CAN CHRISTIANITY INSPIRE A GLOBAL CULTURE?

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PRESENTATIONS

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DESIGN AND GLOBALIZATION
CAN GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MASS COMMUNICATION INSPIRE A GLOBAL CULTURE?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I deliver four points which support my assertion that graphic design in mass communication can inspire a global culture informed by Christianity. First, I argue that the environment in which people consistently find themselves will over time influence and affect the interior dispositions of the person, and when occurring in great numbers, the culture. I argue for the importance of graphic design as a vital component in the development of culture and how as visual beings, we are affected by what we see. In the third place, I offer my interpretation of events in recent history related to graphic design that has changed our society and affected many people. Finally, I suggest a solution to the problem, citing early Christian culture and placing it as the model for a positive change. Only with naturalness did the ordinary Christians of the early Church change their society while being in the midst of it, and analogously, only with naturalness can we, the ordinary citizens in our popular culture change the Western world.

PAPER

To understand the culture of a particular people, it is often said that a study of language, history, music and more is required. By themselves, these elements of culture mean little; it is the effect of these characteristics on individuals at a macro level that brings about changes in culture. Our interior dispositions affect the way we make decisions and in turn affect the way our society characterizes itself in culture. It follows then that at the foundation of culture is the personal perception of the world in the common experience of many. This recognition of the similarities in peoples and cultures was prevalent in the unification of the states on the European continent in the late 19th Century and continues to hold true today [Hobsbawm, 1996][1]. Only when these perceptions are consistent through great numbers of a particular people can one make the generalization that such elements of society form the culture of the people. Our view of ourselves and our society is based on large measure by our perception of our own world. In analyzing these individual elements, language, history, music and the like, we notice that together, these elements of culture create an environment for the audience and ideas and emotions for

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[1] Hobsbawm, E. J. The Age of Revolution 1789-1848. New York: Vintage, 1996. Print.

individuals that in turn affect opinions and dispositions. These are all the result of communication, which, citing technology, have been reintroduced in the world of today as 'mass communication'.

The rate at which these ideas can be communicated is directly proportional to the rate at which culture and societies change and evolve. With the invention of the printing press in the 15th Century and the refinement of mass reproduction in the 18th Century, the cityscapes of countries like Great Britain were forever changed[2]. As literature was more efficiently communicated, so were ideas. A modern example of the cacophony of communication and advertisements can be observed in America's New York Times Square or Japan's Tokyo Shinjuku Ward[3]. With rapid dissemination of ideas come rapid changes in culture.

With the printing press, Martin Luther was able to communicate his revolutionary ideas around Europe with such efficiency that it is arguable that the Protestant Reformation could not have been as successful were it not for the efficient reproduction technologies that allowed him to distribute his 95 Theses throughout Europe within one year[4]. The communication of ideas changes environments and attitudes and ultimately, culture. As a main component of popular culture, visuals in an environment affect the way individuals think. In the age of technology, design has come to have a profound effect on culture at large. This includes two and three dimensional work that seeks to communicate ideas or facts to large numbers of people and often occurs after thorough research of the designer's audience. Newfound efficiency in past centuries introduced a newfound rapidity in existing forms of mass communication.

Recognizing that environments affect the individual, world renowned novelist CS Lewis asserted that an alteration of one's surroundings is the reason that posture and incense have been widely used to assist men and women in prayer [Lewis, 1942] [5]. Knowing that we are affected by our environment, we see the importance of design, which pervades our daily lives. Other than nature and accidents, everything that exists appears as it is because a person decided that it should look this way [Sedlack, 2008][6]. In his book, Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Life and Maybe Even the World, journalist Warren Berger states that "design is applicable to just about any challenge … and its principles are accessible to anyone." He continues to say that all while design will not solve major problems in "one fell swoop," it is creative problem solving, and on a case by case basis, seeks to "learn what people are lacking in their lives" and to fill that void. By his observation, "the brain is always looking to figure out what's important…but doesn't know where to look." Berger asserts that because "the power of visuals is much stronger," in terms of affecting decisions, designers research and capitalize on our visual and emotional nature to "get you to focus where you're supposed to focus."[7] With such power, designers carry in their hands a great responsibility to positive cultural change.

As a result, design, specifically graphic design, has become a main engine of advertisement and marketing, an exceedingly strong branch of communication within cultures. Branding expert Marc Gobé goes as far as to say that with changes in design over several decades, the terms "marketing" and "popular culture" are now coterminous[8]. Observations of human interaction with design reveals concrete manifestations of this concept. Design affects

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[2] Doordan, Dennis. "History of Modern Design." University of Notre Dame. Aug. & Sept. 2009. Lecture.

[3] Raizman, David Seth. History of Modern Design. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004. Print.

