Shaping Belief: The Role of Audience in Visual Communication
Ann C. Tyler

As the goal of all communication is "to induce in the audience some belief about the past..., the present..., or the future,"[1] audience considerations are integral components of the process of visual communication. During that process, the designer attempts to persuade the audience to adopt a belief demonstrated or suggested through the two-dimensional object. The purpose of this persuasion is to accomplish one of the following goals: to induce the audience to take some action; to educate the audience (persuade them to accept information or data); or to provide the audience with an experience of the display or exhibition of a value for approval or disapproval, values with which an audience may wish to identify or may wish to reject.[2] An exploration of the relationship between audience and communication goals will reveal how belief is shaped through design.

The relationship of the audience to the communication process is viewed in widely different ways. In one perspective, the object is seen as isolated as a formal esthetic expression, with the audience consequently, regarded as a spectator. For example, within design competitions, exhibitions, and publications, objects are often displayed with little or no commentary, with no discussion of communication goals. This presentation of design emphasizes the esthetic sensibility of the individual designer[3] and severs the object from its relationship with the intended audience.

Another view characterizes the audience as a passive reader in the communication process. The audience decodes or interprets a visual statement but is not an active participant in the formation of meaning. This view is evident in Hanno Ehses's "Representing Macbeth: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric,"[4] in which the designer combines a variety of formal devices to construct different messages and the audience then interprets the message. Ehses's analysis is a grammatical model because it treats design as the construction of statements or visual sentences;[5] linguistic and pictorial content are joined like parts of speech to form the message. In "Representing Macbeth," "classifications of speech,"[6] such as "antithesis," "metaphor," and "metonymy,"[7] provide designers with a structure for generating a range of messages. The designer begins with the subject and then explores concepts or themes by applying the grammatical model to the subject. In this model, the message is examined in relation to the original subject and is clear or unclear, successful or unsuccessful. The audience either understands the message, finds

1   Richard Buchanan, "Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice," in *Design Discourse: History Theory Criticism*, ed., Victor Margolin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 92.
2   All the goals occur to some degree in one design, but a particular goal is dominant Buchanan, "Declaration by Design," 91.
4   Hanno H. J. Ehses, "Representing Macbeth: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric," in *Design Discourse: History Theory Criticism*, ed., Victor Margolin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 187–97.
5   Ehses, "Representing Macbeth," 193–94.
6   Ehses, "Representing Macbeth," 187–97.
7   Ehses, "Representing Macbeth," 189.

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8 Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in Semiotics: *An Introductory Anthology*, ed, Robert E. Innis (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1985),192–205.

9 Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 195.

10 Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 199–201.

11 Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 201–03.

12 In addition to Richard Buchanan's "Declaration by Design," see also Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues*, 8/2 (Spring 1992) 11–12. A useful beginning point for understanding the rhetorical approach in general is Wayne C. Booth "The Rhetorical Stance," *Now Don't Try to Reason with Me: Essays and Ironies for a Credulous Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 25–33. For a discussion of the relationship between grammar and rhetoric see Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale Universiy Press, 1979), 3–19.

13 Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, 4th ed (New York Marion Boyars Publishers Inc., 1983), 50–66.

14 Detailed exploration of forrnal devices an important area of research, but is not within the goals of this paper.

it confusing (the message is not a "true" or "correct" interpretation of the subject), or finds it unintelligible. The audience is viewed as involved in no deeper engagement than that of decoding references to the subject. A grammatical approach thus emphasizes the scientific over the esthetic aspects of design. In addition, since the audience brings nothing particular to the process, it is not particularized in any way; it is both a *nonspecific* and a passive audience.

Semiotics, a third and closely related view, recognizes the specificity of the audience. An audience holds or recognizes certain beliefs and reads messages based on these beliefs. In Roland Barthes's "Rhetoric of the Image,"[8] denotation and connotation distinguish the literal and symbolic messages within visual communication. The audience reads the literal message while also interpreting the signs which express the "iconic message."[9] The potential readings of these signs outside the communication device are multiple, but the interpretations are particularized within the design through their combination with other signs and the denoted messages.[10] The audience, with its cultural beliefs and understanding, is also involved in particularizing the symbolic (connoted) message[11] thereby becoming an active reader.

