messages, over and above the desire to communicate a specific meaning. Significantly, Wild argues, 'the designer becomes a participant in the delivery of the message, not just the translator'.

The formal experiments of Cranbrook designers are thereby linked to a desire for enriching the designer–audience relation. Wild indicates that as well as showing concern for the internal relationships of form (or aesthetic objects), Cranbrook designers are interested in the exchange between subjects and objects (or aesthetic experiences). This is an aspect of aesthetic design that is overlooked by the critical journalists.

In keeping with the early readings in Britain, a number of themes develop within this catalogue, specifically around the inventive nature of Cranbrook discourse. In ‘Grounds for Discovery’ (1990), for example, Niels Diffrient argues that, under the leadership of co-founders Katherine and Michael McCoy, the Department of Two-Dimensional Design broke away from modernist approaches ‘couched in the International Style and Bauhaus tenets’ and pursued an interest in ‘the subtleties of human interaction’. This interest led to an exploration of ‘the essential messiness and ambiguity of the human condition’. In pursuit of this goal, students were encouraged to challenge recognized frameworks and principles of good design. In particular, notions of orderliness and clarity came under scrutiny, with the typographic grid becoming a focal point for subversive play and experiment. Indeed, Lorraine Wild observes how: The beginning of the McCoy’s’ program at Cranbrook can be seen as part of a wave of activity in U.S. design programs that was directed toward more high-level experimental work . . . that not only trained people for professional practice, but encouraged them to work speculatively, beyond the professional model. (Emphasis added)
In this respect, Cranbrook is characterized as being a significant centre of research and development in graphic design. Furthermore, the early readings of postmodernism and graphic design in *Eye* magazine are in accord with this primary source. Katherine McCoy, for example, describes how Cranbrook embraced a range of teaching methods and philosophies, with the students setting the agenda themselves. She suggests that discussions at Cranbrook moved freely from ‘the technical to the mythical’, taking in such diverse influences as the writings of Martin Heidegger and the day-to-day ‘complexity, variety, contradiction and sublimity of life [itself]’.60

In this way, McCoy establishes eclecticism as a major characteristic within the Department of Two-Dimensional Design. She celebrates a pluralist approach to design methods whereby highly motivated practitioners develop their own pathways through the programme. As an aspect of this ideological complexity and playfulness, McCoy acknowledges how post-structuralist literary theory and postmodern art criticism were part of the Cranbrook mix. These disciplines contributed to the curriculum in the form of informal readings and discussions, which took place in the studios from the early 1980s onwards. She describes how these ‘new influences’ built on the department’s existing interest in linguistic theory (especially semiotics), and were part of a larger re-evaluation of graphic expression.61 Indeed, the desire to adopt such an eclectic range of strategies to graphic production is attributed to the desire to challenge the over-arching ‘sterility’ of ‘universal design’ that is identified as a stultifying aesthetic dogma.62

It is significant that McCoy’s text informs the work of critical journalism. One aspect of this source that is underplayed, however, is the aspiration to heighten a dialogue between graphic design and its audience. As with Diffrient, McCoy alludes to the ‘messiness of human experience’ and identifies human interaction as a source of particular interest to the new critical discourse.63 She describes how:

> the first place we looked was language—the world of semiotics and structural linguistics, and the use of analogy and metaphor to lift the meaning of design beyond its immediate circumstances.64

According to McCoy, it was during this linguistic phase that a strong sense of critical self-reflection developed at Cranbrook, whereby graphic objects became increasingly layered in an attempt to embed deeper messages within their structure.65 McCoy describes how layered work has the capacity to carry, ‘more open, critical or personal content with subtexts, deferred meanings, hidden stories and alternative interpretations’.66

McCoy contradicts the notion of an autonomous, detached and disinterested aesthetic discourse. Whilst the notion of graphic authorship is an emerging concern, Cranbrook designers are also engaged in provoking audiences to construct meaning from graphic artefacts for themselves. According to McCoy, the ‘messiness’ and complexity of their approach signals an interest in experimenting with human interaction, in ways that go beyond a verbal and typographic formalist play.67

In a way that starts to question the early readings of new thinking in Britain, McCoy describes a second stage in Cranbrook’s quest for active audience engagements, whereby the students looked to ‘post-structuralism and phenomenology’ for inspiration.68 McCoy argues that staff and students used these divergent critical tools to explore ‘the encounter between an idea and the programme of use’.69 Rather than simply focusing on the meaning of a message, the designers interrogated traditional
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solutions and critical foundations of graphic forms, broadening out from the linguistic base of pragmatic design. Indeed, McCoy concludes that, ‘Nothing was sacred. Everything was available for questioning and criticism’.  