[4] Brecht, Martin. Martin Luther. tr. James L. Schaaf, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985–93

[5] Lewis, C. S., and C. S. Lewis. The Screwtape Letters: with Screwtape Proposes a Toast. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. Print.

[6] Conversation, Robert Sedlack, Professor, University of Notre Dame

[7] Tanneeru, Manav. "Can Design Change the World?" Living with Technology. Cable News Network CNN, 6 Nov. 2009. Web. 13 Mar. 2010. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/11/06/berger.qanda/index.html>.

[8] Gobé, Marc. Brandjam: Humanizing Brands through Emotional Design. New York: Allworth, 2007. Print

emotion and thought processes; upon seeing the Coca-Cola logo, many people automatically think of the words "refreshing," "delicious." A 2009 case study by Gadjah Mada University in India found that the most popular word associated with Coke is "thanda,"[9] meaning "preferred," and even in some dialects, "love"[10].This trend is not representative of Coca-Cola alone: there is a worldwide association of the Adidas logo with articles of "high quality," or people of "affluence."[11] Design evokes emotion and emotion affects decision making[12].

To capitalize on this growing trend of emotional association, designers have, in recent years, changed their focus of appeal from functionality to aesthetics and now to emotion[13]. This is readily seen in the recent American presidential campaign between John McCain and Barack Obama. Upon seeing the McCain campaign posters, many people saw the old style, a typical patriotic five-pointed star and large letters on a blue and white poster[14]. The opposing presidential candidate Barack Obama was one of the first to have his own logo[15]. As a result of the campaign, many young Americans associate the Obama logo with the word "Change," one of the most carefully chosen and communicated words of the Obama Presidential Campaign in 2008. Many also associate the Obama Presidential Campaign with the word "Hope" as depicted in the famous poster by graphic designer, Shepard Fairey[16], a clear example of the strong affect that design has on the person in the associations that design creates between concepts and emotions and ideas.

As a result of declining moral practices in the American motion picture industry, Archbishop of Cincinnati (1925-1950) John McNicholas (1877-1950) instituted the Catholic Legion of Decency in 1933. The Legion was charged with the task of watching and rating Hollywood movies, thereby empowering parents to make informed decisions about what their families were exposed to. Within one year, the legion had participants in over 80 dioceses and dealt a measurable blow to box offices revenues, prompting two Hollywood representatives to meet Archbishop McNicholas on his doorstep to request a meeting [Fortin, 2007][17]. The Legion's rating system evolved into the current Motion Picture Association of America Film Rating System. "McNicholas' action against Hollywood stemmed largely from his concern over the morality of children and the powerful effect movies had on them" [Fortin, 2007][18]. Under the New York Education Law, some of the films condemned by the Catholic Legion of Decency were censored. Supreme Court decision Joseph Burstyn, Inc v. Wilson [1952] ruled that motion pictures would be considered part of 'freedom of speech' and could not be censored [TIME Magazine, 1934][19]. Because of the legislation against the New York Education Law, the Catholic Legion of Decency lost effectiveness. An attempt by clergy to revive the Legion in the 1960's proved futile and it now exists only as a branch of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops[20].

With the effect of the availability heuristic, increased exposure to ideas and concepts increases the presence of that idea or concept in the receiver's mind, and positively affects the

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[9] Dharmmesta, Basu S. "Marketing Management Study: Coca-Cola in India." Master of Management. Gadjah Mada
[10] "Thanda." Webster's Online Dictionary. Web. 14 Mar. 2010. <http://www.webstersonlinedictionary.org/translation/Xhosa/thanda>.
[11] "Logo Design History." Famous Brands Glossary. Web. 8 Mar. 2010. <http://www.logoorange.com/logodesign-A.php>.
[12] Block, Emily. "Decision Making." Principles of Management. University of Notre Dame. Feb. 2010. Lecture
[13] Sherry, John. "Modern Branding." University of Notre Dame. 6 Feb. 2010. Lecture.
[14] http://shopmccain.com/catalog/images/SM501_Button.gif
[15] http://www.giantsky.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/obama08_thumblogo200.gif
[16] http://creativesuite.com.au/wedesignstuff/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/barack-hope-poster.jpg
[17] Faith and Action, A History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1821–1996, Roger Fortin, 0814209041. 273-7
[18] Ibid.
[19] "Legion of Decency" (Time magazine, 1934)
[20] Faith and Action, A History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1821–1996, Roger Fortin, 0814209041. 273-7

possibility that it would influence decision making[21]. A measurable example can be taken from the American motion picture industry. Movies like Animal House [1978] which depicted a less disciplined college culture have largely shaped the way that the culture of American higher education has developed in recent decades. In contrast to the discipline and professionalism of the college culture prior to the American sexual revolution of the 1960's, the modern college culture is largely similar to that depicted in Animal House as an exaggerated scene of excessive drinking and partying. The movie was so successful in the changes that it depicted and later wrought that it was named one of the top films ever made by Esquire Magazine, and The New York Times, and was deemed "culturally significant" and entered into the American National Film Registry[22]. The ideas of this media became the norm in college life and continue to affect similar changes in culture.