Yet another view, to be explored in depth here, is a rhetorical analysis of design.[12] Within a theory of rhetoric the audience is not characterized as a reader but as a dynamic participant in argument. In this rhetorical view, visual communication attempts to persuade a specific audience through argument as opposed to making a statement within a grammatical structure or conveying a message within the dynamics of semiotics. Designers utilize existing beliefs to induce new beliefs in the audience. It is the use of existing beliefs, as much as the attempt to induce new beliefs, that contributes to maintaing, questioning, or transforming social values through argument. Designers persuade an audience by referencing established or accepted values and attributing those values to the new subject.[13] The specific audience's experiences within society and its understanding of social attitudes are an essential aspect of argument and necessary to the communication goal.

The selection of examples of design within this essay, though not comprehensive, shows the use of devices and strategies to construct argument, the use of existing beliefs in argument as a strategy to induce new beliefs, and the role of the audience in accomplishing communication goals. The formal devices in each example are discussed in terms of the primary goal[14] of the design: to induce action, to educate, to create an experience.

Persuading the audience to act

Persuading an audience to attend an exhibit, travel to another country, or invest in a company is inducing that audience to take an action. In an attempt to persuade, the designer develops an argu-

ment within the two-dimensional space that defines and represents an audience's future experience. The argument becomes a promise: if one attends A, one will feel B; if one goes to C, one will see D; if one uses E, one will become F.

The goal of the first example *(figure 1)* is to persuade the audience to visit the New York Aquarium. The poster's argument, made through formal devices, defines the audience's future experience at the aquarium: if you go to the aquarium, you will have an emotional experience based on a friendly, intimate relationship with members of the animal kingdom. Intimacy between audience and mammal is created through scale. The mammal takes up most of the space, creating the appearance that it is close to the viewer. Personal contact is also suggested because the mammal appears to make eye contact with the audience. Standing in such close proximity to a large animal could be frightening rather than intimate, but any feeling of confrontation is avoided through the dreamy, soft quality of the image, the profile position of the mammal (it is not coming directly toward the viewer), and the friendly expression on its face (it appears to smile).

The formal devices suggest the nature of the aquarium experience by referencing and reinforcing beliefs regarding the relationship between individuals and nature—i.e., nature is friendly toward human beings and animals enjoy being the object of our attention. Although the word "aquarium" indicates confinement, the image defines it as vast, showing no cage or boundaries.

While the aquarium poster promises the audience an experience based on an emotional relationship with the subject, the PanAm travel posters *(figures 2 & 3)* offer a future experience predicated on distance and observation. The communication goal is to persuade the audience to travel to Bali or Japan. The posters argue that the audience will have an esthetic experience in these countries. The first poster, of Bali, is a rural scene of a terraced agricultural area and the second, of Japan, features a sunset and two figures in traditional clothing. Like the aquarium poster, both travel posters use monumental imagery. But the large-scale imagery in these travel posters, combined with other formal devices, makes a very different argument. The PanAm images are architectural in nature: the terraced land forms a contrasting figure/ground pattern; the two people standing with their backs to the audience become shapes against the sky. People and land become objects of beauty. Distanced from the scene through perspective and the lack of any reference back to the viewer, the audience thus remains "outside" a beautiful, tranquil scene. Landscape and people are frozen in time, for the audience to view as they choose—as in a museum of artifacts. Both posters promise the audience an esthetic, *nonparticipatory* experience if they travel to these distant lands.

The travel posters have transformed these foreign countries and people into art, referencing a paradigm which says that art is to

