

Course: **HNC In Design – Graphics And Illustration**

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Assignment Title: **Design And Taste**

This essay requires me to explore the notion of good and bad design, and to identify the key associative characteristics of each. I will discuss the concept of design judgement, examine the factors taken into consideration in the judging process and explore how good and bad design can be defined. I will then evaluate three advertisements - developed by Saatchi and Saatchi for the company Gallaher - promoting the Silk Cut brand of cigarettes, which I consider to be examples of good design. I will look at their form and function, target market, critical impact and influences. I will explain why they signify good design to me, and draw together the key threads of the essay in my conclusion.

When a consumer encounters a piece of design, they make a design decision based upon the product. Sparke defines this as "the fulfilment of the requirements of taste, practicality and social and economic needs" (Sparke, 1986, page xxiii). Taste she later describes as being created by "the mass media, design propaganda, exhibitions, etc., and on a more local scale by what is available in shops and the influence of individuals within the same social, or peer, group" (Sparke, 1986, page 108). Taste is also affected by the time period we live in, as Olivero Toscani points out "new things are always attacked. But time is on our side. What was shocking three years ago is accepted today" (Toscani, 2001). Thus each individual has a particular, subjective taste informing his or her design judgement. For example, earlier this year the Advertising Standards Authority ordered the withdrawal of a poster for the Paddy Power betting chain (Fig. 14) featuring two old ladies crossing the road into the path of a truck, the bet appearing to be on whether they would make it to the other side. On the BBC Website a variety of different opinions were expressed ranging from the ad being "neither witty, ironic, entertaining nor funny. It is disgusting" (BBC, 2001), to "the minute a debate starts on good taste, it poses the question as to freedom of choice etc - the point being, if you don't like it, don't look!" (BBC, 2001). Personal taste also inspires the cult and the kitsch. Cult items, Sparke suggests, "become absorbed into mass culture through mass consumption and turn into the ritualised appendages of the life-style of different social and cultural groupings" (Sparke, 1986, page 155). An example is the Vespa motor-scooter (Fig. 7), which was initially targeted at the female motorcyclist but developed "into a cult object, used almost exclusively by young male members of the sub cultural avant-garde" (Sparke, 1986, page 155). In 1869, the scholar Matthew Arnold published a book entitled *Culture And Anarchy*, which posed the two terms as opposites in conflict. He later defined culture as the product of elites: "the best that has been thought and known" (Mirzoeff, 1999, page 23). Clement Greenberg adopted this view in a 1961 essay that defended the avant-garde "against the mass-produced vulgarities of kitsch." (Mirzoeff, 1999, page 23). Kitsch items are mass-produced, tacky and humorous by nature, such as the Mona Lisa Thermal Mug (Fig. 8). By itself, the Mona Lisa is not a kitsch item, but it becomes one when it is placed outside of its usual context. In this case, a mug that when filled with

hot water shows the real image in place of the image with a moustache on it. To the horror of design purists, kitsch items have enjoyed popularity throughout the later decades of the last century, such as in 1960s Britain when the Pop Movement was immediately “followed rapidly by a series of nostalgic revivals and an interest in kitsch and eclecticism” (Sparke, 1986, page 199).

In practical terms, a kettle is designed to fulfil the function of boiling water with the minimum of effort. The OXO Uplift Tea Kettle (Fig. 1) was an award winner at the American Society On Aging Awards in 1999, as it “was designed with safety and simplicity in mind” (American Society On Aging, 1999). Its features include a “non-slip, soft rubber handle, set low and toward the back, reducing the risk of scalding and wrist strain” (American Society On Aging, 1999). As a comparison, if a kettle was marketed with the design of the Malaysian 18th Century Kettle (Fig. 9) it would be considered unfit to use in terms of practicality. Its weight when filled would make it difficult to carry, storage would be problematic and the durability would be poor. Similarly, the functionality required for battery-powered transport would be a quickly and easily rechargeable vehicle capable of covering a reasonable distance in all weather conditions. When considering the failure of the Sinclair C5 tricycle (Fig. 3), the drawbacks of using it proved a greater reason for failure than the radical design or adverse media reaction. Testers found it “great fun to drive, and the low height gives an added impression of exhilarating speed” (Bourne, 1985), but the battery only had a range of twenty miles, took eight hours to recharge and lost almost ten percent of its efficiency at zero degrees. Models “driven at the launch expired halfway up Muswell Hill, and there were reports of at least one early C5 pioneer finding himself stranded four miles out of Streatham on his way to work” (Bourne, 1985).

