

Are Graphic Designers Modern-Day Don Quixotes

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Abstract

The controversy about graphic designer's social and political role on society is a very popular and a never-ending discussion among contemporary designers and it will not come to an end until so many legitimate justifications and objections still continue to exist. For this reason, there is no consensus in this aspect. In our times, beside the classical job definition of a graphic designer, there is also one more essential task which is taking a part in the fight of social and political injustices, along the way of designing. Since that time and even long before that, designers have been questioning the idea of this statement; whether it has a sense of reality or nothing more than just a utopia. Some of them saw the positive and effective sides of their profession, produced some beneficial works and defined their personal and professional path in this direction. However, there have always been some others having kept their sceptical approach on the issue and questioned the idea of being effective on the solutions of society's social and political problems. The discussion starts at this point, whether social and political graphics have a visible effect on the mindset of society or it is not more than just a pointless endeavour like Don Quixote, who is the symbol of the fighting with the authority on his own, did. These two sides of the issue will be discussed; some opinions of the graphic designers and examples of the contributions will be presented in this paper, without looking for a certain answer.

Keywords: Graphic Design, Poster Design, Social Design, Design Movements, Propaganda

1. Introduction

Initially, before having a certain look at the arguments, it will be useful for our understanding to look at the history briefly, in the context of the evolution of graphic designer's role within the society. First attempts to use graphic design as a propaganda tool nearly coincided with the beginning of 20th century. As a matter of fact, in the 19th century, the figures of Brother Jonathan and Uncle Sam were already used for patriotic purposes and the call of war in the United States (Fig.1). Nevertheless, graphic design, specifically poster, was used as a mass device of propaganda for the first time at the beginning campaigns of World War I, which is started after a brilliant era called "La Belle Opoque" (also known as "Beautiful Era"). It's also stated in many sources that in the war years, posters have become a primary mass media due to the leap forward of print technology. With the help of this powerful type of media, all countries in the war used poster to convince the public for forming an army and asking their support for one of the bloodiest wars through the human history (Bektas, 1992, p.54). As Alice Twemlow stated in her book "What is Graphic Design for?", the conditions of this new, full of war-era designated the role of graphic designer as one-sided:

In the first decades of the 20th century, many designers across Europe and later in the United States espoused the principles of modernism. They felt it was their duty to put design's force behind the drive for social and political progress. During World War II and the post-war period, graphic design in Europe and the United State, at least, has a clear and purposeful role; to provide propaganda, camouflage, and information design on behalf of governments for the armed forces and civilians. (Twemlow, 2006, p.6)

