

DESIGNING

DISTANCE

1.3/6

Designing Distance:
a first-person visual narrator
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Introduction

This article argues that the literary concept of “distance” is a valuable theoretical framework through which to understand how designers affect viewer experience.

Literary theory has long been concerned with the relationship between *what is being said* and *how it is being said*, or recast in design terms, the relationship between *content* and *form*. Theorists in the field of literature continue to examine this relationship and consequently understand the representational techniques used by authors to affect reader experience (Booth: 1961, Gardner: 1991, Lodge: 1992, Wood: 2008). One of the most crucial decisions an author makes is his or her choice of narrator; that is, how the narrative is presented to the reader (Genette, 1980; Lanser, 1981; Leaksa, 1996; Martin, 1986). For example, will it be told from the deliberately subjective, intimate viewpoint of first-person (“I”) or the more objective, remote, third-person (“he” or “she”) perspective? Through the well-established principle of point of view, an author sets up the reader’s relationship to text, keeping readers at the “distance” required to affect certain experiences. It is literary theory’s insight into the rhetorical value of narrative viewpoints that has much to offer the practice of visual communication.

This article argues that a designer’s choice – of typeface, composition, image treatment, colour, etc. – are visual building blocks used to construct a point of view. Further, it is the choice of viewpoint that creates the degree of distance a viewer feels from the work, which ultimately affects their experience. Through the comparison of canonical written and designed texts, I will show how the equivalent of the literary first person can be found in visual work. The task of this article, however, is not to equate the visual with the verbal, but rather to identify the design decisions that can be equally described as characteristics of a first-person text.

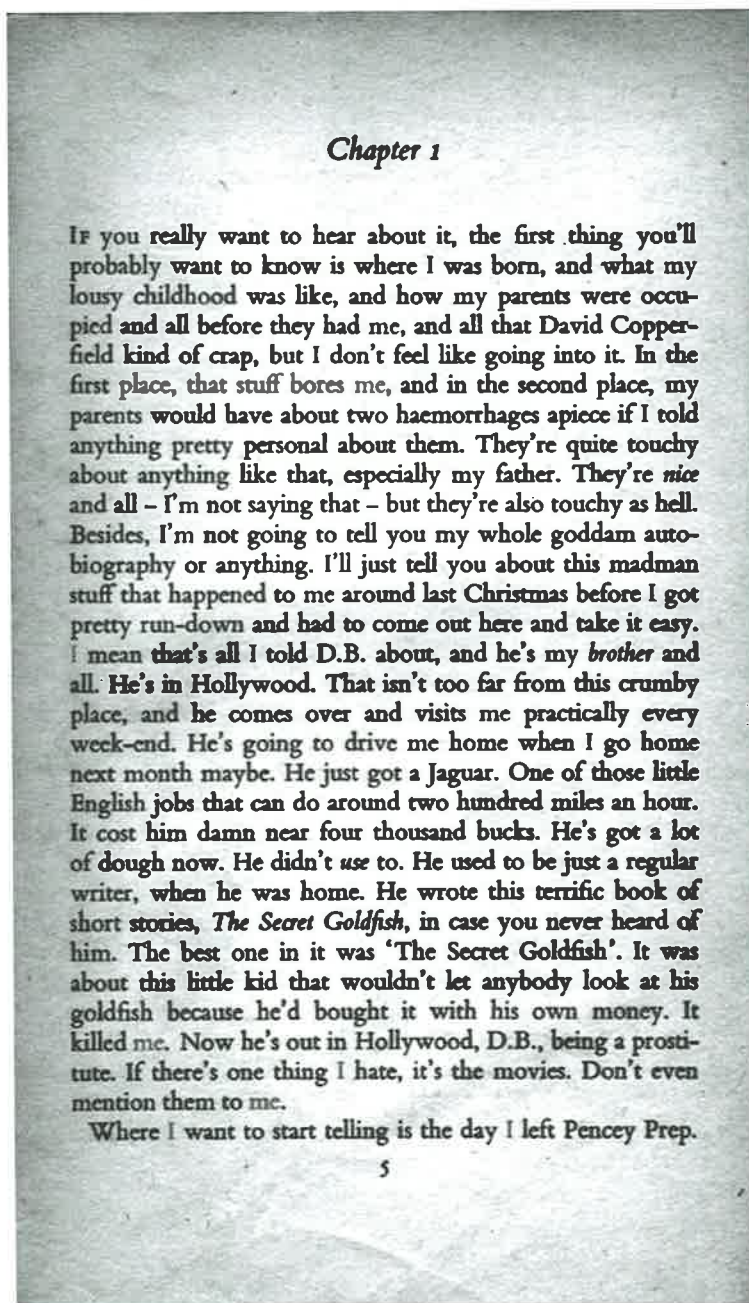
The focus of this framework is the construction of a type of distance within the work and the possible implications of this perspective for a viewer’s experience of the work. It does not attempt to account for the cultural context of the work, or the range of experiences brought to bear on the work by an individual viewer. It is also worth noting that this way of framing visual communication is designed to sit alongside, not instead of, other theoretical discourses, such as semiotics.