Social and economic demands also dictate design decisions, such as the cars designed during the last century, that either successfully mirrored the social and economic climate or failed. The functional design of popular small cars in the 1930s such as the Volkswagen Beetle (Fig. 5) was “characterized by a commitment to function rather than styling where their aesthetic was concerned” (Sparke, 1986, page 89). However, an American car of the early fifties such as the Buick Roadmaster (Fig. 6) was designed as a work of art, “sleek, low, and even more bold than the Cadillac in its combination of aerodynamics and art deco stylishness” (Owls Head Transportation Museum, 2001). The design proved very popular offering curves, speed-lines and chrome finish to convey an image of sex and power to potential customers. If these cars had been launched in the opposite time periods, the social and economic climate would probably have caused two design failures. It is doubtful that a large ostentatious car would have proven popular in austere times, whilst a small functional car launched in a period of prosperity - with individuals desperate to flaunt their social status - would not have attracted many buyers.

Outside of individual consumer requirements, how can good design be defined? In 1907 the Deutscher Werkbund was set up in Munich to “promote excellence in design and craft manufacturing” (McGuinness, 2001). By the fifties the Werkbund had created a definition of good design, expressed by the exhibition organiser Edgar Kaufman Jr as “truth to materials, the unification of form and function, aesthetic simplicity, and expression of the modern age” (Sparke, 1986, page 68). Both the original Werkbund concept of promoting design at home and abroad, and its criteria for good design are still in use today. In Japan the Industrial Design Promotion Organization - known as JIDPRO - use their “G-mark” to signify well-balanced products that have great usability. As an example of what they consider to be contemporary good design, the grand prize in 1999 was awarded to the Sony AIBO Robodog (Fig. 2). Describing why the product was chosen, they felt that it managed to “touch people emotionally and elicit a feeling of affection” (JIDPRO, 1999), the product’s design elements such as its “responsiveness, autonomous actions, learning, and growth in themselves display great product potential” (JIDPRO, 1999) and that regarding design in the future the “product was evaluated favourably for establishing a new milestone” (JIDPRO, 1999). However, they are aware of the vagaries of personal taste when judging contemporary design, acknowledging, “it is unrealistic to resist the influence of the thriving bad taste design seen on the street. In the New Territory Design Category, we tried to ascertain certain uniform standards, even for this kind of kitschy design” (JIDPRO, 1999).

Defining bad design “one can isolate a single factor as a cause for failure” (Sparke, 1986, page xxii). Recent examples of negative design judgement in terms of taste have included Benetton and Coca-Cola. Benetton reverted to a more conventional approach to advertising as a result of changing world opinion to the problematic images their advertisements depicted in place of product (Fig. 10). Coca-Cola had to abandon the launch of ‘New Coke’ within two months and return to the original formula when the replacement drink flopped. As the company’s then President said: “The simple fact is that all the time and money and skill poured into consumer research on the new Coca-Cola could not measure or reveal the deep and abiding emotional attachment to original Coca-Cola felt by so many people” (Mikkelsen, 1999). Examples of badly designed items from a practical point of view can be found on the Bad Human Factors Designs Website, where a variety of items “are hard to use because they do not follow human factors principles” (Darnell, 2001). Examples include a paper towel dispenser that cannot be used when the receptacle for placing used towels overflows (Fig. 13), a sign for a toilet which doesn’t make clear whether the toilet is for men or handicapped men only (Fig. 12), and a top loading VCR which would need to be stored in a spacious environment to allow the eject mechanism to work properly (Fig. 11). Finally, an example of bad design in terms of social and economic needs can be found in the late fifties development of the Ford Edsel (Fig. 4), which proved a costly financial disaster as a result of being “launched into a market niche that was narrow as a razor blade to begin

with and was on a significant downhill slide" (Nerad, 2001), and a design that "might have been the stylists' idea of a neo-classic look but to the buying public it was just plain ugly" (Nerad, 2001).

For my selection of a company embodying the notion of good design, I have chosen three examples - developed by Saatchi and Saatchi for the company Gallaher - promoting the Silk Cut brand of cigarettes. The first advertisement (Fig. 15) from 1983 is a depiction of purple silk in which there is a single slit, as if scissors or a knife have slashed the material. The second advertisement (Fig. 16) also from 1983 shows a shower in use behind a purple silk shower curtain. The third advertisement from 1995 (Fig. 17) has pairs of scissors dressed in purple silk petticoats as can-can dancers, the scissors being the legs of the dancers. In each of the examples, there are no words except for the health warning about smoking, which by law has to be displayed on cigarette advertising.