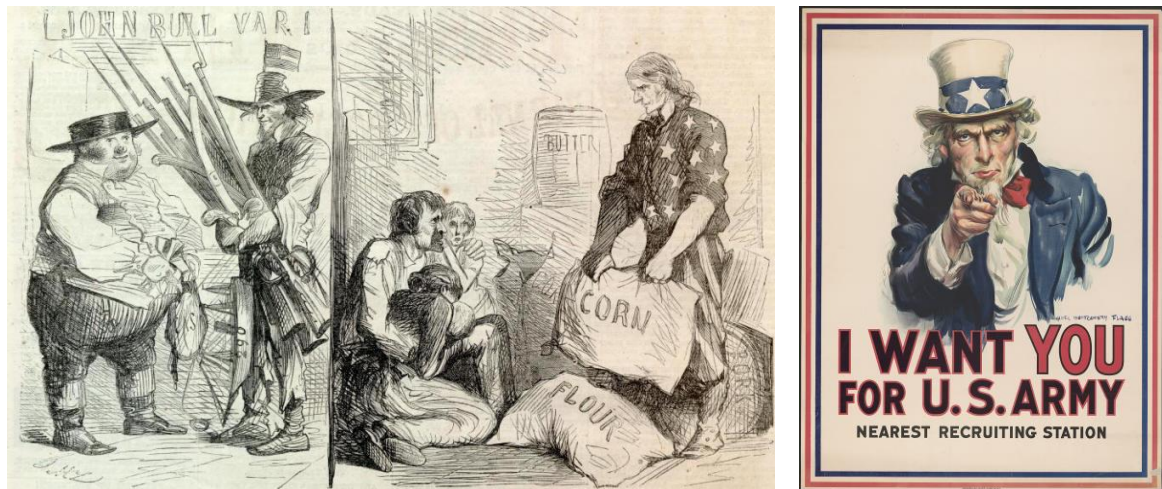


Figure 1. Posters of Jonathan Brother and Uncle Sam

As a result of that, Soviet Union, which was founded in 1922 after a revolution, used graphic design as a helping hand to build its state and society's social/cultural structures with the collaboration of Russian Constructivist artists and designers. Similarly, after the war in the United States, when public was suffering from poverty in the Great Depression, graphic design was utilized as a backing device to raise the spirits of public (which was poorly down). In this period, authorities like governments, politicians, even dictators have seen the potential power of graphic design and its substantial effect on society. Thus, Nazis in Europe tent to spread their ideology and propagaanda via posters. To give a very specific example about this from an article (Oztuna, 2008), even Hitler interfered in designer's job deciding which font must be used in the posters to make them more powerful (Fig.2).



Figure 2. Nazi propaganda posters

This awareness was prevailed in the Second World War years and after that, as a consequence of the reconstruction of civilization, it caused a golden age of advertising in the United States. Designers were only not exploited for the promotion of products by companies, but also for the election campaigns by politicians. Although some designers used their skills for the promotion, there were still some dissenters who designed posters to protest Vietnam War and its failure in the same years. Furthermore, a group of designers consisted of photographers and students published a manifesto called 'First Things First', which later became a milestone in the history of graphic design (Fig.3). The manifesto declared a number of ethics and called the designers into action against some unethical approaches on the profession. In the meantime, there were some youth and fine arts student movements in Europe like Atelier Populaire, who produced influential propaganda poster series against political forces. In the same years, three French designers established an activist design group titled 'Grapus' to produce protest materials against the authority. 70s and 80s witnessed a bunch of years full of activism. Peace, human rights of minorities and fighting with AIDS were the top issues and concerns of some designers in those years.

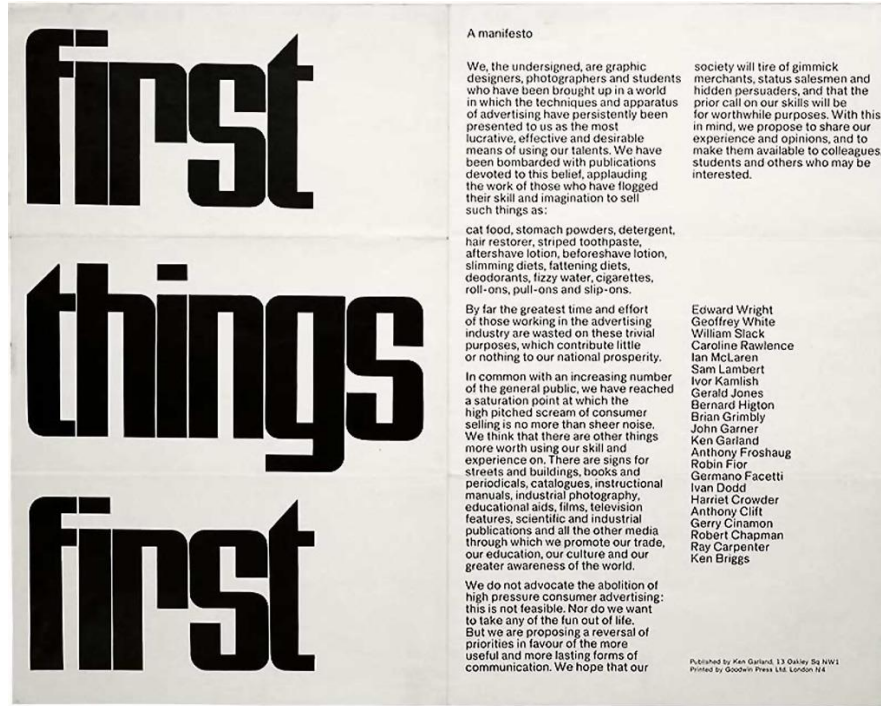


Figure 3. 'First Things First' Manifesto

After a dominant period of wars, ideologies, patriotism and nationalism in the 20th century, designers became more independent, individual and interrogating as any human being in the world and started to react against the authorities, whom they served their skills for before, due to the individualism provided by Post-Modernist mindset. Correlatively, towards 21st century, globalization played a notable role in the change of citizen conception of people. As a consequence of that, designers became more sensitive to the global issues (Fig.4).