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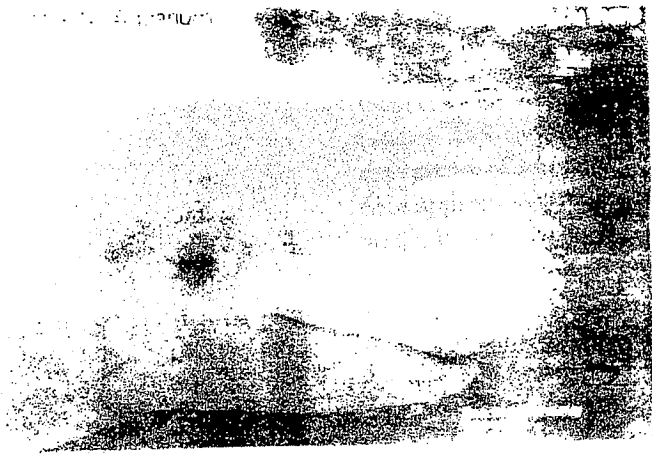ds.
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Figure 1
(NY Aquarium poster) Designed by Michael Bosniak and Howard York. Photograph by
Russ Kinne. *Visit the NY Aquariium.* 1974. Offset lithograph. Printed in color, 42 × 59 1/2.
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Poster Fund.

Figure 3
(Japan) Designed by Ivan Chermayeff, Thomas
Geismar, and Bruce Blackburn. *Pan Am Japan.* 1972
Offset Lithograph, printed in color, 42 × 28". Collection,
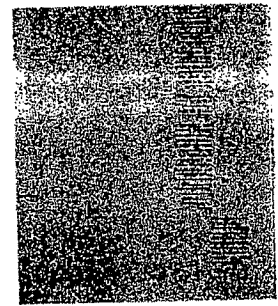The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Pan
American World Airways.

Figure 4
Caremark, Inc. 1985 annual report; Designed by Jim Berte, Robert
Miles Runyan & Assoc.; Reproduced from *Graphic Design USA: 7.*
Courtesy of the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

Figure 2
(Bali) Designed by Ivan Chermayeff, Thomas Geismar, and Bruce
Blackburn. *Pan Am Bali.* 1972 Offset lithograph, printed in color, 42 ×
28". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Pan
American World Airways.

Figure 5
Congaree Swamp brochure designed by Bruce Geyman ©1991 L.
Chapman.

be observed, not experienced. The posters reinforce a belief that these cultures are static and removed from the audience's own experiences. This is achieved through formal devices that create the appearance of a nonparticipatory audience relationship. The audience appears in the role of observer, yet they do participate by bringing cultural beliefs about beauty and art to the argument.

The final example of design that persuades an audience to act is an annual report. The primary communication goal of annual reports is to persuade the audience either to invest or to maintain their investment in a company. Designers persuade the audience by making an argument that represents the company's philosophy, achievements, and financial solidity. The argument is often made through the company's employees or people using their services; in this way, the audience attributes the values embodied in these individuals with the institution they represent.

The Caremark Inc. 1985 Annual Report *(figure 4)* makes its argument through Dominick Petone, an individual benefiting from the company's services. The design argues that Mr. Petone, and therefore Caremark, has strong, moral values; he is hardworking, trustworthy, and straightforward. The dominant image is a photograph of a hardworking man in working-class clothing with his tools in the background. The audience knows he is hardworking because he is wearing a T-shirt, is slim, and appears to be serious in the workplace. The written text states that, though ill, Mr. Petone continues to work. From this information we can gather that work and self-sufficiency are important to him. He is also a rugged individualist: the lighting highlights and accentuates his facial features. He is portrayed as a role model, a hero. The portrait is isolated on the page as in an art catalogue; the borders around the photograph are the same proportions as in traditional art matting while the small serifed type of the written text reinforces the serious and classical image. Yet Dominick Petone is approachable: he makes direct eye contact with the audience, his gaze is open, not aggressive, and he gives the audience a "Mona Lisa" smile.

Although Mr. Petone is separated from the investor audience by his economic class, the audience identifies with him through the shared moral values of responsibility, honesty, and stability. These values are also intended to represent the institution and are shared by the image (Mr. Petone), the producer (Caremark), and the audience (investors). The beliefs represented by Dominick Petone are values that bind the culture, values that the audience recognizes and then attributes to Caremark.

Educating the audience

The second communication goal is to educate the audience or to persuade the audience to accept and interpret information. Information can be seen as valueless, as not reflecting a particular belief system. But all communication involves an interpretation of information,[15] an interpretation based on data, perspective, analysis, and

15 James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc. 1989),195.

The Meaning of Products

Figure 6
Angeles Corporation logo; Designed by Robert Miles Runyan, Robert Miles Runyan & Assoc.

