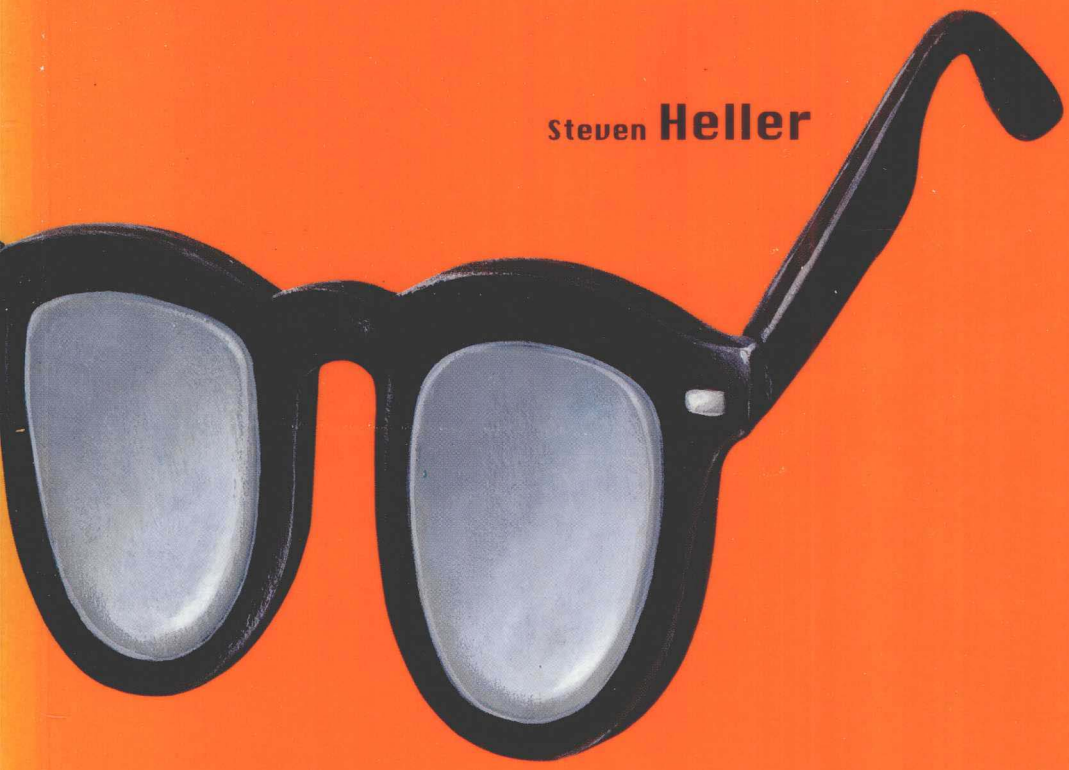
Design Literacy (contin

Understanding Graphic Design

Steven Heller



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

TIBOR KALMAN

FOR HIS COURAGE

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—Steven Heller

Introduction

When he saw the cover sketch for *Design Literacy (continued)* taped to the wall next to my desk, the editor of the magazine that I have art directed for the past two decades declared, "Maybe if I read your book, I wouldn't have to talk to you anymore." He was referring to our regular tête-à-têtes, where I "pitch" cover ideas that either sail smoothly or sink under the weight of justifications. Taking the title of this book literally, my editor presumed that if he read *Design Literacy (continued),* he would indeed be sufficiently literate; he thought that it would no longer be necessary to ask: "What does this mean?"

I assured him that this was no magic pill. Neither *Design Literacy* (the book) nor design literacy (the concept) would alter his opinion about a particular cover image if he really disliked it for conceptual or aesthetic reasons. Possessing design literacy does not mean that a nondesigner will always see eye to eye with a designer (who presumably is already design literate). There are too many added factors that enter into the acceptance or rejection of a design solution, not the least of which is personal taste. In fact, good designer-client relationships are often based on the latter's willingness to overcome certain taste prejudices and accept the expertise of the designer. Which is not to suggest that my editor or any other client would not benefit from delving into the history and process of graphic design. But, even among literate designers, design literacy does not guarantee that everyone is on the same page at the same time. It means only that we share the same general body of knowledge.