Figure 4. Posters of Seymour Chwast, 1967 (left), Shigeo Fukuda, 1975 (right).

2. The Awakening

The 90s was a breaking point in the design community. Some of the designers took the heritage of their fellows, who have a dissenter voice against inequitable political forces, and started to build some critical approaches on the profession with the help of new technology. Liz McQuiston also stated this big change about the new era considerably in her “Graphic Agitation 2” book. She defines the 90s as a witness to a new unstable world, but also to a beginning of a new era for political protest. She also emphasises why an attempt of individual could be effective at a global level, contrary to what is believed:

A new spirit of activism emerged, driven by individual initiative and a do-it-yourself culture. These changes were accompanied by the emergence and widespread adoption of the new technologies - faxes, mobile phones, the internet and the World Wide Web. The image of new technology, used in wartime to dazzle and show videogame-style superiority, was transformed when grassroots activists grabbed control of the internet and made it into the ‘power to the people’ tool of the 1990s. The internet revolutionized the organization, accessibility and information dissemination of protest movements, giving birth to the global protest network. (McQuiston, 2004, p.7)

In the light of technological developments and the power of individualism, a large extent of designers realised their potential on the solutions of social and political problems in the world. As a designer and also designing educator, Katherine McCoy put into words this awareness at the Design Renaissance International Conference in Glasgow in 1993:

We cannot afford to be passive anymore. Designers must be good citizens and participate in the shaping of our government and society. As designers, we could use our particular talents and skills to encourage others to wake up and participate as well.

Some designers believed in the power of initiative and think that every individual designer could be the part of solution to social and political causes, no matter s/he is influential enough. This notion is still not underestimated. What is more, it has prompted many initiatives of designers

who made a big concrete impact on minds more than past while they were not saving the world literally. One of the big accomplishments of these attempts came from a non-profit and anti-advertising media foundation called “Adbusters”, which is founded in 1989 by Kalle Lasn and Bill Schmalz in Vancouver:

Adbusters promotes resistance to corporate and mass media takeover of our culture and our lives, through its energetic website and even more energetic magazine. To this end it encourages ‘culture jamming’ (creative resistance) and subvertising, an important tool with which visual artists, designers and activists around the world can revolt against the system creatively and (often) with a sense of humour. Through its many ad alterations and parodies Adbusters have spearheaded a veritable visual revolution. (McQuiston, 2004, p.92)

The organisation actualised so many globally known projects. One of them is an international day called ‘Buy Nothing Day’, which is a protest day against consumerism, and so many people from different countries has been participating it every year. Beside this, ‘First Things First’ manifesto was updated by the organisation in 2000 with the attendance of new designers. This was an emergency re-call for designers in the new age. When we turn back to our discussion, it is possible to give an example about the reality of their impact on society. Their most concrete and influential act was ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, which is started in 2011 after the global economic crisis. It spread so many countries and created a brand new conception in the protest culture (Fig.5). Furthermore, some designers made contributions to the boycott.

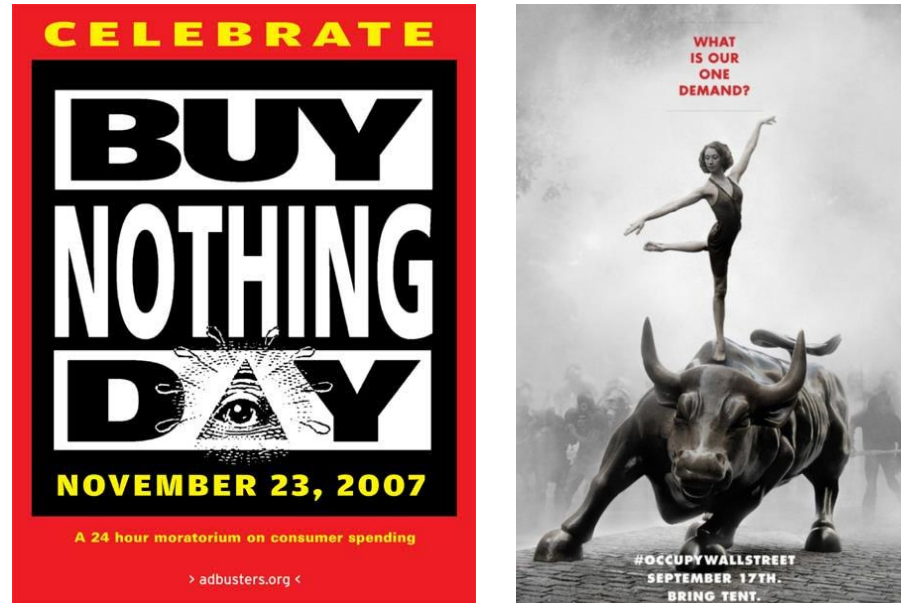


Figure 5. 'Buy Nothing Day' poster (left), 'Occupy Wall Street' poster (right).