Figure 7
Screen Gems Inc. logo; Designed by Tom Geismar, Chermayeff and Geismar, Courtesy of Tom Geismar.

Figure 8
Seatrain Lines Inc. logo; Designed by Tom Geismar, Chermayeff and Geismar, Courtesy of Tom Geismar.

16 Logos are then applied to communication devices and those devices may have other primary goals, such as inducing the audience to buy a product.

judgment. Educational materials are no exception; information is interpreted and communicated according to the paradigms of academic communities. Educating the audience often includes making an argument that the information is "fact," that it is "true."

The map and guide to the Congaree Swamp (*figure 5*) is intended to educate the audience about the swamp's ecosystem. The argument suggests that nature has an inherent logical order and that the information provided is scientific, i.e., rational and factual. For information to appear factual, it must seem stable, unchangeable. Various formal devices such as detailed illustration techniques, minor changes in scale, and a lack of tension in margin and spacing mitigate against an emotive response by the audience, while a heightened sense of order is achieved through the clearly visible organizational grid system. The brochure is basically a diagram—codified information without expressive characteristics that might suggest individual authorship. Information, such as this, is presented as data and appears to be communicated through an omniscient voice. When the omniscient voice of science is used, the audience seems to be nonparticipatory. The audience is, apparently, only a reader. This dynamic is similar to that of the travel posters (*figures 2 & 3*), but here the image lacks a sense of drama or emotion, eliminating the appearance of interpretation or perspective. In sum, the organization of facts in the Congaree Swamp brochure is an argument relying on a scientific paradigm. While learning about the swamp's ecosystem, the audience's belief in the rational order of the universe is also reinforced.

The goal of educating an audience also occurs within communication from the business community and through objects not generally classified as educational materials. Corporate and institutional logos are an example of design that attempts to educate.[16] The logo defines the company and persuades the audience that the qualities of the logo are also the qualities of the institution it represents. The audience includes both the company employees and those who come in contact with the company. Audience identification with the values of the organization serves the goals of management as well as those of public relations.

Simplified, geometric logos became the symbols of large corporations and dominated design in the 1960s and 1970s. These reductive icons were developed to represent the "modern" corporation as a large, anonymous entity driven by technology and the values attributed to science—rationality and objectivity. The icons reference science through formal devices such as diagrammatic imagery, an efficient use of line and shape, and an emphasis on positive and negative space (*figures 6, 7, 8*). As in the swamp brochure (*figure 5*), the elimination of individuality and emotion suggests an omniscient voice and the presentation of fact. Geometric simplification of form continues to be applied to logos, but the 1980s also saw the reintroduction of more formally complex shapes and "naive" representation. The icons began to take on some of the qualities of
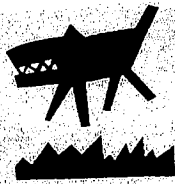
Figure 9
Blackdog logo; Designed by Mark Fox,
Blackdog; Reproduced from *Graphic Design
USA: 8*, Courtesy of the American Institute of
Graphic Arts.

Figure 10
CHIASSO logo by Jeff Barnes.

folk art imagery by referencing individual (handmade) characteristics. These new logos *(figures 9, 10)* reflect the same communication goal: educating the audience by defining the organization. Rather than referring to the values associated with science and distancing the audience, these logos communicate a more emotional relationship with the audience. The quotidian quality of the logos represents the company not as an anonymous institution but rather as an organization comprised of individuals like the audience. The audience's relationship to the organization is based on self-identification. Though not overtly participatory, an argument involving personal identification recognizes the audience's existence.

In the previous examples, existing beliefs are transferred to the subject to create new beliefs. In posters within an exhibition titled "Visual Perceptions," existing beliefs are replaced with new beliefs. The goal of the posters is to educate the audience regarding the stereotyping of African Americans within the print and broadcast media.[17] Several posters in the exhibition invoke stereotypical images and racist values and then refute those beliefs within the argument. Beliefs are not only a strategy of argument but the subject of the posters as well and so must be clearly visible to the audience.