In a different article within the same volume, entitled ‘The Mannerists of Microelectronics’, Anglo-American writer Hugh Aldersey-Williams highlights the specialized philosophical concerns circulating within graphic design practice at Cranbrook. Aldersey-Williams describes how Cranbrook designers, particularly in the area of product design (led by Michael McCoy), were continually engaged with semantics; that is to say, with a concern for the metaphorical potential and wide range of meanings of individual instances of graphic forms. In the process of this engagement, they embraced a variety of design languages and critical discourses. They employed the ideas of Jean Baudrillard’s *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1983), for example, to explore ‘the cultural, psychological and social domains’ of a work of Graphic Design, turning his critique of capitalist production, ironically, towards the very service of product design.

Nonetheless, Aldersey-Williams argues that, when it came to exploring the idea of authorship, particularly in terms of a signature presence and the producer’s capacity for individual expression, the Cranbrook designers turned to (the old thinking of) phenomenology. This philosophical tradition supported their discussions of intentionality and ‘meaning being a deliberate act of design’. Furthermore, it provided a ‘respectable intellectual underpinning’ for those wishing to explore ways of humanizing products and encouraging deeper subject-object relations (in terms of human interaction, for example). Indeed, Aldersey-Williams sees phenomenology as providing a more holistic view of the designed artefact than linguistic theory, because it considers the aspect of human relationships within and around the object, and focuses on the intimacy of subject–object interaction in design culture.

As Aldersey-Williams argues, ‘the phenomenologists prefer that we should confront the immediate reality of things as they appear to us rather than the complex truths of their underlying nature’. The risk of phenomenology, however, is a weakened capacity for direct social critique. According to Aldersey-Williams, it can fall into the trap of superficial ‘Mannerism’, whereby the surface is over-worked in order to look ‘deep’.

This close reading of the catalogue reveals how new thinking at Cranbrook is ultimately constituted from diverse historical, conceptual and philosophical origins. Whilst McCoy makes meaningful distinctions between post-structuralism and postmodernism (that are clearly employed by Lupton and Mills), other Cranbrook practitioners draw on alternative (and contradictory) intellectual traditions. Daralice Boles, for example, states in the catalogue that: ‘It was “clarity, clarity, clarity” for years; now ambiguity has moved in. It’s a shift away from a structuralist approach to a phenomenological one’. Notions of the postmodern barely pierce Boles’ intellectual horizon, as she highlights the shift from linguistic to humanistic concerns in graphic design criticism. She focuses on how phenomenology plays a specific role in the epistemological mix at Cranbrook, facilitating discussion around the graphic surface, subject–object relations and the experience of looking and interacting. Boles, whose interest lies in the area of furniture design, argues that phenomenology has encouraged a complete re-thinking of the design artefact at Cranbrook, which is no longer perceived as an object to be viewed swiftly but as something to be endured and touched. Boles succinctly summarizes the contribution of phenomenology to the new discourse, stating: ‘a lot of current thinking holds that we should allow the viewer to judge. There’s a new interest in sensuality, materiality. Experience is emphasized’. To this end, residual philosophical principles
can be seen to offer a significant contribution to the new thinking and distinctive visual style of Cranbrook design in the 1980s and 1990s.

In light of this conclusion, it would appear that the early readings of new thinking have based their critique on a highly selective reading of Cranbrook design. Lupton and Mills, for example, have focused almost exclusively on the individual contribution of Cranbrook’s co-founder, Katherine McCoy. This is understandable, as McCoy was the chair of the Department of 2D Design. In the process, these early readings of postmodernism and graphic design have, however, committed the other voices within the discourse to the margins of new thinking; the significance being that these voices carry the weight of residual thinking, such as phenomenological approaches to the designer-audience relation. This tendency to simplify this story of origins, whilst understandable as an imperative within journalistic discourse, has the effect of erasing the complex epistemological constitutions of new thinking in America. Not only this but also the centrality of phenomenology to Cranbrook’s vision seems greatly at odds with its constitution as a new discourse, especially if one is caught up in the idea of postmodern graphic design as a disruptive style and/or intellectual attitude that breaks with modern and universalistic traditions.