Design authorship

Before moving deeper into the territory of “distance” it is worth noting one area of literary theory with which visual communication design has already flirted: authorship. The enduring concept of graphic authorship – of a designer whose role is greater than that of the conventional “service-provider” emerged in the 1990s (McCarthy, 1995) and was fuelled by Michael Rock’s article, “Designer as Author” (1996). This concept’s tenacity, though, has had more to do with “its potential to propel designers beyond the drudgery of service provider and into the territory of cultural elite,” (Sweetapple, 2007: 4) than to provide a much needed expansion of critical approaches. The problem with authorship, as it has been applied in design discourse, is the tendency to focus on “who” created something rather than

...the personal pronoun highlights the narrator's presence... hand-written type continually pulls the viewer toward the individualised act of making, therefore toward an individual, unique narrator.

Figure 2: The first page of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. (I have made the personal pronouns – I, me and my – red.)
Reproduced in grey



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“how” it was created (2007: 6). Yet, as Rock writes, “the primary concern of both the viewer and the critic is not who made it, but rather what it does and how it does it.” (1996: 53). This concern – how messages are communicated – has not been answered by design discourse’s limited take on authorial criticism.

Issues of ownership, origination and acknowledgement are, however, only partial reasons for literary theory’s investigation into authorship. Far richer territory afforded by authorship is the insights it provides into creative process; that is, how an author constructs and delivers a narrative. Of particular focus is the examination of the author–narrator relationship. The narrator symbolises the rhetorical dimension of literature – how the narrative is presented to the reader. It is in this author–narrator relationship that the rhetorical devices used to create stories and affect reader experience are located. As I will discuss, an understanding of these devices offers a way to investigate how design decisions affect the viewer experience. Again, how viewer experience may be affected is discussed solely in the context of “distance”; it does not take into account the contextual factors that impact on viewers’ interpretation identified by communication models following Shannon and Weaver (1948).

Distance and the visual narrator

The type of distance the reader feels between him- or herself and the events in the story is referred to as “psychic” or aesthetic distance (Abrams, 1998; Booth, 1996; Bullough, 1977). The author’s choice of narrator allows them to reduce or increase the degree of distance. For example, the more subjective, intimate viewpoint of the first person (“I”) produces less distance between the reader and the narrator than the more objective, remote, third-person (“he” or “she”) perspective. In Figure 1 is a scene written by John Gardner to depict different viewpoints. Reading from left to right it illustrates an increase in distance between the reader and the story.

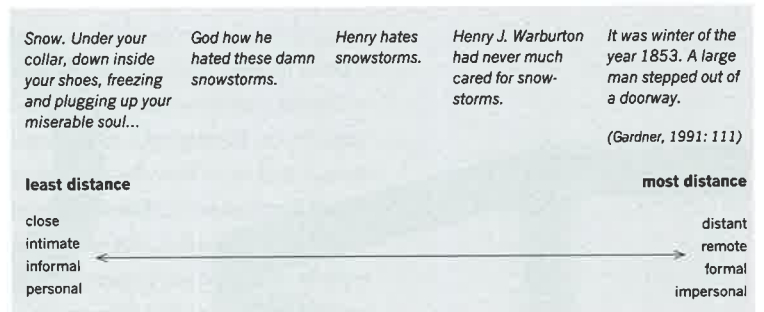


Figure 1: A scene depicted from different points of view to illustrate shifts in distance between the reader and the story

In the description of the scene where the reader is most distant from the events (“It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.”) The narration is factual (“1853”) and impersonal (“a large man”), almost forensic. It is a style of writing that is journalistic. In the middle example, the distance between the reader and the events has decreased. The reader knows that this man is “Henry” and that he “hates snowstorms”; the reader has access to character’s internal thoughts; he or she knows how Henry feels. In the final example – the example of least distance – this level of intimacy is further compounded as the author collapses the space between the narrator and the reader altogether; you, the reader are the character: “your collar ... your shoes ... your miserable soul”. The nature of the information also changes. The larger world is sacrificed for a detailed, internal perspective.

