

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

Verfremdungseffekt: Towards a critical Graphic Design education

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Abstract

The university has become so professionalised that students are becoming consumers rather than thinkers. This article proposes a new graphic design education that develops Bertolt Brecht's 'estrangement' or 'alienation' effect to establish an analogy between Graphic Design and Epic Theatre. It is an attempt of presenting an often-neglected view of the Graphic Design practice, evidencing how education must be de-contextualised and deconstructed to move away from this current structure.

Key words

Brecht; Graphic Design; uniform society; verfremdungseffekt; epic theatre

In a society based on self-expression and appearances, in which the 'spectacle' is its essence, knowledge has lost its core purpose and has increasingly become more of a commodity. This has affected universities, which have become more professionalised places. Suhail Malik (Reader in Critical Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London) suggests that students are becoming consumers rather than critical thinkers (in Hansen and Vandeputte, 2015, p.50). This is a consequence of university systems, which condense resistance by forcing students to adhere to mechanisms of alienation that do not consider them as people or students even. These mechanisms are regulated by capitalist motivations, in which institutional success is measured by 'attendance numbers, evaluation procedures and efficiency' (Iverson and Vandeputte, 2013, p.26). By analysing both the university as an institution and relevant theories on sociology, this essay seeks to suggest a new approach to graphic design education, which could create space for transparency and critical engagement.

Graphic designer Peter Buwert explores the ethical dimensions and implications of visual communication design (2016, p.33). He argues that there is a need for universities to open space for criticality, making space for students to perceive alternative possibilities. This article explores Bertolt Brecht's 'verfremdungseffekt' – also known as the distancing / alienation / estrangement effect – as a method to do so. Developed in the 1930s as part of the then new genre of Epic Theatre, this strategy reduces the illusory nature of theatre. Such ideas can be used to displace students from their familiar daily lives, revealing preconceived ideas and attitudes. By opening more possibilities for interpretation, one could argue this strategy allows for an education freed from convention, where subjective interpretation and criticism enable an alternative approach to the subject and consequently the world.

The university and society

Buwert describes 'habitualisation' to be an aspect of human nature (2016, p.26), a process which is based on the acceptance of everything that is familiar to be able to handle day-to-day events. However, the idea that we habitualise everything to make our lives easier may be considered as problematic, as most of us do it without realising it, neglecting any repercussions that may arise from it. As Veronique Vienne observes, mesmerised as we are by computer or television screens, most of us are 'docile spectators' (2002, p.35). One begins to question where the scope for a nuanced

engagement is, particularly when we consider that social media networks 'primarily prompt us to approve and affirm' (Seijdel in Lijster *et al.*, 2015, p.196). Since one's default tendency is to habituate, as Buwert suggests, one will eventually believe everything one reads, unable to distinguish fact or fiction. This corroborates conclusions by the philosopher Immanuel Kant in 'What is Enlightenment?' (1784), outlining that once the act of 'habitualisation' becomes an undisputed norm, people become fond of what is familiar, and find comfort in their lack of personal engagement (in Foucault, 1997).

Philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig discusses the current state of higher education, outlining the way in which students interact with the institution and the commodification of education as important factors today (2013, p.41/43). Student cohorts have become passive components of the university – uniform people made for exploitation in a uniform society, unable to make use of their own reason. Graphic designer Gunnar Swanson corroborates this thought when he notes that universities survive in a capitalist society by being accessible to everyone (in Heller, 2005, p.25). However, as Franco 'Bifo' Berardi suggests, when capitalist motivations drive knowledge production, by prioritizing attendance numbers, ranking positions and 'customer' satisfaction over true knowledge, very little new knowledge is produced (in Ivison and Vandeputte, 2013, p.34).

The liberalisation of the university, is not in itself a problem, rather the problem lies in what one could argue is the avoidance of any kind of obstacle that might appear within an undergraduate programme. Arguably, students are being asked for less, so that the goals set out by the evaluation procedures can easily be met and therefore result in high levels of student satisfaction, consequently increasing ranking positions, leading to high numbers of student applications which keeps the institution going. Pascal Gielen, while blaming the Bologna agreement for the current state of graphic design education, points out how it discourages any relationship between theory and practice, essential to the development of an artistic practice (in Gielen and Bruyne, 2012, p.2). Sociologist Rudi Laermans, a teacher at a Belgian university, corroborates Gielen by arguing that teaching theory has become impossible at any university 'as nowadays one is supposed to deliver formatted packages of knowledge' (in Gielen and Bruyne, 2012, p.2). Theory here is seen as a burden, as it doesn't bring direct value to the problem-solving ability in the client-dependent model that we, students, are always told is quintessential in our 'profession'.

Brian Holmes comments that the 'old concept of universal knowledge and maintenance of the democratic public sphere are being eroded, destroyed at the foundations and then cleared away, while some humanistic façade remains floating in the glow of the spectacle society' (in Hansen and Vandeputte, 2015, p.19). However, as suggested by Raunig in *Factories of Knowledge* (2016), universities follow a similar pattern to factories, where one can draw an analogy between the worker and the student. Here, the student is expected to attend, be efficient and to deliver, only to be given the oft-promised place in the professionalised market. Anything outside this monotonous routine leaves very little space to resistance, to foster thinking beyond superficial thinking. Even though universities represent a site which condenses resistance, they are also a site in which conflict can be stimulated and emerge from, as they still provide tools that students can use in order to think to accomplish something, rather than to think *for its own sake*. We must make full use of the potential of the arena of higher education to stimulate new forms and approaches to graphic design. Using the words of Mark Fisher, 'we must have the courage to invent new institutions, institutions that will have both the flexibility and the robustness to combat capital' (Lijster *et al.*, 2015, p.36).

