The Open Logo and the Closed History Notes of a Social History of Visual Identities

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Abstract. The golden age of corporate identity and logo design has always found wide space in visual communication histories as a crucial moment in the evolution of the graphic design profession in a modern direction. This focus in the last ten years has been confirmed by the publication of monographs, magazines and reprints, the launch of digital archives and publishing houses dedicated to the story of 'logo-modernism'. If, on the one hand, this interest in the narrative of the modernist corporate identity season has made it possible to access images, information and biographies that were hitherto known little or nothing, on the other hand, they have perpetuated the presentation of this season according to a 'heroic' reading fuelled by the 'formal lens' and 'visual satisfaction'. In doing so, historical narratives have often ended up showing graphic artefacts as decontextualized objects. Presented as 'works of art', logos were detached from the social context in which they lived, from the meanings they took on in the real world, and from the economic and political messages they conveyed.

Starting from the reconstruction of the historiographical debate that has run through the discipline since the 1990s, this contribution proposes to extend the historical narrative of logo design and the season of corporate identity manuals, trying to also include the dialogue between the end users and these canonical artefacts of graphic design history. Analyzing the way in which public opinion during history has related to logos by loving them, contesting them, modifying them, rejecting them, memeifying them, allows us to look at the trademarks of modernism as cultural objects, as mediators of social relations. Finally, this contribution proposes the social history approach as a lens to open up history to a more inclusive narrative and to look at logos as 'open works'.

Keywords: Graphic Design History · Historiography · Corporate Identity · Corporate Image · Logo · Social History

1 The Logo 'Out of the Context'

The golden age of corporate identity has always found ample space in the histories of visual communication as a crucial moment in the evolution of the graphic design profession in a modern direction. Through the figure of the director and coordinator of complex visual identity systems, graphic designers have seen their professional status

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mature and embed itself in the project methodology proper to industrial design, that of problem solving. Particularly between the 1960s and 1980s, this professional strand contributed to defining the canons of modernism on a global scale, becoming one of the fields on which the idea of International Style grew.

Beyond the histories of graphic design, over the last decade more and more printed publications, web platforms and social pages have disseminated and deepened the topic of logo design in the second half of the 20th century. Through in-depth image collection and acquisition work, these projects have provided a growing audience of students, professionals and the general public with a large amount of logos and designers' names, which until some time ago were difficult to find or often never published. In doing so, the projects that are part of what, to quote one of the best-known titles in this series, could be termed the 'logo-modernist' strand have shown common traits in the treatment of the iconographic apparatus and the point of view adopted in the narrative. The volumes that have investigated visual identity manuals, for instance, have often presented such canonical objects of the golden age of corporate identity through 1:1 scale reproductions or through zenithal photos and studio-architected reportage intended to emphasize the materiality of such volumes. This made it possible to enjoy high quality images, close-ups of typographic and stationery details. On the other hand, this editorial and narrative choice of presenting the manuals intact in their 'virginal' stage, highlighted an almost fetishistic view of such objects.

The tendency to isolate the design in order to highlight its aesthetic and formal qualities is most strongly evident in publications dedicated to the presentation of modernist logos. Shown as monochrome images on a white background, the logos are usually associated with short captions relating to name, product category, year, author and country. Furthermore, in preferring the visual aspect of the collection, the archive, the collection, the logos – both in print and web projects – are often arranged in a grid, associated by formal similarity (e.g. by lines, arrows, circles, letters).

By focusing on form, on the stylistic unity of design, on the homogeneity of graphic style, on the authorship of designers, the narrative that emerges from 'logo-modernist' publications and archives ends up privileging the merely aesthetic and formal aspect of these projects, running into a tendency that Italian design critic Silvia Sfligiotti recently identified as a common trait in much of the historical narrative of the sector: the use of images 'out of context'. Sfligiotti in particular reflects on the role of reproductions of visual artefacts in the construction and teaching of graphic design history. "The reproductions we have access to usually either have no background or simply a neutral one. If the object is a poster, it is rarely shown on a wall; if it is a book, it is not shown in the hands of a reader. This way any connection to the context of use and to the historical setting is lost." [1].