Through the following examples I will show how the literary equivalent of the first person can be found in visual work; that is, how the designer creates a visual text that feels as if it is delivered from a singular, individual

perspective, by a narrator who is not only present in the text but engaged and invested in the content. At this point it is useful to think of the narrator as a mediatory presence, “not a person or state of mind, but a linguistic and logical relationship posed by the text as a condition of its intelligibility” (Branigan, 1984: 3). The mediator is a rhetorical strategy developed by the designer to regulate the nature and extent of the information being delivered – *what is being communicated* and *how it is being communicated* – for it is the rendering of mediacy that sets the distance between the viewer and the work, therefore affecting the viewer’s experience of the work. When a novel is written from a first-person point of view the reader is made keenly aware of a singular perspective: of events told through an individual’s eyes, of their unspoken thoughts, of their emotions and feelings. We learn of their likes and dislikes; they share with us their opinions and judgements (Chatman, 1978: 202). The perspective is subjective, and consequently all first-person narrators are unreliable to some degree (Toolan, 2001: 69). Yet what is lost through the myopic narrator – a level of objectivity unavailable from a singular perspective – is gained in authenticity and honesty. Access to a kind of larger world truth is supplanted by access to an inner truth. Because the reader’s access to the internal world of the character is direct and unmediated – thoughts are not vetted no matter how ill-conceived – the reader perceives the experience to be genuine.

One of the most famous first-person narrators in modern fiction is Holden Caulfield – the 16-year-old protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger, 1951). From what is suspected to be a psychiatric facility, Holden recounts his time in New York, the few days between his expulsion from school (the fourth) and his arrival back home. Like all coming-of-age novels it deals with the difficulties of growing up. Holden is lonely, craves intimacy and connection, and yet through his actions continues to alienate himself. What is most striking about this book is the intensity of the reader’s experience of Holden. From the first page, even the first line of the book, the reader is made aware of both the narrator’s presence and his stake in the story.

In the following section I am going to discuss three characteristics that identify a text as first-person, which leads to a reduction in the distance between the reader/viewer. The first characteristic is the use of the personal pronoun (“I”). I will argue that a Sagmeister Inc. poster evidences the visual equivalency of “I”. In Ed Fella’s work I will argue for evidence of the second characteristics of a first-person text – a sense of immediacy, spontaneity and authenticity. And finally, through a review of David Carson’s work, I will argue for the existence of mediatory opinion and judgement, revealing the third characteristic of a first-person text.

Sagmeister and the Personal Pronoun

The most obvious trace of the first-person narrator in any novel is the use of “I” (and the accompanying first person pronouns “me” and “my”). Within the first sentence of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* there are five such references: “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it.” (1951: 5). By the time the reader reaches the bottom of the page Holden Caulfield has directly referred to himself 24 times, leaving little doubt that an individual with a particular version of events is recounting the story (Figure 2).

The capacity to deliver a message from a singular point of view is not unique to a written text. Take, for example, the poster designed to advertise the AIGA Fresh Dialogue talks in New York in 1996 by Stephen Sagmeister (Figure 3). What is striking about this poster is the singularity in which the information is delivered – the alarmingly fleshy (and phallic) tongues and the hand-generated type. Attention is drawn toward the act of telling, more

