

Typography papers 2

Review of *Graphic design* (Jobling & Crowley)

Richard Hollis

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Reviews

Paul Jobling and David Crowley: *Graphic design: reproduction and representation since 1800*. Reviewed by RICHARD HOLLIS

Fred Smeijers: *Counterpunch: making type in the sixteenth century, designing typefaces now*. Reviewed by H. D. L. VERVLIET

Paul Jobling and David Crowley: *Graphic design: reproduction and representation since 1800*. 1996, Manchester: Manchester University Press. 296 pp; ISBN 0-7190-4466-9 (hardback) £40.00; 0-7190-4466-7 (paperback) £14.99

RICHARD HOLLIS

The extension of design studies into the field of social and cultural history has become a feature of educational syllabuses. Graphic design is now the focus of a great deal of academic attention; and institutions where art and design are taught have been attracted increasingly to theory.¹

In their definition of graphic design, Jobling and Crowley 'regard the three following interdependent factors as quintessential in circumscribing the field: that all images are mass-reproduced; that they are affordable and/or made accessible to a wide audience; and that graphic design is not just a question of presenting pictures in isolation but more a means of conveying ideas through the juxtaposition or integration of word and image into a holistic entity.' This entity – 'the overarching theme of this book' – is identified by its authors as 'intertextuality'. In fact, the diversity of their perspective shows more interest in contextualising graphics than in examining its artefacts as design.

The varied tone of the nine essays which make up the book can be detected in their end-of-chapter notes and in the 'Suggestions for further reading'. These include not only histories of graphic design and printing, but also art history, journalism and propaganda, social studies and cultural studies, advertising, semiology and psychology, postmodernism and cultural theory. Geographically limited to England, France, and to a lesser extent, Germany, the essays' themes are familiar; but not as graphic design. The first two are nineteenth-century topics: illustrated weeklies and the politics of satire in England and France. The remaining subjects are Parisian *fin-de-siècle* posters, British First World War propaganda, Modernist graphic design, early photojournalism, the graphics of 1960s youth culture, advertising (mainly Benson & Hedges), and finally graphic design and postmodernism. Although limited by the number of pages and illustrations, the historical summaries are valuable – that on photojournalism particularly good – and the authors deliver unexpected facts and some sharp observations: for example, on the way the medium of wood engraving, in its crudest form in an early nineteenth-century catch-penny print, could mask the gruesome detail of a spectacularly barbarous murder; and their sharp observations of the magazine *Octavo*, for whom 'Modernism, however, was no longer a project but a pastiche, even if one resulting from a "love affair" with Modernism on the part of these designers'.

If the variety of critical standpoints can be bewildering, the authors' analysis is at times exemplary. When they describe the work straightforwardly and 'the way in which meaning is constructed', as they do with a 1915 recruiting poster (Women of Britain say – 'GO!'), they

1. This has been most evident in the United States, and the convergence of such theorizing with practice is well documented in Hugh Aldersey-Williams, *The new Cranbrook design discourse* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).



Le Journal illustré cover, 1865

produce a model of critical exposition. When they discuss advertising with semiological rigour, in the manner pioneered by Judith Williamson in the 1970s, it can be clear and complete. More often it is disappointingly imprecise, as in the first characteristically intriguing essay, on popular weeklies. This reproduces a cover to *Le Journal illustré* consisting of a masthead, a topographical engraving of the town of Amboise, contents summary, list of contributors (which includes Gustave Doré), price and subscription details. Below this is a wood-engraved illustration of enthusiastic villagers greeting the arrival of a new issue of the magazine. The refrain of a song printed in an earlier issue, claims the text, 'gave one of our artists the idea for the scene depicted below', adding that the scene is not entirely imaginary, as the illustrator had lived for a time on the outskirts of Paris and had witnessed the excitement generated by the paper's delivery. It is not that Jobling and Crowley misread the 'intertextuality', but that they present this as 'testimony to its (*Le Petit journal's*) immense popularity' and assert that the image 'strongly suggests that by the second half of the nineteenth century the illustrated press was being bought and read by all social classes and age groups'. Two pages later, and more soberly, the illustration is used as evidence that such magazines' potential market was to be found not just in big cities. These observations, interpreting the drawing as objective record, ignore the self-promotional intention of the cover, where the illustration performs the same rhetorical function as an advertising photograph.