"Triptych," a series of three posters in the exhibition, alters the audience's relationship with and interpretation of the information over time. The first interpretation is ambiguous and may lead to a stereotypical conclusion, while the information received later exposes that stereotype. For example, in the last poster of the series *(figure 11)*, the audience first sees a blurred figure of an African-American man running juxtaposed with the headline "CRIME." The photograph suggests anonymity through cropping, motion, and soft focus; this is a man portrayed without individual characteristics. The large type screams like a tabloid headline and a label. Both the image and headline are ambiguous in meaning. Did the man commit a crime? Was a crime committed against him? The audience can only read the small type after coming closer to the poster, after the opportunity to form a stereotype has presented itself. The small type, contrasting in size and detail, shifts the ambiguity and tells the audience how to interpret the poster. ". . . Seeing my color makes me a criminal. But what is my crime?" Through the text the man must now be seen as an individual trapped within the context of racial stereotyping. By making the audience aware of their participation in the argument, the poster challenges the audience to recognize and confont their own beliefs and assumptions as well as those of the media. The formal devices that divide the audience's interaction into two clearly defined segments are merely expressions of a deeper engagement by the audience. Through this device, it is revealed that the *audience* holds or understands the beliefs demonstrated in the argument and that the *audience* is attributing those beliefs to the subject.

17   Tibor Kalman, "I Don't Think of You as Black," *International Design* (vol. 18, no. 2, March/April 1991): 56–59.
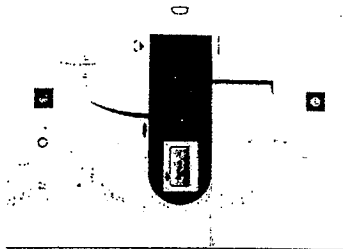
Figure 11
"Triptych"; Designed by Greg Grey.

Figure 12
Typography as Discourse poster, designed by
Allen Hori; design directed by Katherine
McCoy; *the 100 Show: the twelfth annual of
the American Center for Design.*

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18 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New
York: Capricorn Books,1958).
19 Ingrid Sischy, "Advertising Taboos:
Talking to Luciano Benetton and Oliviero
Toscani," *Interview*, April 1992, 68–71.

Providing the audience with an experience through the display
of values

Though all design creates some type of experience for the audience,
experience is rarely the primary communication goal. If the goal of
a design is experiential,[18] then it is often interpreted as a focus on the
esthetic moment. Experience, is a display of values, however, and
esthetics is simply one of any number of values. When an experi-
ence is the goal of an agent, the design displays or exhibits particu-
lar values for the audience to consider. The audience may identify
with the values or they may condemn or reject the values.

A display of esthetic values can be seen in "Typography as
Discourse" *(figure 12)*, a poster directed toward an audience of
designers. Formal devices in the poster raise issues of the role of
esthetics in typography and design. Because words are broken,
displayed backwards, and read in different directions, the audience
experiences the letters as shapes, patterns, and codes. Type becomes
a symbol, not of language, but of an esthetic. In creating an experi-
ence for the audience, the poster argues a *particular* esthetic.
Adherence to an esthetic is a cultural belief and this poster develops
an argument for a certain esthetic, a specific cultural belief.

Experiencing *social* beliefs as a primary goal is demonstrated
in the controversial series of ads produced by Benetton, the clothing
manufacturer. The ads reproduce documentary photographs that
reference values. These images, placed within an ambiguous context
when used in an advertisement bearing the name of Benetton, are
used without any explanatory or contextualizing text. The ads,
which have included images of a death-bed scene of an AIDS
patient, an overcrowded ship of Albanian refugees headed to Italy,
and a newborn infant with umbilical cord, blood, and mucus,[19] create
an experience for the audience through displays of social values.

It could be argued that the goal of these ads is to induce
action, to induce the audience to buy clothing. In fact, the ads may
result in an audience remembering Benetton and supporting the
company if the audience identifies with the values the ads seem to
imply. Or it may be argued that the goal of these ads is to educate,
to induce in the audience an awareness of the issues and values
referenced. But the ads do not interpret the beliefs referenced, so the
argument does not attempt to persuade the audience of a particular
belief. And so no particular belief is attributed to Benetton either to
induce an action or to educate. The argument of these ads is a
display of beliefs and the *role of the audience* within that argument is
to experience the beliefs exhibited.