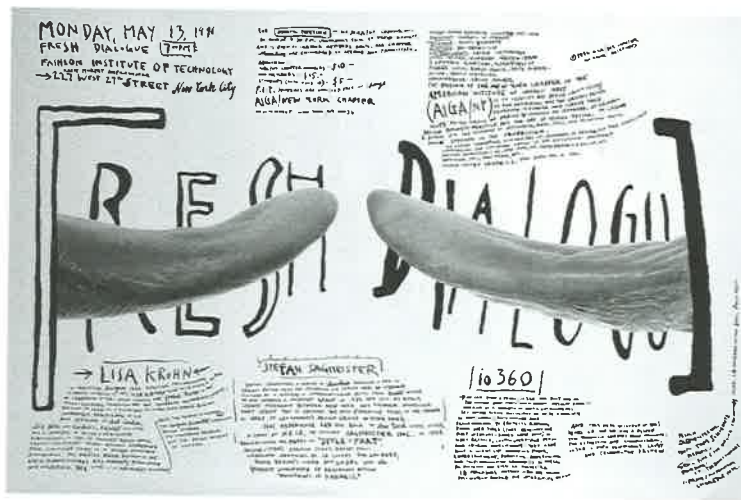


Figure 3: Sagmeister Inc. poster for the AIGA Fresh Dialogues 1996

than what is being told, which creates a first-person visual narrator. What is being told – name of the event, speakers, location, date, credits, etc. – is conventional; how it is being told is not. For example, the crossbars in the “F” and “E” of “Fresh Dialogue” are tongues, and every other element of the page has been hand-written in a legible “scrawl” (not finely rendered hand-generated typography). Similarly, what is most striking about the first page of *The Catcher in the Rye* is the narrator’s presence, not the story itself. In both the written and visual text the narrator is foregrounded, their presence strongly felt; there is nothing objective or detached about the delivery of this information.

Just as the appearance of the personal pronoun highlights the narrator’s presence and therefore the perspective from which the story is told, hand-written type continually pulls the viewer toward the individualised act of making, therefore toward an individual, unique narrator. Hand-written type (and handwriting) could be seen as the visual equivalent to “I” in a text as it is often used to create work that is expressive, personal, lively and idiosyncratic. Hand-generated words draw out and play up the potential subjectivity inherent in communication.

The choice between “I” and “he” or “she” (between first and third person) does not alone create intimacy, opposed to detachment, between the reader and the narrator. The existence of the personal pronoun does not give insight into a character’s thoughts, or generate a more immediate story; nor does the reader come to know the narrator in great depth purely because they are narrating from a first-person perspective. These things happen, not as a consequence of the “I”, but as a result of the *kind* of information that is readily and legitimately accessed from this point of view. The way a narrator *speaks* and what the narrator *thinks* and *does* are how an author adds flesh to the skeletal “I”. Short of this rounding out, the narrative “I” is little more than an empty frame.