Anyone reading this book with the expectation that it will provide a cure-all for ignorance about graphic design will be disappointed. True design literacy, which requires years of learning

and experience, involves practical and theoretical understanding of how design is made in order to function as a marketplace tool and a cultural signpost. The book title *Design Literacy* refers to the sharing of knowledge—certain facts, impressions, and opinions—about graphic design and its broader cultural affiliations, but it is not a textbook about how or what to make. It will not walk the reader through conception, manufacture, and application. In fact, rather than a fulfillment of the reader's expectations of becoming more literate, the title more precisely reflects a personal journey. Although I hope that the book will be used to increase understanding and even debate within the field, the essays collected here and in the preceding volume, *Design Literacy,* are stepping-stones in my own education. In other words, they manifest how I became design literate, regarding not only the language(s) of design but, as well, the legacy of individuals and objects that comprise it.

I found that truly understanding and appreciating graphic design as both commercial art and cultural force requires one to examine the contexts for many objects and the raisons d'être of their makers. So, in a sense, this book is something of an analytical show-and-tell, in which I am reporting on objects and ideas that have relevance to my understanding of design. These subjects are, however, also components of a larger body of information about the design process as extrapolated from artifacts that, when taken as a whole, contribute to the definition of twentieth-century graphic design.

The first *Design Literacy* (co-authored with Karen Pomeroy) used various designed objects (some classic and others arcane) as touchstones for an examination of how graphic design and graphic designers function in respective contexts. The selection was based entirely on my own interest and fascination with diverse forms—including objects that I had previously researched over many years as part of larger histories or profiles. The selection of what to include was based either on what I believed to be an important work by a significant practitioner (an archetype of a particular genre) or simply on what sparked my curiosity (whether it loomed high in the design pantheon or not). The reason for writing the book was to share all available insight into the object (or genre of objects, as the case may be) through both interpretation and, when possible, the words of the creators themselves. Rather than merely comprising a linear narrative, the essays (or short stories, as I like to call them) ostensibly function as sidebars to a broader historical sequence as spelled out, for example, in Philip B. Meggs's *History of Graphic Design* or Richard Hollis's *Graphic Design: A Concise History.* However, in a comment to me, Milton Glaser critiqued the first *Design Literacy* as "all meat and no potatoes," suggesting that this sidebar approach lacked the intellectual glue necessary to bind the essays. According to Glaser and some other like-minded critics, the first book was flawed because it did not make cohesive links between one object (or essay) and another. Rather than accept these stories as self-contained units, as they were intended, my critics wanted a more definitive overview that used the selected objects and themes as support for grand conclusions.

My rationale for not doing that was simple: Conventional graphic design history has already been written as a linear narrative flowing from one movement, period, or style to another, and that form is just one approach of many. The problem for me is that not all design fits snugly into

well-organized categorical berths. Moreover, I was not interested in repeating the narrative approach; Meggs and Hollis have already done this very well in their respective books. Instead, I opted to address individual works, genres, and ideas that appear to have exerted even a modicum of influence on overall practice. The fact that the story of one object does not link neatly to the next, like some complex jigsaw puzzle, is okay as long as the objects are formally or conceptually worthy of analysis—or provide the basis for good stories.

I realize, however, that some of the themes covered in both *Design Literacy* and *Design Literacy (continued)* are not recognized as part of the graphic design canon (past or present), and that it is a stretch on my part to inject them into serious design discourse. A designer whom I greatly admire said of the last volume that he strongly objected to seeing untutored or naïve design—such as anonymous shooting targets and raunchy 1960s underground newspapers—covered in the same venue and with the same reverence as highly professional work by, for example, Paul Rand, Will Burtin, or Saul Bass. Yet what better way to examine the comparative merits of design as visual communication than to look intently and respectfully at all forms on the design spectrum—high or low—if they reveal something important about the nature of what we do?