The formal devices within the Benetton ads define the audi-
ence's role and also suggest the audience's deeper engagement with
the communication process. The quality of the photographs
expresses their documentary origins. Some of the photographs have
the harsh graininess of an enlarged snapshot, some express the

immediacy of a captured moment, and all place the viewer as a voyeur in a private, emotional, or intimate scene. Audiences have become accustomed to this voyeuristic role in the context of the news media. By altering the context and placing the image where the audience expects to see a product, the audience becomes uncomfortably aware of its role as an active participant in the argument.

Shaping belief

The goal of visual communication is to persuade an audience to adopt a new belief. However, this necessitates a reference to existing beliefs through formal devices. In developing an argument, a designer does not have a choice of referencing beliefs or not referencing beliefs; the choice lies in what beliefs are referenced. In making this choice, existing beliefs will be affected (maintained, rejected, or transformed) and a new belief will be shaped. The designer, of course, cannot combine just any set of beliefs with a subject to reach the communication goal. Communication is directed toward a *specific* audience and that audience comes to the argument with *particular* cultural beliefs and understanding. The audience is a dynamic participant in the argument and the designer must discover the argument that will persuade a particular audience.

The range of argument achieved by varying the combination of formal devices seems limitless, and experimenting with formal devices within argument has been a major focus in graphic design. By examining the shaping of belief and the role of the audience in argument through a theory of rhetoric, what are some additional directions for investigation in design? Currently, there are many discussions concerning the responsibility of the designer in relation to the subject. What of the designer's responsibilities in referencing beliefs? And as an active participant in shaping belief, does the audience have a responsibility within the communication process? Are there avenues for exploring argument other than varying formal devices or varying the beliefs referenced? Are there communication goals not yet explored through visual communication? Questions of this sort may set a much needed new agenda for design inquiry.

Figure 13
Benetton Advertisement; Photo: Oliviero Toscani for Benetton; Courtesy of Benettons.

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

The Meaning of Products
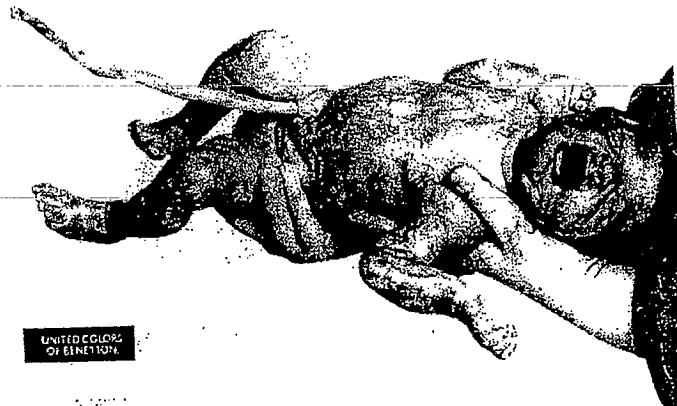
DAVID VOGLER

IF YOU'RE READING this book, there's a damn good chance you're an art student or a so-called e-designer just breaking into the Internet business. (If you're not an art student or a young e-designer trying to break into the business, then please skip this writing and advance to the essay immediately after this one. I've read it and I can tell you it's a lot more entertaining.)

If you're anything like *my* students, you're probably an insufferable punk with a pierced tongue, painted pinky nails, and an unjustified contempt for "traditional" media, like print, packaging, or broadcast.

At the risk of sounding preachy, I'll let you in on a little secret. It doesn't matter what medium you choose to work in. Good design transcends *all* media. Regardless of whether you're an e-designer or a "traditional" designer, your core mission is smart communication. Whether you work in print or pixel, successful design solutions begin with knowing your audience. Below are three anecdotes that come to mind.

Get in Their Head

Many years ago when I was an insufferable punk like you, I was fortunate enough to work for The Grand Master of Parody. His name was David Kaestle and he initially made his mark as art director of the *National Lampoon* magazine. Kaestle and his team created some of the industry's most brilliant satire.