Conclusions

If you would have told me ten years ago that I would still be making a case for postmodernism in design in 1995, I probably wouldn’t have believed it because the political imperative that drives modernism-at-all-costs was not evident to me then and I assumed that design would move along with other cultural practices.

This article has described a field of criticism in the 1990s that is characterized by contestation between competing views of graphic design. Whilst the early readings of postmodern practice are relatively sensitive to the complex interrelations of past and present, this article has argued that early invocations of the debate within the field of critical journalism have reduced the modern–postmodern axis into a series of reductive oppositional motifs. This is the result of an evolving mode of critical writing in the field of graphic design, known as critical journalism, and its wider consequences for the academic life of the subject should not go unnoticed.

Whilst ostensibly discussing the new thinking in American practice, the writing in Eye magazine in this period asserts a preferred and idealized form of making. In the process of delineating postmodern/post-structuralist approaches, critical journalism simultaneously achieves two significant moves; firstly, it defers to pragmatic design as the implicit and irreducible paradigm within contemporary graphic design criticism. Secondly, it refers to a series of binary oppositions—such as that between modern and postmodern—that have the effect of erasing the similarities between contemporary and historical practices at the level of epistemological and philosophical constitutions. In light of re-reading some of the original sources from this historical period of criticism, there is evidence of much old thinking within so-called postmodern practice.

The early British commentaries in the field of critical journalism have been shown to abandon the widest aspects of Cranbrook’s complex intellectual approach; indeed, its tendency towards historical and philosophical eclecticism—which includes a strong interest in the residual thinking of phenomenology—have been effectively eclipsed in the postmodern story [1]. Through the process of historical excavation, this article has shown how even a deep discussion of pragmatic design itself has been
displaced (much like phenomenology) by the reductive imperatives of a hybrid discourse, one that is admittedly only part academic. This suggests that there is still work to be done within the academy, in order to make this underlying pragmatic impulse explicit.

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Notes

1 See H. Armstrong, Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the field, Princeton Architectural Press, London, 2009. This is a recent text that attempts to summarize the critical scene according to its own conventions.


5 For a key text on postmodern graphic design circulating within the academy, see R. Poynor, No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism, Lawrence King, London, 1993.

6 Poynor in Keedy, op. cit., p. 1.

7 See notions of parody, pastiche and kitsch outlined in F. Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Verso, London, 1991.

8 It should be noted, however, that the majority of references to pragmatic design come with neither explanation nor qualification. Pragmatic design, it would appear, is a by-word for professional common sense; it invokes the intuitive ‘rightness’ of practice-based design. See N. Currie, ‘Design Rockism’, in The Education of a Graphic Designer, S. Heller (ed.), Allworth Press, New York, 1998, pp. 110–12.

9 This is a process that Jacques Derrida describes as différence, whereby words refer to (and defer to) one another. J. Derrida, Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs, D. B. Allison (trans.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973.


12 Postmodern design, by comparison, was a regular feature of American publishing culture, such as Emigré.


14 In an interview with Mr Keedy in 1994, Poynor admits that his own interest in critical journalism has been stimulated and encouraged by a burgeoning graphic design press in America. He cites Print, CA and Graphis as influences in this respect. Poynor in Keedy, op. cit, p. 1.

15 Ibid., p. 110.

16 The status of the Department of Two-Dimensional Design at Cranbrook was well-recognized within the design community in America by this time. For example, a group of students were invited to edit, design and produce edition 10 of Emigré magazine in 1988.


18 Cranbrook Academy was first established as an arts faculty in the 1930s and has enjoyed a central place within American design discourse ever since. The prestigious alumni at the Cranbrook Academy of Art include, for example, Charles Eames and Daniel Libeskind.

19 Jeffery Keedy, for example, is identified as exerting a strong intellectual influence on his peers, circulating texts by writers such as Roland Barthes and Hal Foster. Lupton summarizes how these texts attribute readers and audiences with the capacity to produce their own readings or interpretations of artefacts. According to Lupton’s account, it is Keedy’s interest in these reader-friendly texts, at this specific historical conjuncture, that signals a difference between visual experiments at Cranbrook and other types of new work in America. Lupton
argues that most other emergent artefacts in this period reveal only an interest in style for style’s sake, lacking a solid foundation in philosophical and theoretical principle. Lupton, ‘The Academy of Deconstructed Design’, op. cit., p. 51.

In developing this argument, Lupton seems to work with a distinction established by the following text: A. Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1986.