Since the first half of the 1990s, one of the themes that emerged in the historiographical debate concerns precisely the way in which artefacts were represented and narrated in the first published graphic design histories. In 1994, Victor Margolin highlights some recurring narrative problems. Among them, he highlights the tendency to use 'visual quality' as the main parameter in the historical narrative. According to the American design historian, describing "how artifacts look does not sufficiently address the question of why they look as they do." [2]. The following year, it was the American design critic

Steven Heller who invited researchers, historians or practitioners to disengage themselves from 'graphic designer' aesthetic parameters, or what he calls the 'formal lens', [3] when constructing the history of graphic design.

In 1992, design historian Bridget Wilkins also emphasized the obsession with appearance within the history of graphic design in an article pivotal to the historiographical debate, in which she stated: "The strangest aspect of the history of graphic design as it is currently written, taught, and discussed is the almost total absence of discussion of how these communications are received by their audiences." [4]. The article traces the causes of the lack of end-users in graphic design stories, first and foremost to the formal reading and heroic narrative of the profession. Wilkins' observations are still relevant if we consider the 'logo-modernist' strand mentioned above. Disassociating logos from the contexts in which they lived, from the public they addressed, showing them as a rich collection of monochromatic trademarks or well-designed manuals, risks indulging a formal reading and presenting the projects as contextualized 'works of art' and the authors as protagonists, as heroes or, in other words, as 'great men'.

2 The Logo as Mediator of Social Relations or the Logo "Out of the Studio"

The history of 'great men' – or 'great men' theory – is an approach to the study of history in which the events of the past are told from the impact of great men, or heroes. This strand, inaugurated by the studies of the Scotsman Thomas Carlyle in the mid-19th century, [5] was opposed in the following century by social history. Founded in Europe by the British historian Edward Palmer Thompson, [6] social history by contrast recounts historical events from the point of view of ordinary people, emphasizing the marginalized, the oppressed, the poor, the nonconformists and also taking the name, depending on the context, of people's history, history from below or history from the bottom up.

In the mid-1990s, the dialectic between great men and people's history, between history 'from above' and history 'from below', also penetrated the historiographical debate on graphic design. "It is complex, it is undefined, it is messy, but the rewards will be great." [7]. With these words Martha Scotford closed her famous essay *Messy History vs Neat History* in 1994. The American graphic design historian proposed extending the point of view of women in the history of graphic design, suggesting social history as an antithetical key to the canonical narration of 'heroes'. "This is the social history of graphic design, a perspective that demands the inclusion of a broad range of activities, people and objects, and the application of ideas and methods from many areas of historical and cultural study." [7]. Scotford's essay featured in the magazine 'Visible Language', within the spring 1994 issue edited by historian Andrew Satake Blauvelt. Mentioning Scotford's contribution in the volume's introduction, Blauvelt emphasizes the role of social history as a solution for "an understanding of art and design outside of the objects and their creators – the transcendence of aesthetics and the artist/designer genius." [8]. The social history proposed by Blauvelt invites historians to place themselves "outside of the objects and their creators" in order to grasp the context and circumstances in which artefacts were distributed, received and consumed by societies.

In 2011, Rick Poynor invites to place the history 'out of the studio', thus avoiding narrowing the analysis, advocating an opening of the investigation to cultural, social, political, environmental and economic fields, and including the views of visual studies, social studies, cultural studies, psychology, audience studies and ecology. In an article published on the "Design Observer" website, the English historian and critic states: "The study of graphic design surely would benefit from opening itself up to these new interdisciplinary perspectives and investigations from the outside." [9]. In Blauvelt's words, to place oneself "outside" means to widen the field of analysis, to zoom out to understand the context. To this meaning, the "out" proposed by Poynor adds that of going outside the graphic design studio to acquire a gaze other than that of the designers, external to that of the discipline, in order to have the scientific tools necessary to consider the effects of visual communication on its audience in greater depth.