One and maybe the most important of them was Jonathan Barnbrook, who is also known for his dissent graphic design works in the design industry. He, also one of the contributors of Adbusters magazine, supported the movement since the beginning and designed a logo, which is admired and chosen by the protestors, for the rebellion in London as a pro-bono work. His works, especially posters, which generally include his fonts, has made a tremendous impact on the people of profession, and they have also exhibited in the museums to meet public. As he stated in his interview (2006), he always indicates his opinion clearly about the impact of graphic designers in the various media:

Graphic design is not only about promotion or not an industry, but also a mass communication area. This means we have the potential of transmitting what we believe to tremendous numbers of people. Unfortunately, there are so many designers who think that everything should be kept limited within the market economy and that otherwise, community will not give response. This is absolutely nonsense. (Barnbrook, cited in Grafik Tasarım Magazine, p.37)

There was a man who agreed with this statement, and used his talent to break the prejudices and brought the attention to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Despite the powerful political

forces, he tried to show the reality of conflict starkly and succeeded in this thanks to his own efforts. Yossi Lemel stood in the middle of both side and brought some unforgettable aspects to the issue through the objectivity in his poster designs, which appeared in many publications and are placed in numerous exhibitions. As noted in the *Graphic Agitation 2*, “Lemel’s posters extract their provocative force from manipulation of the signs and symbols of the here-and-now. They also bear the hallmark of beautifully polished still photography, used to make stunning images with often controversial political messages.” (McQuiston, 2004, p.172)

Although the designers, who address the global issues, gained the respect from some of their confreres with their socially and politically based designs, some designers in the community objected to the idea of posters in museums. They did not give a credit for a poster in a closed area when its duty is to influence people. Designer Andrew Lewis clarified this objection efficiently in his interview in a Turkish social design-based magazine called *No Tasarım* (2008). He thinks that the place of a poster is outside, not an inside wall, and creative ideas in the posters, no matter they are great, is a word of designers, one to another. He also wonders whether ordinary people on the street would understand the idea of these posters. But, the debate does not finish at this point. To encourage designers, especially the young ones, for the social and political awareness, design competitions emerged in the last decade and caused a bunch of designers to develop some critical approaches about the issue. One of them was Leonardo Sonnoli. He pointed out this judgmental opinion in his interview (2008):

The question is, whether these competitions and exhibitions are useful or not; especially if the competition targets such demanding issues. [...] I think, these kinds of competitions do not let designers to produce functional posters but beautiful ones. Participations are interested in the style, not the content. Ultimately, competitions turn out to be the competition of producing the coolest work. (Sonnoli, cited in *No Tasarım Magazine*, p.124)

While the designers were discussing the benefits of the competitions, one of them, called ‘Good 50X70 Social Communication Project’, which is an independent, non-profit initiative, shone out. In contrast to the discussions about poster exhibitions, Good 50X70 exhibited the winning posters in open-air galleries and once in a big avenue of Milan in public in 2010 (Fig.6). The organisation brought the issues comprehensively to the attention of design community with its annual competition and students workshops around the world. Moreover, co-founders of the organisation started to ball rolling for another important competition known as ‘Poster for Tomorrow’, which focuses only human rights issues. The co-founders of the organisation, Tommaso Minnetti and Pasquale Volpe stated their view about the reality of posters in No Tasarim Magazine: “The contribution of designers to the global issues may not be so explicit, but it has an advantage of being culture-based. It gains a political position by impressing and re-shaping ideas. Ultimately, it does not bring a ‘solution’. Nevertheless, there is no more important commercial project than this.” (Minnetti&Volpe, cited in No Tasarim, 2008, p.100) The organisation also has the support of many respectable constitutions such as Unesco, Council of Europe, and non-profit organisations like Amnesty International, Greenpeace and World Wildlife Fund.