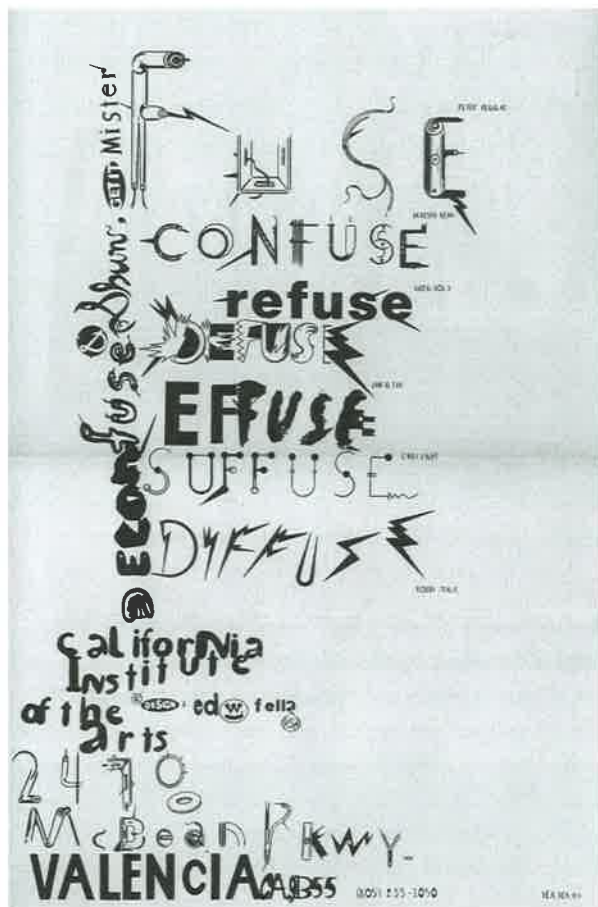


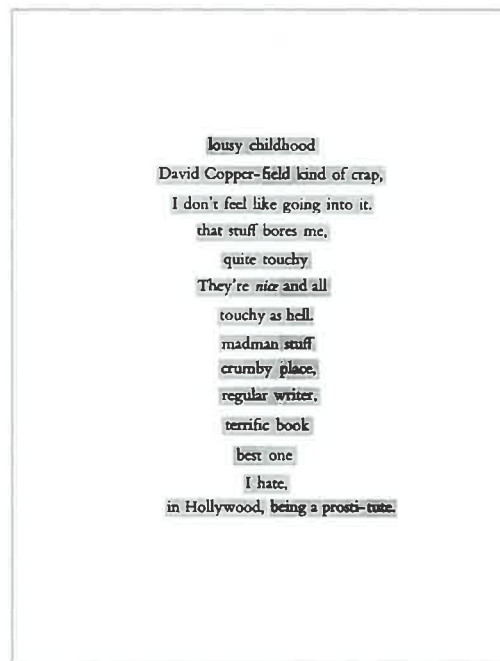
Figure 4: Ed Fella poster

Ed Fella and Skaz

One of the most striking aspect of *The Catcher in the Rye*'s opening sentence is not the liberal use of the personal pronoun but rather Salinger's capacity to place the reader squarely in Holden's sights: "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know..." (my emphasis). The reader is directly addressed; they are being called to attention. This not only highlights the presence of a narrator but also creates a sense of immediacy. Immediacy is also a key characteristic of a first-person text, along with spontaneity and authenticity. Equally, these are characteristics of the work of designer Ed Fella.

Much of *The Catcher in the Rye* is written in a style called *skaz*, which is characterised by first-person narration that seems spoken rather than written. In describing these texts David Lodge writes, "he or she uses vocabulary and syntax characteristic of colloquial speech, and appears to be relating the story spontaneously rather than delivering a carefully constructed and polished written account" (1992: 18). Again, the opening sentence is a perfect example: "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it." In place of a flowing, well-crafted opening line is an ungainly sentence, consisting of a sequence of clauses strung together, spilling out as they come to mind. The awkwardness of this sentence and its rambling nature resembles patterns of unedited speech, not elegant prose. And in addition to these syntactical decisions are Salinger's choice of colloquialisms – "lousy" and "crap" – which further suggest an informal, spoken discourse.

Holden Caulfield's ill-formed, syntactically challenged musings are of course a strategy used by Salinger to create authenticity. As David Lodge points out, *skaz* "is the product of much calculated effort and painstaking rewriting by the 'real' author" (1992: 18). This "premeditated incompetence" is an approach also used by designer Ed Fella in the creation

Figure 5: A list of Holden's opinion extracted from the first page of *The Catcher in the Rye*

of his work. Fella uses the term "anti-mastery" (cited in Keedy, 1991: 14) to explain his strategy. Fella's work has been described as "completely unprofessional in appearance and riddled with graphic design solecisms and errors", and further criticised for looking "bungled, amateurish, incompetent, ugly" (Poynor, 1998: 73). But equally it could be described as "rambling", "spontaneous", "direct" and "informal". Take, for example, his poster for a guest lecture by Neville Brody at the California Institute of the Arts (Figure 4).

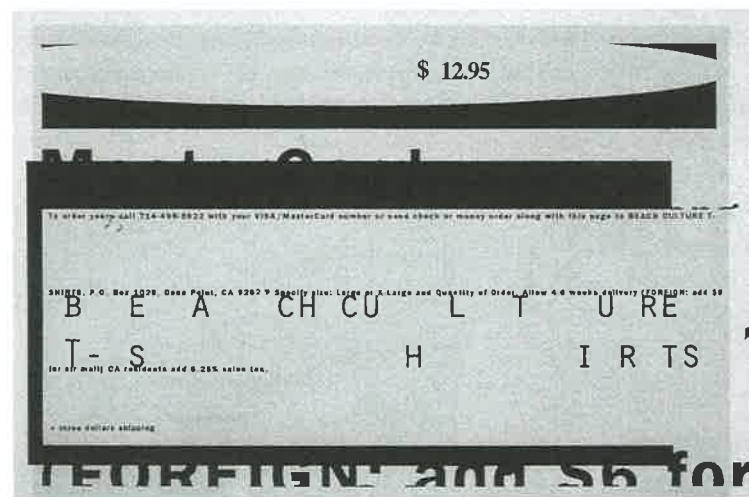
There is no visual distinction between the logistical details (where, when) and Fella's personal musings and word play. Both are treated with the same degree of informality and irreverence. The information hierarchy is not conventional, the name of the institution and the address are given the same visual treatment as his highly personalised additions: "deconfusesun", and a list of words that rhyme with fuse – confuse, refuse, effuse, suffuse, diffuse. These typographic ramblings are a form of visual improvisation: spontaneous, immediate and chaotic. (Interestingly, the term *skaz* comes from a Russian word suggesting "jazz" or "scat".) Just as Caulfield's words seem to "spill out as they come to mind" so too do Fella's, and, just as Salinger's *skaz* "is the product of much calculated effort", so too is Fella's typography.