Only two years before Poynor's article, in 2009, historians Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish contributed to the debate with the publication of a *Critical Guide* to the history of graphic design. Among the various topics analyzed and previously unexplored perspectives raised, the authors devote ample space to the relationship between graphic artefacts and society. In the book they place graphic design projects within the "public sphere as a realm of shared information and common assumptions changes" considering them part of the "cultural landscape" and emphasizing how, beyond formal qualities, "every graphic artefact mediates social relations." Through this lens, the two authors devote an entire section of their research to "Corporate identities and International Style" [10].

Drucker and McVarish argue that histories of graphic design, focusing mainly on formal aspects of corporate identity, often lose useful information about the context around such projects. On the contrary, the authors connect logo design to the evolution of society: trademarks define the companies they represent and simultaneously educate and persuade the public that their formal qualities correspond to the qualities of the institution represented. Similarly, the neutrality, minimalism and geometric shapes that characterized many corporate designs between the 1960s and 1980s, according to Drucker and McVarish, "served private interests with seamless efficiency." [11]. In the critical reading of the history of graphic design made by the two authors, logos should not only be considered as 'concise' or 'recognizable' elements of a visual identity but as image-value generating tools within competitive markets also connected with "political battles over the shape and ownership of discourse, intellectual property, and censorship mechanisms." [10].

Even without mentioning social history, the two authors of the *Critical Guide* propose to place the history of graphic design in its cultural and social context. In doing so, they point out in particular the lack of information concerning the interwoven relationship between designers as authors of visual identity projects and their clients, which in many cases were iconic companies of the golden years of booming capitalism. In doing so, they raise questions about the ethics of the designers involved. If on the one hand "the efficient surface forms of logotypes and identity systems might promote an image of stability" [12] on the other hand they have "constructed an image of smooth operations that could gloss over uncertainties in business activity or irregularities in accounting practices" [13] by banks, oil or pharmaceutical companies, multinationals responsible for controversial

financial, labour and environmental policies often contested by the anti-capitalist and environmentalist movements that spread in the mid-sixties. By investigating the social, economic, political and environmental implications that exist around logos, Drucker and McVarish's analyses expand the canonical historical narrative focused mostly on the formal details of the designs and biographical and professional details of the designers of the golden years of corporate identity.

Recently, the lens of social and people's history has become relevant again in the historiographical debate, reflecting the broader ferment on civil and social battles – related to anti-racism, feminism, environmentalism and gender issues in primis – that have swept through public opinion in recent years. In 2020, the People's Graphic Design Archive (PGDA), an online archive founded by Brockett Horne, Briar Levit, Louise Sandhaus, and Morgan Searcy, was born. The intention of the archive is to recognize and preserve "graphic design's and culture's expansive and inclusive history" [14] through "a virtual archive built by everyone, about everyone, for everyone." [15]. The invitation extended to an ever-widening number of users, in the PGDA's goals is aimed at challenging the canonical narrative of history. In the curators' intentions, the involvement of the widest possible pool of "people" lays the foundations for an archive capable of determining the collective history of graphic design from below in a plural and intersectional manner. The American critic Aggie Toppins also recently mentioned people's history as a possible alternative in order to develop more intersectional, inclusive and decolonial counter-narratives. Toppins in an online article called for a move away from a view of graphic design history as a history of the profession, stating that "people's history suggests a bottom-up orientation […] rather than the top-down gifts of good taste and proper function." [16].

Considering this historiographical chronology, it can be said that over the last thirty years, the debate within the history of graphic design has repeatedly invited historians, researchers, curators, critics and designers to extend the field of history, [17] to take the story 'outside of the objects and their creators' or 'out of the studio', to have a bottom-up perspective by trying to broaden the view to the context in which visual communication and graphic designers lived. Despite the invitation to a more 'social' history, the narrative of logo design in particular appears still too often tied to a design/er centric approach and hardly open to include the context, the 'people', the society.