The function of an advertisement is to encourage use of the product or increase consumer awareness of the brand. However, "as rule 2.1 in the advertising code of practice states advertisements should not seek to persuade people to start smoking" (Langan, 1998). This means the ads need to sell the Silk Cut brand and attach concepts to it, without showing the qualities of the cigarettes. The advertisements are able to do this by using what Williamson refers to as Hermeneutics. This is making the viewer interpret the meaning of the advertisement, "deciphering a code, or translating from one language to another: it is an interpretation along given channels, which lead away from the interpreted object, to a meaning behind or beyond it" (Williamson, 1982, page 71). Fig. 15 is able to non-verbally communicate Silk Cut – a piece of silk appears to have a cut in it - and thereby "establishes a psychological imprint with which to interpret future advertisements in the series" (McIntosh, 1996). The proper interpretation of Fig. 16 is that the purple silk shower curtain will be slashed to create a silk cut. The guide to the correct interpretation is provided by the process of Intertextuality, defined by Bignell as when an "ad borrows signs and meanings from another media text" (Bignell, 1997, page 48). In the case of Fig. 16 it is "possible to decode the ad partially, incorrectly, or perversely" (Bignell, 1997, page 46), but these chances are reduced "by virtue of the particular cultural knowledge it calls on, the context in which it appears, and the way that it's visual and linguistic signs point the reader in the right direction" (Bignell, 1997, page 46). In this case, the reader might be familiar with the previous Silk Cut advertisement, but if not can see the health warning so is alerted to the fact that this is an advertisement for a tobacco product. The purple silk shower curtain and the white background also subliminally link to the packaging of Silk Cut. But then the puzzle – how does the image relate to the brand? For viewers of the film 'Psycho', the puzzle can be easily solved. There is a scene in the film where a woman is attacked with a knife slashing through a shower curtain, and this is suggested by the showerhead seen in silhouette (it is the same type as used in the film). In Fig. 17 the scissors are dressed as can-can girls in purple silk petticoats, so superficially it appears that they will be performing

the silk cut. Again, the message is displayed non-verbally and is enforced by the dual signifiers of the health warning, and the previous advertisements in the series.

Goldman theorises on four groups who have different strategies for interpreting advertisements. The traditionalist will not indulge in interpretation, whilst the modernist "demands a clear meaning" (Goldman, 1992, page 213). The seeker wants to know where the idea for the advertisement comes from rather than what it means, whilst the surrealist "enjoys the weird or fantastic nature of the imagery" (Goldman, 1992, page 214). In examining the advertisements, the modernist would enjoy puzzling the solutions to what they represented, the seeker would be trying to work out what was being advertised, the surrealist would be enticed by the very nature of the ads, whilst only the traditionalist would not appear to be engaged. However, even they would be pointed to the fact that these were advertisements for cigarettes by the health warning, so all groups are catered for. The success of the advertisements in targeting a variety of different groups was shown by the 1996 Cancer Research Campaign study on advertising recall that revealed, "the two most advertised brands, Benson and Hedges and Silk Cut, were the most frequently named. Silk Cut on its own was more frequently mentioned by girls who had never smoked before" (McIntosh, 1996).

There have been many critical views expressed about these advertisements. The writer Alastair McIntosh thinks, "what we see here is actually violated sexuality" (McIntosh, 1996). In Fig. 15 "the silk is not merely cut; it is knife-slashed" (McIntosh, 1996). In Fig. 16 "the erotic purple shower curtain triggers thoughts of rape and murder" (McIntosh, 1996), whilst the can-can scissors in Fig. 17 "cut at the sexual apex" (McIntosh, 1996). Similarly, Jim Hagart from the University Of Teeside feels "each ad carries essentially the same anxiety provoking message" (Hagart, 2001), which "helps form and maintain a strong mental association between the brand and anxiety." (Hagart, 2001). In the Lodge novel 'Nice Work', the character Robyn performs a semiotic analysis of Fig. 15. She feels the advert "appealed to both sensual and sadistic impulses, the desire to mutilate as well as penetrate the female body" (Lodge, 1988, page 221). Although the view of the Gallaher Company is that "you're reading more into this than me, quite honestly. I just regard them as images, and the fine images that they are" (McIntosh, 1996), even advertising executives admit to uneasy feelings when discussing them. When Fig. 16 was proposed for an industry award, the reaction of one judge was "everyone was unanimous that it was the best ad of the year. But I felt distinctly uncomfortable. You knew that the scene was Hitchcock's 'Psycho'. The woman was about to be raped and killed." (McIntosh, 1996). It is noticeable however, that the negative critical appraisals are from academics and professionals rather than the general public.