Specifically, Kaestle was the man behind the *National Lampoon's* high-school yearbook parody, which is considered to be the gold standard for print humor. (Kaestle's project actually led writer Doug Kenny to create a little movie called *Animal House*. That film launched the career of John Belushi, and essentially changed the course of mass humor and pop culture. I submit that if it weren't for the likes of Kaestle and the *Lampoon* in the late 1970s, we wouldn't have humor Web sites, like *Onion.com*, in the late 1990s.) Kaestle's design direction was spot-on target and amazingly accurate right down to the smallest detail. You'd swear it was an actual high-school yearbook made by actual high schoolers.

I once asked Kaestle what the secret was to creating such accurate parodies. He told me

to think of the target being spoofed and simply "get in their head." In other words, to art-direct a parody of a high-school yearbook, you had to think like a high-school yearbook art director (and like the high-school audience it was aimed at). As painful as it might have been, you had to fully assume that person's point of view, art style—and in the case of an amateur yearbook designer—lack of talent. By being true to the host and the audience, you could easily emulate their approach and converse in their language. Essentially, you would be "in their head" and the results were nothing short of pure genius.
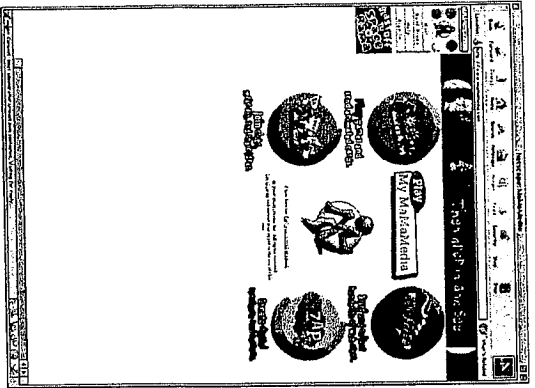
Be an Actor, Not a Star

A few years later, an actor friend of mine attended a theater workshop held by veteran Shakespearean actor and starship captain, Mr. Patrick Stewart. (Since this friend—who shall remain nameless—was a crummy actor who never really hit the big time, I always questioned the validity of his tales. Nevertheless, there's a moral to this story that supports my point, so please bear with me.)

On the first day of class, Stewart confronted the group with a chilling question: "Do you want to be an *actor* or a *star?*" Stewart's question was loaded. He then angrily demanded that any of those in attendance who wanted to be "stars" were unworthy of his time and would be banished from the workshop. Stewart then went on to explain the difference between an "actor" and a "star." A Hollywood star was not a true actor, but rather a vain publicity-monger whose purpose was to maintain a persona. "Stars" are people who essentially play one role—themselves—regardless of where they are cast. An example of this would be someone like Jean-Claude Van Damme. He can only play one thing: the doofus kickboxer heavy. The "star" is creatively insubstantial and is just concerned with the surface.

An "actor," however, is very different. A true actor is concerned about *his craft*, not his sur-

Nick.com is clean, intuitive, intelligent, and fun. A modern design based on visuals relevant to today's kids without being trite. Reminiscent of skateboard graphics, rave flyers, and youth fashion.

MaMa Media's site has very poor production values and a confusing design. The graphics and editorial slant is condescending and treats kids with disrespect.


face appeal. An actor is a chameleon capable of morphing into a variety of diverse characters with each one being wildly different than the next. Think of Alec Guinness or Gary Oldman or Tom Hanks. These are true actors who "get in the heads" of their given characters.

That being said, I've always found that the best designers are the ones who approach their craft like "true actors." The good ones can adjust themselves to serve a variety of clients without defaulting to one single surface style or trend. This ability to emulate the mindset of the target audience can be the key to effective communication. And that holds true for both old or new media and everything in between.

Listen to the Audience

For the past decade I have worked at Nickelodeon. Most recently as a vice president and creative director, helping them launch their online division. It was here that I met Scott Webb who taught me the "art of knowing your audience." Scott was one of the founding fathers of Nickelodeon and was a mentor to me; he was "Yoda" to my "Luke Skywalker." When it comes to branding, creative direction, and relating to the audience, Scott taught me everything I know. In the business of branding, he's a true Jedi Master.