3 Corporate Identity vs Corporate Imagination

In 2012, with the volume *Kommando Otl Aicher*, the German graphic designer and critic Alexander Negrelli analyzed one of the iconic projects of the season of corporate identity manuals: the visual identity of the 1972 Munich Olympics created by the design team Dept. XI supervised by Otl Aicher. However, as already emerges from the title of the book, in presenting the case study, rather than giving credit to the efficiency and complexity of the articulated coordinated image system of the Olympics, Negrelli chooses to describe the unexpected dialogue that existed between this project and the terrorist attack planned by the Palestinian commando Black September against the Israeli Olympic team.

"The principal concern of corporate design is control. […] Maintaining control over the way the rest of the world was to perceive its image was highly important in Munich,

36 years after Berlin." [18]. Negrelli describes Munich's visual identity as a battleground between control and loss of control. On the one hand one of the icons of modernist design, on the other what is called the birth of modern terrorism. On one side the order conceived by Aicher to offer a peaceful and solid image of Germany thirty-six years after the Nazi Olympics, on the other disorder. But above all, on the one hand a visual identity project linked to an international public event, on the other the perception of the entire world in relation to this same event. On the one hand the wish to coordinate and control the image of an event in all its manifestations, on the other hand the bombers, the victims, the police, the left-wing extremists, western public opinion, the Arab world, the Palestinian population, who after 5 September 1972 will not look at such a visual identity system with the same eyes. Certainly not with the gaze desired by the designers; certainly not with the eyes of the designers.

"Products are made in the factory […] but brands are made in the mind." [19]. This sentence, stated by Walter Landor, one of the undisputed protagonists of the golden age of international corporate identity, sums up very well the gap between the communication of a brand and what end users perceive of that particular brand. In the textbooks of corporate communications theory, this difference is well known: on the one hand, there is 'corporate identity' – here understood as a combination of corporate design, corporate communication and corporate behavior – and on the other hand, there is 'corporate image', the image that the public has of a given brand.

Also aware of the relationship between corporate identity and corporate image is also another driving force of the modern logo season, Paul Rand, author of famous visual identity programs, who in 1991 declared: "A logo is a flag, a signature, an escutcheon. […] A logo derives its meaning from the quality of the thing it symbolizes, not the other way around. A logo is less important than the product it signifies; what it means is more important than what it looks like." [20]. A few years later, Rand personally experienced this discrepancy between how a logo looks and what that logo means or ends up representing. Following the financial accounting scandal involving the US energy company Enron to the point of bankruptcy in 2001, the company's logo designed by Rand in 1997 ended up becoming "an instant symbol of corporate greed and corruption." [21]. A few weeks after the explosion of the 'Enron scandal', Rand's 'Titled E' was renamed 'Crooked E', reused through blogs, social networks, banners at demonstrations, graphically modified by users to denounce public outrage. On the one hand, the corporate identity, Rand's 'Titled E', on the other hand the result of what could be called the 'corporate imagination' of large sections of public opinion, the 'Crooked E'.

If such designers as Landor and Rand are aware of the relationship between logos and public sphere, if the difference between corporate identity and corporate image is well reported in technical and theoretical manuals on corporate communication, if the historiographical debate has often denounced the risk of a historical narration 'closed' in the studies, this binomial still seems little investigated in the histories of graphic design. In historical narration even today, this dialogue is often limited or vanished: there is only discussion about corporate identity and little or nothing about the 'image' that the public has made of a given company and its 'imagination' as an active act of resemantization of a logo or identity project.