The effect of design is seen in other examples within modern popular culture. The idea of living an environmentally sustainable lifestyle has existed for decades, and was mentioned in by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical Rerum Novarum in 1891 and later cited in John Paul II's Centesimus-Annus 1991 in which he criticized man's tendency to "consume the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way." Despite these proclamations, not until Al Gore's movie, Inconvenient Truth did graphic designers join the movement and help to create a worldwide phenomenon, creating paraphernalia and new mantras like "green is the new pink" in response to the then-popular movement of American adolescent males to don pink clothing. The introduction of designers to the movement, starting with the movie, was the genesis of the modern sustainability movement. The idea of responsible living with respect to resources existed within the Catholic Church for centuries and only entered main stream media when designers joined the movement.

In his book, The World is Flat [2005], Thomas Friedman explains that the globalized world is possible because of the ability to communicate on demand, two effects of which are the outsourcing of manufacturing and economical worldwide trade [Friedman, 2005][23]. Many new social media have taken root because of the new opportunities in our connected and "flattened" world. Users are now able to have domestic and international video chats in real time using programs like Skype; they can be friends on Facebook and share pictures on Picasa, which uses face recognition technology to automatically name the individuals in photos which can then be shared in online photo albums. Design communicates ideas; globalization allows the communication of ideas to occur worldwide.

C.S. Lewis stated that in the sexual revolution of the 1960's, many Americans called for the greater acceptance of sexual topics in popular culture. They claimed that once the initial lack of familiarity died down, the topic would become less intriguing and would bring about the reduction of sexual crimes. Lewis asserts that this premise has been adopted for the past four decades, but rather than being free, the human race is further enslaved by the sexual appetite with an increased instance of sexual crimes[24]. Designers hold a great deal of the responsibility for this change of our culture because of the ideas that they communicate and have been communicating. Because, as Gobé asserts, "marketing" is coterminous with "popular culture," designers can make a difference in society by their use of marketing tactics. Designers can make

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[21] Myers, David G. Psychology. 9th ed. New York: Worth, 2008. Print.

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[22] United States of America. Library of Congress, National Film Registry. National Film Preservation Board. Animal

[23] Friedman, Thomas L. The World Is Flat: a Brief History of the Twenty-first Century. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. Print.

[24] Lewis, C. S. Mere Christianity: a Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, Broadcast Talks, Christian Behavior, and Beyond Personality. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. Print.

a difference in the way people think and can therefore make a difference in the way culture is formed.

The early Christians lived in the middle of a world that sought their demise. It was through their ordinary friendships and naturalness that they changed Roman society from one which sought to exterminate[25] them to one which embraced their way of life. In the same way, through Christian friendships, society can change itself from within.

Citing the observations of the Didache letters of early Christians, we learn that in a largely pagan environment, the Christians were known for their hitherto unheard of abhorrence toward adultery, sexual promiscuity, theft, sorcery, abortion and more[26]. In the early days of Christianity, it was the laity which converted their society and it was through personal friendships that they did so. While it was effective of the American bishops to lead their people in protest against the American movie industry in the early 20th Century, in the modern world, where autonomy and individuality have in large part replaced obedience, it is the task of the layman to once again convert society while remaining in it, and it is the task of religious leaders to empower members of society to do so[27]. As we have seen in the outcome of the movement against declining morals in the American motion picture industry, the attempt to change legislation is ineffective and perhaps not desirable by virtue of the circumstances which such legislation might bring about, namely censorship. We also see that in the bishop's second attempt to implement change using the same measures, such as the attempt to revive the Legion of Decency, much less participation was garnered. In a culture of individuality, the power of change lies with individuals and the responsibility of preparation falls to the leaders.

To bring our culture to a more positive stance on moral issues, we must rely on the elements of culture, most notably, language, literature, music and more. These elements of culture must become more positive outlets of interior expression. Changing ideas communicated by designers requires natural apostolate with these leaders of a new and individualized society. As design employs creativity to solve problems, we also seek creativity to bring design to more positive expression. Designers change society, but though personal friendship in the New Evangelization[28], society can change designers.

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[25] "Emperor Tertullian." Catholic Encyclopedia. Web. 12 Mar. 2010. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14520c.htm>.

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[27] Langan, Jeffrey J. "The Didache Letters." Philosophy. University of Notre Dame. Jan.-Feb. 2007. Lecture.

[28] Paul II, John. "Novo Millennio Ineunte." Letter to Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful. Dec. 2000. Print.

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