Regarding influences on the advertisements, they are a reflection of the early eighties approach to advertising that “developed in response to viewer alienation” (Goldman, 1992, page 3). By making the Silk Cut advertisements ambiguous the idea is to get “viewers to pause and look at the ads rather than skipping past them” (Goldman, 1992, page 3). Another influence from that period is the approach to the female where Goldman feels that advertisers “spliced together signifiers of feminism with the consumer narrative of femininity as envy, desire and power” (Goldman, 1992, page 130). The use of purple silk is a signifier that is used to associate itself with “royalty and splendour, and hence evokes the concepts of quality, strength and importance” (Langan, 1998), and it is also associated with “glamour and riches. It also has aesthetic and sensual appeal and could be seen to fetishize the product” (Langan, 1998). The seventies advertising campaign for Benson & Hedges cigarettes – another Gallaher brand – is another influence on the development of the advertisements. The approach of placing the gold packet of cigarettes in unusual places originated from a book of surreal photography, “Shoes had been placed in unusual positions, such as outside a mouse hole, or in a cage beside a caged bird. The staffer adapted this idea, substituting the gold cigarette packet instead of the shoe.” (McIntosh, 1996).

Why are these advertisements good design? What I particularly like is - as Goldman describes a Reebok commercial - each is “designed to deny its adness, the ad keeps viewers dangling in terms of its agenda” (Goldman, 1992, page 210). The allusions to the brand being advertised are subtle and there is a post-modern ironic knowingness that says to those in on the joke – we both know what this advertisement is for but let’s make it as obscure as possible and see how many people get it. Using the health warning to advertise the product provides further irony – we can’t show you the cigarettes, but thanks to the Government you already know this is a cigarette advertisement. The images are powerful and lodge in your memory; they exude menace and provoke unease. In describing an advertisement featuring a female holding a blade, Goldman suggests that it “conjures up a fantasy about castrating (disempowering) the spectator-owner” (Goldman, 1992, page 166). Subliminally in Fig. 15 and Fig. 16, but more overtly in Fig. 17, the suggestion or appearance of blades is “simultaneously representing both the terror of the phallus and the instrument of its removal” (Goldman, 1992, page 166). Admittedly this approach is distasteful, but the idea is encoded so deeply that it does not make a direct impression. The lack of public reaction to the advertisements - as opposed to that for more overt campaigns such as Benetton - suggests that most viewers respond in a similar way as the character Vic in ‘Nice Work’ who reacts to his girlfriend’s theories on Fig. 15 by saying “you must have a twisted mind to see all that in a perfectly harmless bit of cloth” (Lodge, 1988, page 221). This point is confirmed by Bignell who theorises “the meanings of an ad will be inflected and altered by the intertextual field of other ads, press stories and media events which surround the ad” (Bignell, 1997, page 53). Taking these factors into account make any interpretation of “an ad as a

self-contained system of signs with a determinedly ideological effect very difficult to prove as true” (Bignell, 1997, page 53). Hagart describes Silk Cut as encouraging “addiction by semi-subliminal and manipulative ads” (Hagart, 2001), but if they are manipulative - and I feel strongly that no amount of advertising can force someone to start or continue to smoke - they are great examples of how it should be done.

In conclusion, I feel that the Silk Cut advertisements demonstrate an excellent approach to design. They transcend any social and economic trend – the images have no particular references to anchor them in a particular time period, and could be viewed as works of art separated from their form and function. They appeal to my personal taste as opposed to the more confrontational approach adopted by some advertisers, even though their own underlying messages are more subversive and disturbing. Finally, they fulfil the key requirement of their functionality in raising awareness of the brand, and have done so without resorting to the “endless barrage of predictable advertising narratives” (Goldman, 1992, page 3). My opinions on these advertisements being good design are based on my own personal design judgement, which you might not share. Ultimately though, this is how good and bad design is, and will continue to be defined, rather than what design organisations or anyone else would like to define for us.

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