This is a quibble. But it is the first of many (and some more serious objections) before the reader accepts that depth of scrutiny is sacrificed to the breadth of the authors' interests. Each essay has its range indicated by a two-part title, always a straightforward lob followed by a back-hand, thus: 'In the Empire of Signs: ideology, myth and pleasure in advertising'. The initiate will recognise 'The Empire of Signs' as the title of a book by Barthes and may not be prepared for the essay's use of popular art history among its range of reference. There is sound reason to connect the figures in a photograph promoting Calvin Klein's 'Obsession' perfume with sculpture; but to link their bodies, white as stone, to a particular Renaissance bronze of Hercules or a Rodin because of their similarity as images rather than in meaning is gratuitously inexact.² The same essay offers limited rewards in invoking Freud, Magritte (without paying serious attention to his intertextual ideas) and, at some length, André Breton. And to introduce Man Ray's *Le Violon d'Ingres* photographic joke without explaining at least the second part of its triple entendre,³ is to drain it of its intertextual production of meaning(s). This inconsistency of critical or analytical methods is perhaps an index of the immaturity of the Design Studies genre.

Both their ambition and the weight of earlier research on which the authors rely – there are nearly 600 references – may have distorted the shape of some essays and and flawed their perspective. 'Fin-de-siècle poster design: Objectifying national style, pleasure and gender' aims to 'explore the evolution of the modern poster with regard to the so-called colour revolution of the 1890s, and investigate several important issues concerning reproduction and representation', and to do so by 'looking at the poster as an ideological construct, and investigating

2. The Erymanthine boar carried over Hercules's shoulder has been ravaging the countryside, and has been captured by Hercules as a social act, not for his personal gratification.

3. A second activity performed with professional skill; 'Violon d'Ingres: occupation secondaire où l'on excelle' (*Petit Larousse illustré*, Paris: Larousse, 1983). The painter Ingres had been a child prodigy as a violin player and continued to play throughout his life. Hence 'violon d'Ingres' has come to mean 'hobby' or 'second string'.

both its aesthetic and political signification'. That is to say, in less than thirty pages and with only five illustrations, they plan to examine the way in which the posters exhibit contemporary attitudes to a particularly French tradition, to ideas of pleasure (rather than the Naughty Nineties, this is inevitably Barthes's *jouissance*), and the New Woman. The authors set out with a coherent but not entirely accurate summary of the technical aspects of lithography: there appears little purpose in their pointing out that Grasset's familiar *L'Encre marquet* poster was reproduced by a relief process (perhaps it was) when it is best known and recorded in two different lithographed versions, one from zinc, the other from stone. The authors also talk of colours being applied to a single stone – *à la poupée*⁴ – which surely can't be the case.

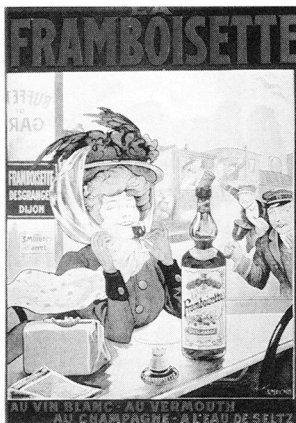
Such technical discussion does little to advance the authors' arguments. It is in their technique that posters expose part of the problem of 'intertextuality' in graphic design. Since in many cases the artists had no control over the lettering (often added later), the 'analysis of word and image relationships' is revealed to be no more than a drawing and a label – not essentially identifying the subject of the illustration but what the drawing is being used to call attention to.⁵ Again, these would be no more than distractions if the authors did not extend their technical discussion to include limited-edition illustrated books, certainly not 'accessible to a wide audience' and which confuse the authors' concern with both 'intertextuality' and 'reproduction and representation'.

In the same essay, attention to earlier critical texts rather than to the posters they cite leads them into art-historical quaintness. In their treatment of Chéret, they recycle the perverse contemporary association not with Tiepolo, which is sensible, but with Watteau and even Deboucourt [*sic*]. In the same essay, following a sub-heading 'Advertising the New Woman – sex and sexuality', is a list of the better-known posters which made 'symbolic links between the female figures portrayed and the products and services they advertise'. This introduces the most serious question in this field of mixed academic media. 'What do we choose to look at?'