Lupton discusses how Cranbrook students worked on a scholarly journal called Visible Language, which first introduced them to post-structuralist ideas back in 1978. Putting her argument into context, Lupton describes how the department of 2-D Design had designed an issue of Visible Language, a critical journal that engages with philosophical and theoretical ideas around typography and writing systems. This collaboration encouraged Cranbrook designers to engage with a clearly defined critical methodology, to develop an enthusiasm for contemporary literature and critical thinking and hence to formalize any nascent intellectual concerns. Among the articles in this issue was an appraisal of the deconstructive thinking of Jacques Derrida, for example, and a piece that explored Roland Barthes’ idea of readerly–writerly texts. Lupton, ‘The Academy of Deconstructed Design’, op. cit., p. 47.

Lupton is both an author of numerous books and articles on design, and a curator (rather than a critical journalist per se), who, on this occasion, has tailored her practice to accommodate the editorial requirements of a professional magazine in the field of critical journalism in Britain. Indeed, when a version of the same article appears in a separate book of her own writing, she pays more attention to the nuances of post-structuralism, focusing on the role of deconstruction within this specific intellectual movement. It could be said that the reductionist approach to postmodern design is an unintentional effect of the crossing over of techniques and traditions. Look at the work of Octavo magazine, which between 1984 and 1992 explored the play of type and image (but always with modern design principles in mind). Look also at Tomato’s work for the Jazz deejay trio, United Future Organisation (1992–2002), and the experimental approaches to typography explored by Neville Brody and Jon Wozencroft in Fuse magazine (established in 1991).

It is worth noting that whilst Cranbrook is the focal point of the emerging discourse, there are other pockets of experimentation in America. See A. Greiman, Hybrid Imagery: The Fusion of Technology and Graphic Arts, Watson-Guptill Publishers, New York, 1990. Also, the work of D. Carson for Ray Gun magazine in the 1990s.

He describes how Helvetica, in the 1950s, was viewed as a purely ‘functional’ typeface (citing the reading offered by Rudolf Arnheim at Basel), whilst Neville Brody encouraged people to see it as a ‘trendy’ editorial face in the 1980s.
Jeffery Keedy sees this response as typical of those who prefer to hold on to modernist design principles, allaying their fear of postmodern design by ascribing to it authorial characteristics. Keedy, op. cit., pp. 161–4.

This interpretation works with the same postmodern and post-structuralist division invoked by Ellen Lupton and famously articulated, in the first place, by Andreas Huyssen. It also references the post-structuralist conception of works put forward by Roland Barthes, in terms of readerly and writerly texts. See R. Barthes, *S/Z*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, London, 1990.


The catalogue features examples of posters and books by the American designer and co-chair of the Department of Two-Dimensional Design, Katherine McCoy, as well as work by its students and alumni. The show itself marked ten years of experiment in the field of Graphic Design and the catalogue effectively captures that period. It includes, for example, work by Ed Fella and Jeffery Keedy, designers who have been cited in the work of Lupton and Mills as exemplars of a postmodern or post-structuralist approach. Crucially, the catalogue not only archives the visual output of Cranbrook’s department of graphic design but also contains several articles that clarify its contribution to the wider intellectual discourse of design.


Ibid., p. 35.

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 11.


At this point, McCoy invokes the wider experimental scene in American graphic design, which includes the work of experimental typographers at Émigré and Cal Arts.

Ibid., p. 15.


Ibid., p. 17.

This fits with the experimentation in the field of American typography, where April Grieman and Dan Friedman were exploring the notion of subjective and/or playful design. See Lupton, *Mixing Messages: Contemporary Graphic Design in America*, op. cit.

McCoy, op. cit., p. 16.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 17.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 19.


Ibid., op. cit., p. 20.

Ibid., p. 21.

Ibid., p. 25.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 25.

According to Aldersey-Williams, Cranbrook designers drew specifically on the writings of phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his work, they discovered an intellectual framework that encouraged a positive evaluation of the surface of things, for it is the surface that provides the starting point for an encounter with an audience. This also poses a good counterbalance to the dominance of linguistic theory in critical writing for, as Aldersey-Williams argues, phenomenology tends to encourage both viewer and maker to look into the surface in search of deeper connections.

Boles, op. cit., p. 29.

Ibid., p. 29.

Phenomenology, for example, is part of an early nineteenth-century philosophical tradition that is more readily associated with discussions of aesthetics than semantics and yet Cranbrook practitioners use it, selectively, to develop an appreciation of deep interpersonal and object relations within the practice of communication.