Working out who is delivering the lecture requires some inside knowledge: you need to know that "Fuse" was the name of Neville Brody and Jon Wozencroft's experimental type magazine (1991–). A further hint is given by naming each "typeface" after *The Brady Bunch* (an iconic 1970s TV sitcom about a blended family): "Peter, Regular", "Marsha Demi", "Greg Bold", "Jan Ultra", "Cindy Light", Bobbi Italic". A play between Brody and Brady, perhaps? Although Fella's popular culture references and informal speech ("getit mister") add to the colloquial qualities of this work, it is the visual colloquialism that he creates through his type – the hand-rendering of each typographic form, the aberrant kerning and largely ignored baselines – that most strongly aligns this work to the first-person narrator.



Figure 6: Contents page, Beach Culture magazine

Figure 7: Advertisement for a Beach Culture T-shirt



David Carson, attitude opinion and judgement

As I have discussed, the opening sentence of *The Catcher in the Rye* reveals a strong narrative presence: the "I" designating a singular point of view, and the syntax and vocabulary beginning to add tone. But so far our narrator's portrait has only been revealed through the style of the narrative, not the content – that is, how the message has been delivered, not what it contains. The final characteristic that I will discuss, typical of a first-person narrative – evidence of a narrator's opinions, attitude, judgements – changes this, providing an insight into the narrator's values. Again we need to go no further than Salinger's first sentence. Here we learn that Holden thinks his childhood was "lousy" and that he is not a huge fan of Dickens, "all that David Copperfield kind of crap". But what this sentence also reveals is the extent to which the first-person narrator controls the reader's access to information. "I don't feel like going into it", Holden says, referring to his earlier years. So he doesn't. By the time the reader reaches the bottom of the page, many more of Holden's opinions are shared (Figure 5).

While the work of Sagmeister and Fella also evidences narratorial attitude, the work of graphic designer David Carson reveals the visual approaches that create a mediatory presence that is anything but impartial, objective or restrained. Through Carson's work we will also see a degree of audience self-identification that is not present in the previous examples. We will also see that although Sagmeister and Fella are still working for clients, it is Carson's role in the delivery of other people's content (particularly writers of magazine editorial) that serves to emphasise his idiosyncratic approach – that is, his position as first-person visual narrator.

David Carson is mostly known for his art direction of the magazines *Beach Culture* (1989–91) and *RayGun* (1992–95). His work on these periodicals makes him arguably the most famous designer of the 1990s. Carson's success is attributed to his ability to create a set of visual codes that speak directly to youth culture, "to reconnect with audiences for whom print had failed in its emotional range" (Blackwell, 2000: 5).

This demographic – the MTV generation – is thought to have left magazines behind in favour of less static forms of media. "You can't give an eighteen-year-old a page of solid grey type and expect him or her to read it," he claims (cited in Poyner, 1997: 253). But whether they actually read *RayGun* is arguable. It's also beside the point. For *RayGun* does not appear to be bought for the content traditionally offered in music rags – band-bios, CD reviews, etc. – it is bought instead for the less tangible, but no less real attitude that is projected throughout the magazine.

Andrew Blauvelt attests to the regularity of this sentiment stating, "a majority of the letter writers to *RayGun* seem to identify the magazine with immediate, personal connection and self-discovery" (1996: 59). But to what exactly are the readers connecting? Not the physical magazine and its not-quite-white pages, nor its revelatory prose about life as a rock star. They are connecting to the personality that is presented through the explicit design decisions evident on each page. This personality, or mediatory presence, is constructed by the continual subversion of editorial design rules.