Can graphic design be epic?

Criticality enables us to transform a uniform society into a more dynamic one. According to Foucault, 'critique' is the art of limiting the ways structures of power govern us (1997, pp.25–31). By this he means we should not accept as true something that is assumed to be truth, just because an authority says so. Foucault identifies a correlation between critique and the society that uses it, which he finds

to be a 'minority' within it. This minority has a limited capacity to use its own understanding without being governed by an authority, which maintains much of humanity in this minority condition.

Graphic design has come to be viewed as a subject that is thought to be about clarity and to make people's lives easier, which could be viewed as keeping them in the minority. This is a process that not only constrains the ability of the minority, but also the ability of students to see beyond these definitions and explore the full potential of the discipline. To an extent, graphic design feeds the uniformity of society and consumerism, as a problem-solver discipline, by giving the impression that it produces results which follow the rules of the market. Steven Heller argues how, even though some graphic design academics present it as a traditional service-based activity, it is an intellectual pursuit that demands philosophical fluency (cited in Bennet, 2006, p.10). One needs to start and engage with a practice that foresees the designer as a mediator, not as a problem solver.

One could contend that graphic design leans towards a more critical practice, with a basis in research. However, as Dunne and Raby outline, critique should not be negative, as it can be, in accordance with Foucault, the gentle refusal, the turning away from what exists and the refusal, 'not to be governed like that' (2013, p.34-35). Ramia Mazé explores the expansion of design roles in society, observing that, rather than problem-solving, graphic design is a problem-finding practice, which exposes issues and articulates questions (in Frostner and Ericson, 2009, p.381). Criticality in design offers alternatives that expose existing 'norms', asking questions as opposed to presenting pre-defined answers.

Use of the *verfremdungseffekt*: Graphic Design in education

Brecht's 'verfremdungseffekt' and displacement strategies may be adapted, and are of use when exploring the potentials for criticality in graphic design education. Walter Benjamin explains that Epic Theatre, aimed to create 'astonishment' rather than 'empathy' (1999, p.147). Instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function.

Frederic Jameson outlines that 'verfremdungseffekt' – most recently described in English as 'estrangement effect' – makes one look at something in a strange way (1998, p.39). To look in a strange way is to look at something from a new perspective. By adopting a new perspective you look at something differently, which defies the inclination to habitualise. Submitting the audience (referred to as 'participants') to this process of exposure, creates in them a 'deeply unsettling moment of psychological disorientation experienced when something which has always appeared familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar.' (Buwert, 2016, p.27/28).

In an educational environment, this effect could allow students to perceive, reflect and transform – as it encourages a critical analysis of diverse topics and information networks (Buwert, 2016). This effect causes the uniform student to awake, as it engenders perception of alternative and endless possibilities, the ability not to accept the given as true. While design can encourage patterns of habitualisation, it can also disrupt it. Accordingly, this concept could be translated into graphic design education, creating a new pedagogic approach.

A new kind of graphic education

Introducing the concept of 'verfremdungseffekt' into graphic design education is a way of critically re-evaluating the conventions of how it is taught, as well as the intrinsic nature of the discipline. Criticality acts as a counterpoint to the traditional service-based activity associations of graphic design. As the designers Zak Kyes and Mark Owens discuss, this critical element identifies a new form of relationship between client/designer (in Frostner and Ericson, 2009, p.341). This relationship is not based on a client-dependent model, but on mutual trust and a clear line of communication, establishing new modes of production that are more flexible, more open and more complex.

Dunne and Raby observe that 'without an intellectual framework, it is very, very difficult to advance the practice of critical design.' (2013, p.43). Arguably, research is the foundation for knowledge and knowledge is the foundation of higher education, thus, graphic design education should be research orientated. Andrew Blauvelt argues that theory provides the basis through which to ask questions which are vital to criticality and the research process (in Heller, 2005, p.105). This corroborates Jan van Toorn's idea that the contemporary graphic designer must be a 'practical intellectual', someone who is actively engaged in critical reflection (in Heller, 2005, p.107). Teaching students to produce effective research-based work, enhances their outcome and expands their creativity (Heller in Bennet, 2006, p.13), as research informs an outcome that is freed from conventional visuals and now becomes driven by knowledge production, enabling graphic design to adopt activist ways of 'making things public' (Latour cited by Holmes in Hansen and Vandeputte, 2015, p.27).

Arguably, graphic design requires students to detach themselves from uniform society, as the subject demands a certain level of awareness and criticality. Students must be encouraged to challenge and modify everyday conventions. Only by detaching themselves from uniform society can students observe as well as engage critically with the subject and the world. However, not everyone can easily make use of their own reason and de-habitualise their perspectives – as Kant asks, does one know up to what point one can know? (in Foucault, 1997, p.35). In accord with Foucault, who describes being critical as a virtue (1997, p.25), Dunne and Raby suggest that critical design is about not accepting things as they are, questioning and considering everything, as it is more an attitude than anything else (2013, p.34).

This essay does not envisage the abolishment of current graphic design educational practices. By introducing the concept of the verfremdungseffekt, it instead aims to raise awareness of what graphic design education could be. As Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler consider, 'critique' is not a universally valid model for an ideal institution in today's capitalist society (in Lijster *et al.*, 2015, p.136). As knowledge-based art institutions, universities present conditions more conducive to critique, which just needs to be stimulated. As Brian Holmes implies, this can only be done over time and by cultivating a deep sensibility within universities (Hansen and Vandeputte, 2015, p.31) as they are one of the few spaces in society where new critical stances emerge.

To be human is to refuse to accept the given as given.

(Neiman, in Black, 2009)

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Biography

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