Borrowing terms from the renowned Shannon-Weaver model of communication, one could say that historical publications – including those referred to at the beginning – focus mainly on the signal (the logo), the sender (the graphic designers) and little or nothing on the receiver (the public). However, while historical publishing narrates logos and corporate projects as untouched and in their 'virginal' state, investigating formal and stylistic aspects or the biographies of their authors, logos once 'out of the studios' are confronted with end users who frequently love them, make them their own, criticize them, use them as a fighting tool, make them memes, boycott them. In particular, this last decade, the years in which 'logo-modernist' publications have been in print, has been marked by social phenomena in which the reuse of logos has played a decisive role: to name but a few, the virtual nostalgia of the vaporwave, the protest of the anti-capitalist Occupy Wall Street movement, the return of 'logomania' in fashion, and the democratic and widespread.

These phenomena of memeified, contested, appropriated, distorted, bootlegged logos have succeeded in what the history of graphic design has often failed at; they have reminded us that in the life of logos, there is not only the moment of production of a mark, but also that of fruition. In the same way, there are not only designers, but also the public to whom their design artifacts are addressed.

The history that focuses on artefacts and their creators only gives us a distorted and partial view of the life of the graphic designer's profession, of society and of logos, but above all it runs certain risks. First of all, it risks being a "professionalizing" history, presenting the story of the designer as author, as genius, as hero, as educator of an unidentified public in order to institutionalize and reinforce a professional status, to canonize a strain, a style, an approach, a circle of authors, studios, agencies [22]. In doing so, he makes no mention of failures or, for instance, of connivance with corporate policies of dubious morality.

Secondly, it runs the risk of being a history that forgets the audience or at best presents it as a passive recipient subject, thus not contemplating the possibility that the user may empathize with or reject a project by appropriating it, through the processes of 'corporate imagination' mentioned above. A story made up of logos presented as untouched objects, to be admired or, to paraphrase Umberto Eco, as 'closed' works of art.

The re-appropriation of logos by end users demonstrates that, once they have entered the social context, and thus left the studio, these symbols become, rather than mere graphic elaborates, cultural products open to receiving processes of re-sematization by the public. Talking about the consumption and decoding of a logo within the histories of design would thus make it possible not to look at graphic artefacts par excellence as closed works. On the contrary, the logo could be understood as being open "to a multiformity of meanings that […] [the end user] must discover; indeed, depending on his state of mind, he chooses the key of interpretation that seems most relevant to him, and will use the work in the desired meaning" [23]. Conceiving the logo as 'open' would allow the historical narrative to open up to the user's and society's narrative, to understand the real impact of the logos analyzed within the real world, showing how, beyond their aesthetics, corporate identities live an autonomous life of their own in popular culture or collective memory.

As the Italian historian Carlo Vinti states, the study of the "traces left by users on artefacts, as well as their comments deposited elsewhere, […] [can] certainly tell us a lot about the wide space that often separates designers from their audience." [24]. Otherwise, as the historiographical debate has already pointed out, a story "closed" in the studio also risks addressing only an audience of insiders, thus increasing the distance professionals and public.

Launched as an Instagram page in autumn 2019, the LOGO In Real Life (Logo IRL) project attempts to collect precisely the traces of the 'bottom-up' ferment mentioned above, with the intention of providing insights into a social history of corporate identity. The project proposes itself as a participatory digital archive of modified, counterfeited, appropriated, memeificated, contested logos by investigating "what happens to logos when they leave corporate identity manuals, brand guidelines, studios, awards, start living in real life". By flanking the historical information on the authorship of a given brand analysed with information on how the public re-appropriated that logo by changing its meaning as well as its form, Logo IRL attempts to open up the historical narrative concerning the 'logo-modernist' golden age.

Poynor suggested that history should be taken out of the studios. The analysis presented here shows that a history 'closed' in its own studio ends up interpreting and disseminating logos as closed works. On the other hand, the phenomena of re-appropriation of logos mentioned above, realized by broad and heterogeneous layers of society, invite us to get out there, into the real world. Logos out in the open, history closed. The open logos and the closed history.

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