Take for example this contents page from *Beach Culture* (Figure 6). The approach seems fairly standard: the articles are in the order in which they appear in the magazine and the numbers included are possibly page numbers. That is, until you realise that there is no correlation between the two – the contents and the numbers do not match up. Furthermore, a glance through the magazine reveals that, in fact, there are no page numbers. Therefore, this so called "contents page" ignores one of its fundamental roles – to guide the reader as directly as possible to his or her chosen destination. It becomes, instead, a form of visual lip-service to the traditional requirements of magazine design, but more significantly an opportunity for the visual narrator to thumb their nose at convention. This narrator is no traditionalist: a rebel and a risk-taker instead. This position is further compounded by the advertisement for a "Beach Culture T-shirt" (Figure 7). The unusual thing about this advertisement is that the actual T-shirt is not shown. This approach implies a relationship between the

producers (of the magazine, T-shirts) and the potential consumers that is based on reciprocal trust. The readers trust that the "attitude" (and aesthetic values) of the magazine will be maintained in cloth, and, equally, the producers of *Beach Culture* trust that the readers will rise to the challenge of the unseen shirt. Together, in an environment of mutual understanding, they practice one of their shared beliefs: risk-taking. For this enterprise to be successful they need each other to fulfil their individual obligations.

The design decisions in Figures 8, 9 and 10 continue to build the image of a visual mediator with little regard of conventions, and a strong inclination to typographic lawlessness. Figure 8 may look like a conventional piece of editorial design, but closer inspection reveals otherwise. What appears to be a standard piece of three-column typesetting is actually a continuous line, broken twice, by the vertical boundary of an artificial text box. An attempt to read the lines in the order suggested by the designated columns would result in a nonsensical piece of writing. The sentences actually scan from the far left to the far right of the page.

Figure 8: Page from *Beach Culture*



Figure 9: Page from *RayGun*

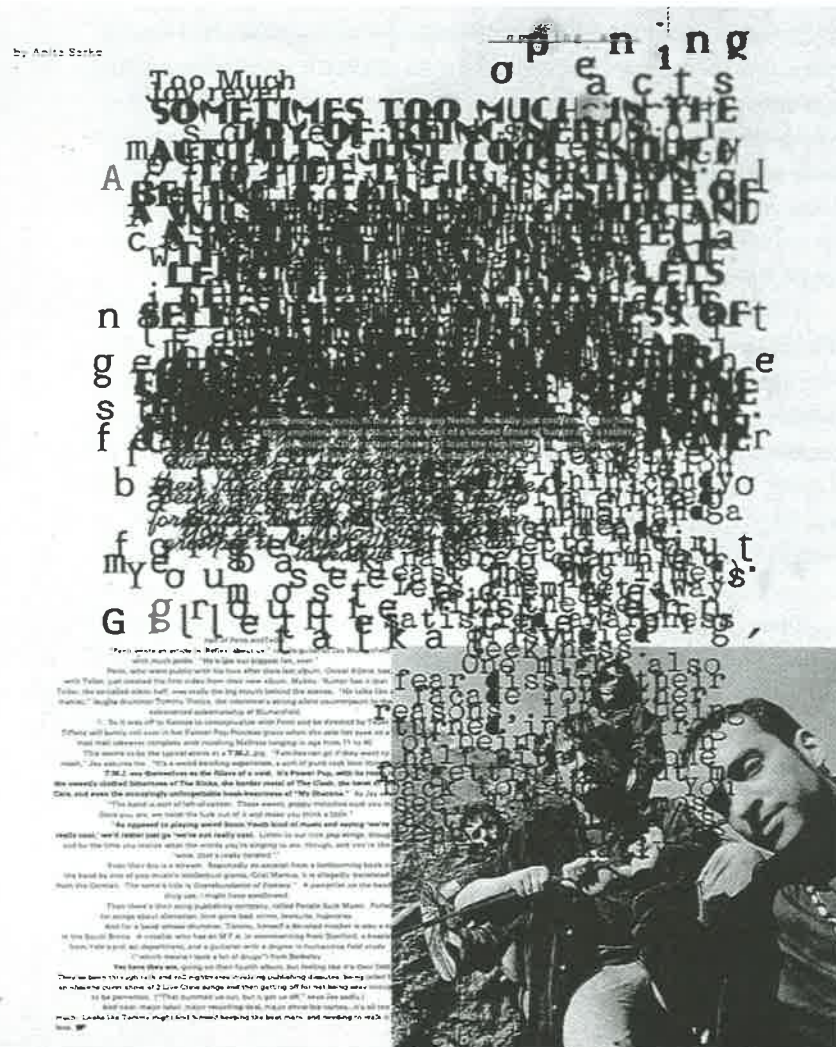


Figure 10: Page from *RayGun*

In Figure 9, the opening paragraph (top half of the page) of the article is treated with disregard, rendered illegible by the layering and repetition of type. The visual narrator asserts his power over the writer, abandoning the usual rules of the relationship, which require design to display, in most cases, transparency, but in the least, respect. And in Figure 10, the visual narrator has committed what some would regard to be a sacrilegious, even blasphemous act: a large white sphere deletes John Lennon from a spread on the Beatles. It is a sign of the visual narrator's contempt toward a band idolised by the parents of this readership. To *RayGun* devotees it is further evidence of the narrator's understanding of their need to rebel against all that is associated with their guardians (or anyone over 40).