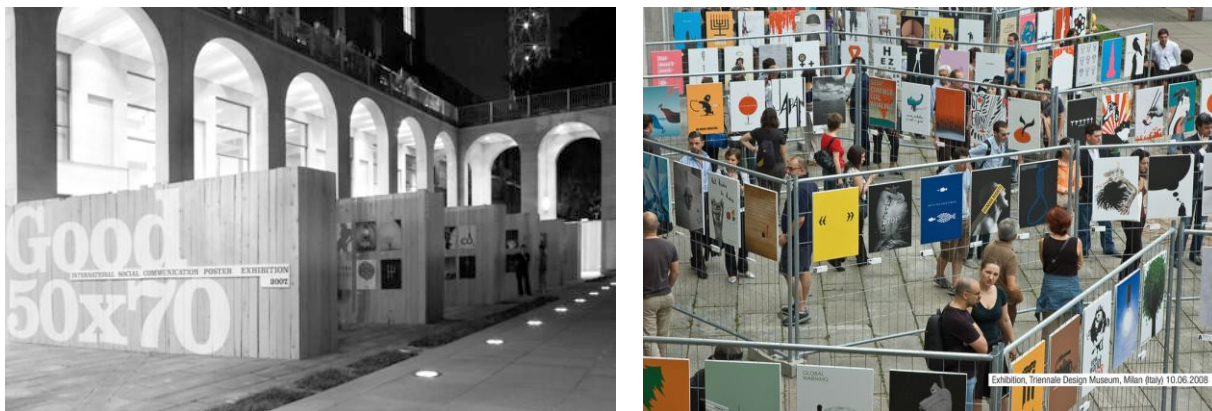


Figure 6. Open exhibition areas of ‘Good 50x70’ poster competition.

Taking these kinds of support is an efficient way to be more powerful and effective and transmit your message at a global level. But still, isn’t it the only way to spread designers’ idea about the global problems? What about commercial ways, communicating with the public via clients, corporations and companies? Some designers think that the collaboration with the business

industry for social projects is quite possible. A designer and designing educator Jennifer McKnight think in that way and told her opinion about the issue in one of her interview: “In fact, when you work with the clients who do not think about social responsibility but have the enough power for a radical change, then you could have many opportunities to be effective in changing and arousing the awareness. “(McKnight, cited in No Tasarım, 2008, p.84) While some of designers still approach with caution to the idea, others turn this into advantage. One and maybe the most important example of this is Benetton. The company has made a remarkable impact on people’s minds with its provocative and paradigm-shift print-ads about the human rights issues. “The photographer and creative director Oliviero Toscani started delivering the overtly political messages that define a decade of Benetton advertising.” (McQuiston, 2004, p.204) The aim of poster ads is to shock people with the powerful and thought-provoking images like a black woman breastfeeding a white baby or a priest and a nun kissing. The company also launched a magazine called Colors in 1991:

Under the editorship and creative direction of renowned designer Tibor Kalman, Benetton’s promotional magazine Colors also broke new ground, handling themes such as racism in a manner that was both controversial and visually stunning, Kalman reigned over the first 13 issues (1991-5), blasting his way through one taboo after another. (McQuiston, 2004, p.204)

Both Toscani and Kalman used the power of image for grabbing the attention of people to the social and political problems in the world and they succeeded in this using a company’s facilities regardless of getting the flak. Today, as a consequence of that their campaigns, posters and spreads are still remembered and spoken by the people (Fig.7).



Figure 7. Benetton advertisement (left), Colors magazine (right).

3. Conclusion

As a result of these controversial examples and opinions, the debate will continue to remain among one of the most-debated issues to be taken under consideration. Even in contrast to the arguments presented above, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Maybe it is overstated, and even the title of this essay seems very challenging in the beginning, but only if we think that graphic design is just about creating shapes, colours and types and making the world more beautiful and a liveable place. In fact, the problem is solved when we think in this way; however, it is not quite as simple. The arguments about the issue show the issue's subjectivity and sensitivity. Hence, it would not be logical to get a conclusion as soon as possible. Designers have some code of professional ethics like anyone else in other professions, and the world keeps turning, they will continue to shape their professional paths. Therefore, it is up to them to use their talents and skills for the sake of society additionally commercial purposes. Nevertheless, it is not attributing to designer super powers, but graphic designers, have a talent and they know how to realise it for communicating ideas more than any ordinary people in the world.

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