

Maud Lavin



*Clean
New
World*

Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design



Maud Lavin

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To Audrey and Carl Lavin

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Clean New World

Introduction

This book is about who gets to say what to whom. It's about who has the means to communicate, the power and money to get a message across, the passion and humor to speak, the openness and confidence to participate in dialogue rather than monologue. In aiming these questions at graphic design and the related areas of advertising, corporate identity programs, Web sites, and political photomontages and posters, I am looking in particular at cottage-industry images printed, broadcast, projected, or digitally transmitted in mass markets. I want to know what happens to private visions in public forums. For me and for others, graphic design is an umbrella field, defined broadly as mass visual communication and more fully as "an art form that depends for its efficacy on the degree to which words and images communicate a coherent message."¹ For the most part, it's a hard-working service field, a field that sees itself more occupied with translating speech into visual language than speaking. It is client- and product-oriented. Many of its corporate-client practitioners are instructed to provide order and clarity, to give their clients' companies the look, sheen, and promise of a clean new world. It's a fairly neurotic expectation, since designers can't really clean—they just cover, wrap, accent, or put into a clean envelope some messy realities. Typically, no in-depth communication exists in corporate design graphics. For me, graphic design fascinates, then, because it is a bizarre example of hamstrung power. In corporate service, design's most common function, it is implicated in both cultural stasis and change, but with only partial control.

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A while ago in Minneapolis, I was on a panel with Ivan Chermayeff, a principal in the design firm of Chermayeff/Geismar. A star in the field, Chermayeff looked the part of the handsomely aging artist: tall, rangy, with longish hair and expensively understated clothes. Chermayeff was well known for, among other things, having redesigned Mobil's corporate graphics. His waves of clean gasoline sloshing inside the orange O were then seen by millions of people. But as we started to talk in the panel about how that image and its related identity program did and did not relate to what Mobil actually does as a corporation, Chermayeff grew uneasy. He didn't really know or didn't want to talk about what Mobil did. His task was to concentrate on the details of its look. Here was someone who had tremendous power to communicate visually and no power whatsoever to influence the content. And here was a field, graphic design, bent like most fields around self-justification, forced to talk formal visual issues and ignore its own impotency.

Because graphic design is so powerful and so warped (in most commercial practice) in its ability to communicate, it provides an exaggerated model for the same questions that dog other communication fields like photography, film, the Internet, and my own field, writing. Who really has a voice in our culture? Do we have public forums that are democratic, alive, open, fun, able to make a difference? Or are too many of our public spaces bought and closed off: the town square where speeches were protected by the First Amendment now deserted in favor of the shopping mall where private owners determine what is said in advertising spaces; the cacophony of public-access cable ceding to HBO; anything resembling porn on the Net potentially censored by schools and libraries; reporters, TV news anchors, graphic designers, and others hired to condense and deliver messages but to keep their own mouths shut.

Of course, like most people, graphic designers don't like keeping their mouths shut. For financial reasons, the same designers will often work on corporate graphics and on alternative, self-generated projects. So, this book is not only about communication questions, but also about the historical and contemporary track record of graphics in making powerful political statements, in functioning as intriguing personal creations,