Since graphic designers draw inspiration from both professional and unprofessional sources—from known designers and anonymous craftspeople—there is no reason to limit our study to haute design. I believe that common "show cards," produced by job printers during the 1920s and 1930s, are as integral to the history of this field as the 1960s award-winning *West* magazine or the ultrahip contemporary magazine *Wallpaper** (all of which are discussed herein). Both recognized and forgotten objects are equally valid in the course of discovery. Incidentally, the selections in this book are not driven by any specific ideology (e.g., modern or postmodern), a fact that accounts for the eclecticism and diversity of the objects, ideas, and individuals presented here.

Design Literacy (continued) is not a second chance to correct what certain critics found lacking in the first volume. Although I respect their viewpoints and accept the notion that a less eclectic and more thematically unified book has distinct virtues, I have elected not to shift my perspective this time around. Rather, as the title indicates, this second volume is a continuation of my fascination for and inquiry into a variety of designed things and the ideas supporting them. *Design Literacy (continued)* is not a hellbox of what was cut from the first book, either. It is a collection of some previously published and new essays about subjects that have continued to capture my interest since the first volume was published in 1997.

And like the first volume, *Design Literacy (continued)* defines design literacy as a basic understanding of how design functions in the environment. This is addressed mostly in the section called "Objects" through analysis of artifacts that are organized into four categories: Propaganda (design that imparts political or social messages); Media (vehicles and environments, such as books and magazines, where design conveys messages or is the message); Language (typefaces, letters, symbols, codes, and stereotypes that serve as the lingua franca of visual communication); and Commerce (that which is used to sell ideas or things in the mass

marketplace). Some of the objects in each category may well intersect with other categories—which is inevitable given the multipurpose nature of graphic design—but are included where they are because the stories are told from the vantage point of those particular categories. In addition, *Design Literacy (continued)* includes sections not present in the first volume: namely, Issues and People. The former consists of commentaries and histories about specific aspects of design, including censorship, plagiarism, and the Big Idea in advertising. The latter includes profiles of designers whose bodies of work, even though specialized (for example, type design, book design, and poster design), make better stories than excerpts of single objects. Together these sections serve as additional sidebars on the historical timeline of graphic design.

To borrow Milton Glaser's descriptive analogy, I can say that those readers who are looking for a full-course meal might indeed still be hungry after reading *Design Literacy (continued)*. This is fine, however, because there is no one book that will provide all the information or points of view required for complete design literacy. This sequel is a feast for those who are happy with large helpings of meat and who find these distinctive objects of design as mouthwatering as I do.

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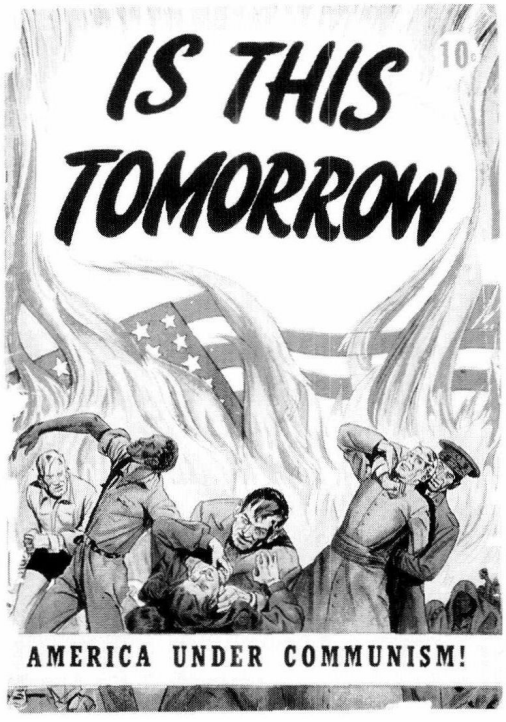

Anticommunist print and film propaganda from the forties and fifties is as quaint as patent medicine ads from the last century. The stereotypes involved are so ludicrous, it's hard to give them any credence and even harder to accept their survival after several decades, almost into the present. Postwar rhetoric about godless communism so infused all media and invaded everyday life in America that just the word "communism" provoked irrational behavior. The power of anticommunist propaganda was so effective (and perhaps seductive) that Americans relinquished certain rights and liberties in order to allow the government to persecute its perceived opponents. While this is not an apology for real Soviet crimes, it is an analysis of why anticommunist propaganda was virulent and, therefore, unhealthy for Americans. The history of this propaganda, as for all propaganda, is rooted in the creation of recognizable stereotypes that oversimplify complex issues for the purpose of controlling mass opinion. The methods by which this government encouraged insidious red-baiting and witch-hunting through print and film—the longest continuous propaganda campaign of its kind—ultimately had a deleterious effect on all society.