The selectivity of Jobling and Crowley's material weakens the social history which is derived from it. Contemporary photographs of Paris show that while Chéret and his artist colleagues were producing their 'art posters', the advertising columns and hoardings of Paris were alive with chromolithographed pictorial posters. Ignored by the poster dealers and by the publishers of magazines for collectors, few were recorded at the time and thousands have disappeared, but they lurk in museums and libraries and belatedly surface in the auction houses and their catalogues. Given the authors' definition of graphic design, these are the works which they might have been expected to trawl for, rather than relying on the canon established at the time by educated connoisseurs and embalmed in histories of art and graphic design. As social and cultural history, is their relative aesthetic banality not a positive recommendation?

The importance of what is visible or remains hidden from history is demonstrated by the discussion, in the same essay, of the 'New Woman' whose 'threatening nature', the authors state, is subverted in these graphics by 'turning her into a fetishistic object of masculine

Francisco Tamagno
La Framboisette aperitif
poster, c. 1865



Such posters, not discussed by Jobling and Crowley, are more typical of *fin-de-siècle* production than the 'art posters' discussed by art and design historians. Their pictorial and narrative content is also a more promising source of cultural history. The direction of women's gaze in posters, discussed by the authors, is here shown at its most ambiguous.

4. A technique used for areas of different colour printed from the same intaglio plate, as in many 18th-century reproductive prints.

5. Lautrec's *Moulin Rouge*, as illustrated, has the bottom third overprinted with red text, destroying Lautrec's *japoniste* space.



Clémentine Dufau
Byrrh aperitif
poster design, 1903



Clémentine Dufau
La Fronde journal
poster, 1898



Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen
Le Petit Sou journal
poster, 1900

6. A radical journal founded in 1897 whose sale the authorities did their best to restrict.

7. In the 1960s the model for the plaster bust of Marianne, essential to every town hall in France, was Brigitte Bardot.

desire.' Illustrating a prize-winning competition design for an aperitif poster by Clémentine Dufau, the authors suggest that despite the fact that 'her dress code and pose are alluringly provocative, her gaze does not meet ours, and in the way she holds her glass of wine and cigarette she appears altogether more resolute and in control of her own sexuality.' What the authors find alluring may be the fact that the woman's physique conforms to a more modern stereotype, yet the figure's *décolletage* is typical of evening gowns of the period. Not only can it be equally argued that the woman's pose and downward look are those of submissiveness, but it can also be shown that the gaze of women in French posters of the period is rarely directed at the spectator – there seems to have been a fashion or convention for the eyes to be half-closed, lidded. Certainly the eyes of Mucha's women can be direct (and resolute), but not so often Chéret's, and with Lautrec's, never. More important in detail is the fact that Dufau was a committed feminist. As designer of one of the key works of the genre and the period, aesthetically and politically, the poster for *La Fronde*,⁶ her representation could even be presented as ironical. An example of the complexities of addressing representation is the authors' more obvious misreading – of an unillustrated Steinlen poster for the radical journal *Le Petit Sou*. Its image, they claim, 'symbolises woman as the political leader of the proletariat'. The woman depicted is in fact Marianne, with her *bonnet rouge*, icon of the French Republic and immortalized on the 1830s barricades in Delacroix's *Liberty*. Bare-breasted as any Chéret model, sanctioned by tradition, she needs more subtle positioning than as a 'more positive stereotype'.⁷

Such insensitivity to political reality recurs in the essay on Modernism. This provides an efficient summary of its main features. To say that 'In his concern for technique, Schwitters absolved his designs and those of his colleagues from any responsibility for the promotion of capitalist ideology' is grotesque. The authors' vulgar presentation of the Modernist designer torn between on the one hand producing political propaganda (presumably of the Left) or working 'in support of capitalist ideology' (earning a living) gives little idea of the desperate circumstances of Europe at the time. The chronic lack of space has demanded simplifications and omissions: the Werkbund magazine *Form* is quoted as the epigraph for their essay on advertising, yet no mention appears of the organisation's efforts to come to terms with National Socialism, nor the struggles of Modernists who stayed behind or tried emigration to the Soviet Union.

Not only original research, but sorting, evaluating and restructuring existing material is the stuff of history. This book makes a contribution. But the issue at stake, the authors say in their introduction, as much for the historian of graphic design as for the graphic designer, is 'how to make sense of so much visual and verbal information'.

Rather than 'further reading' don't we need 'Suggestions for further looking'?