Nickelodeon is the number one brand for kids in every medium they get into. Nick dominates in television, magazines, consumer products, and, more recently, online. How do they do it? They talk to kids. They listen to their audience and respect them. This sounds rather obvious, but no other entertainment company listens to kids with the passion, devotion, and sincerity that Nick does. Every script, product, and design is tested and approved by kids. Nickelodeon has a massive research department devoted solely to communicating with its audience through carefully engineered focus groups. No idea is realized unless a kid says he likes it.
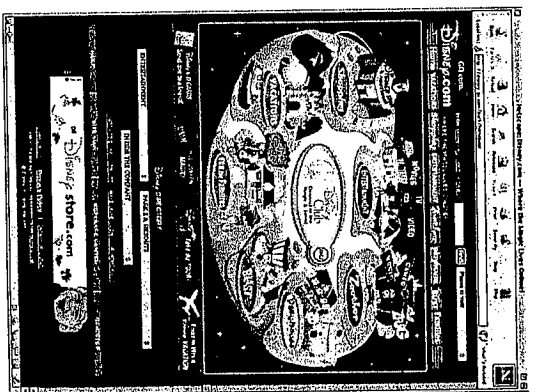
Disney.com uses a theme park "map" metaphor as a content organizational device. This is an approach considered to be outdated and embarrassingly amateur. This antiquated navigational logic breaks down quickly and usually produces frustration for the user.

Scott Webb taught me to listen to the kid audience, as well as the kid inside me. This was especially helpful when I re-launched nick.com in the summer of 2000. This was a serious refreshment of the "look and feel," navigation, and content direction of the entire site. We also upgraded our publishing systems and server solutions. It was the single most ambitious re-launch in Nick Online's history. But before I touched a single pixel, I talked to the audience.

From what kids told me, they found most kid Web sites to be "babyish" and insulting. After I studied the competition, I couldn't help but agree. (See sample screen grabs.) Naturally, Web design conventions for adults are different than for children. Kids have different motor skills, reading levels, and a profoundly different relationship with a computer than grown-ups. The new nick.com needed to be more than pretty eye candy; it had to be fun, navigationally clear, intelligent and kid-friendly. As a result, I directed my team with these five informing design principles:

1 | RESPECT Unlike most kid Web sites, the Nickelodeon interface respects the audience. There are no cornball environments as seen on the Fox, Disney, and JuniorNet sites. Nick offers intelligent menu systems that work for all ages and all skills, without the creative crutch of real-world metaphors such as houses, maps, dashboards, and spaceship windows.

2 | TEMPLATED All the nick.com pages follow a strict program of design guidelines and layout templates. This ensures consistent site packaging and enhances user clarity. This clear design program also ensures cost-effective page maintenance. I'm a strong believer that an interface should take a back seat to the content. The UI should be "invisible" and unobtrusive. The interface is there to help you access content, not overshadow it.

3 | SURPRISE, MOVEMENT, AND PLAY The nick.com site packaging is lean and functional, yet maintains a uniquely Nickelodeon sense of play, fun, serendipity, and discovery. It's loaded with

"easter eggs" and undocumented surprises. All the pages combine smart utility with animation and sound. In a sense, each Web page is a cool "digital toy" unto itself.

4 | CONSISTENT NAVIGATION The tabbed navigational bar is devilishly simple and appears consistently on every page. This navigational solution is intentionally "unclever" and does not pretend to entertain. The content is where the cleverness and entertainment is found, not the signage. Basic color-coding provides clear, consistent visual themes that unify each area. Even non-readers can navigate based on appearance alone.

5 | GRAPHICS WITH ATTITUDE The *nick.com* Web site uses modern design elements based on visuals relevant to today's kids without being trite. It's reminiscent of skateboard and snowboard graphics, rave flyers and youth fashion. Fonts, colors, and layouts promote a hip, "bubblegum techno" style. It's a site design that suggests a "junior varsity MTV" rather than *Barney*.

By talking to the audience we were able to launch a new site that better serves their needs and increases our traffic. In a sense, the kid audience helped design the new *nick.com* as much as I did. And judging from the hundreds of letters that we get each week, the kids say they love it.

Whether it's through creative arrogance or innocent over-enthusiasm, designers sometimes assume the audience they serve is just like themselves. Only on rare occasions will you embark on a project where the end user shares your own tastes, insights and opinions. For all other times, I suggest you check your ego at the door and ask the audience for input. They'll thank you for it.