During World War II, Americans referred to all Russians somewhat affectionately as Ivan, but, afterward, the name Boris was commonly used in American anti-Soviet propaganda, as in the aggressive battle cries so typical in vintage cold-war comic books: "Give Boris a taste of old glory" or "Teach Boris what it means to be American." This name, the equivalent of John or Jim in America, had a threatening ring to it. Neither Nikita, Alexi, nor Leonid conjured the same

negative stereotype that Boris did, because it embodied all the evils of Russian Communism and Soviet expansionism. Therefore, when Boris (Yeltsin, that is) came to the United States in 1990 for his first whirlwind visit and was greeted by throngs of friendly Americans—some chanting "Boris, Boris"—it was symbolic that a terrible era, noted for its witch-hunts and vicious propaganda, had finally ended. Boris is now the leader of an independent, post-Communist Russia; on January 28, 1992, fifty-three years after the cold war began, he and President George Bush proclaimed its official end. This too was symbolic, since the cold war had actually ended over a year before when, under Mikhail Gorbachev, a punch-drunk Soviet empire went down for the count before the world's disbelieving eyes. After years of throwing wild punches, the West had finally scored a knockout.

"The Cold War was Stalin's war," writes William G. Hyland, the editor of *Foreign Affairs* and author of *The Cold War: Fifty Years of Conflict.* "He started it in 1939, when he struck a devil's bargain with Adolf Hitler to destroy Poland, partition the Baltic and Eastern Europe, and unleash World War II." Two years later, Hitler invaded the USSR, forcing Stalin into an alliance with America and England. The seeds of conflict over postwar Europe were planted before the Nazi invasion and sown during the Big Three summits, especially at the Yalta Conference, where Stalin was given free reign to carve up Eastern Europe into Soviet satellites and retain his much-disputed Nazi/Soviet spoils. However, the history of Stalin's empire-building, his brutality and perfidy, needn't be rehashed here. Suffice it to say that his cold war was not about ideology or winning hearts and minds; it was a straightforward power struggle that was confined, by Stalin's definition, to the range of the Red Army. If given the chance, the cold war might have turned hot, but Papa Joe died in 1953 before he could muster the resources to launch that critical offensive. Yet the cold war was certainly hot enough to raise American acrimony to a boil, causing this government to escalate the level of conflict on many fronts—including the home front, where vicious red-baiting of real and imagined foes became a spectator sport.

Years before our wartime alliance with Russia began, Americans were conditioned by politicians, businessmen, clergy, and the press to fear and loathe the Communist Party. Editorial cartoons portrayed them as bomb-throwing thugs. In fact, even the *New York Times* showed more respect for Mussolini than for Lenin or Stalin because, during the early years of the Italian fascist régime, Il Duce promised a social revolution that was more palatable to ruling-class Americans than the Soviet model. Indeed, to be anti-Mussolini in the mid-1920s or even anti-Hitler in the early 1930s was to be "prematurely antifascist" (an oxymoron coined after 1940 by red-baiters to describe early Communist sympathizers and fellow travelers). After the Russian Revolution, communism, like socialism and anarchism, was the dread of America's business and industrial leaders, who feared labor unrest because of their own exploitative practices. These same leaders forged secret alliances with racists, jingoists, and other America-first fanatics in spreading anticommunist propaganda throughout the nation; they thus succeeded in convincing masses of Americans that their lives and livelihoods were threatened by Communists and Bolsheviks—who not coincidentally were nestled among the throngs of foreign immigrants regularly entering the United States.