To the readers of *RayGun* these design decisions are the private codes of rebellion and revolution: the absence of page numbers is a sign of non-conformity; the unreadable sentences, an anarchic act. These signs of subversion project an anti-establishment attitude that is all-important to the readership of *RayGun*, who find a peer, even a comrade in this narrator. They identify with the visual narrator: "RayGun is me", cries one of the readers from the letters page (cited in Poynor, 1997: 252).

The function of the first-person visual narrator

It is said that the success of a story narrated in the first person is closely related to the relationship developed between the reader and the narrator. This, as we have seen, can also be said for the first-person mode, the success of *Beach Culture* and *RayGun* being dependent upon the high degree of empathy and trust felt by the viewers toward the visual narrator. But what is the purpose of having such an audience? What are the communicative functions of a reduction of distance beyond "the page", beyond increased empathy and trust? When is this strategy – the first-person mode – most effective? What are its weaknesses? The answers to these questions lead to a greater understanding of how designers affect viewer experience.

To the designer, the primary function of the reduction of distance is to personalise the mode of communication, which is achieved through both the presence and engagement of the visual narrator. Through the unconventional manipulation of text and imagery, the visual narrator makes his or her presence felt, and through the visual evidence of reaction, response and comment, the visual narrator engages with the content. Viewers are aware that this work is mediated by an individual consciousness, and they are mindful of the expression of individual values and attitudes.

The strengths of a first-person visual narrator

The ability of the first-person mode to communicate to a specific audience is possibly its greatest strength. As we have seen, a highly individual, first-person, visual language enables a particular perspective to be delivered, one that is far from neutral. Such evidence of a "narrative attitude" enables the viewer to make an informed decision about the possible level and type of interpretation that occurs in the delivery of the information. For this reason it could be considered to be an empowering position for the viewer as he or she is given access to the visual narrator's motivations, making the process of communication seem transparent.

We have also seen, through Carson's work, how this empowerment inspires an audience that is loyal, committed and captive. But also of great interest is the empathic audience: an audience who understands the message, but even more impressively, feels understood.

Between the pages of *RayGun*, this audience finds not articles and images, but "a kindred spirit" (N.R.R. Naral cited in VanderLans, 1993: 27). Through its emotionally motivated and untraditional visual approach *RayGun* has managed to speak to its readership with uncanny precision. Such precision is undoubtedly the key to Carson's work, and as I have stated, the strength of the first-person mode.

Because of the rarefied visual dialects often evident in the first person mode it could hardly be regarded as a democratic method of communication – it is a private conversation rather than a public announcement, which makes it such a powerful method of communication in a world saturated by messages for the masses. It is harder to ignore someone speaking directly to you, particularly if they are speaking to you in your own language.

Carson's ability to directly access the inner-consciousness of the youth market did not go unnoticed by advertising companies looking for a way to connect with this demographic, or, more pointedly, their disposable incomes. The Carson formula of individualism over information is the perfect agent for an advertising style that has a bias for brand attitude over product features. David Peters identifies this shift in advertising direction, "Now, advertising is more about the identity and image of a brand – and the aspirations it mirrors in its target audience – than it is about products" (1997: 44). Mike Jorkovac, who worked with Carson on a campaign to launch a new style of Levi Strauss jeans, claims that Carson is ideal to facilitate this shift:

David came back to us with a phenomenal packaging position that really helped reposition the brand. It was to appeal to the same target that David's Ray Gun magazine appeals to; the work he did was like a Rorschach collage. When we did the testing on it, the kids were saying, "this is exactly how I feel in terms of life".

(cited in Poyner, 1997: 253)

Jurkovac sees this mode of communication as the future for all targeted messages, not only those directed toward youth subcultures. But at this stage the first-person mode is the ideal strategy for advertising's new objectives as it is renowned for revealing as much about the mediator's attitude as the "content", if not more.

Apart from Levis Strauss, Nike (Figure 11), Ray Bans (Figure 12) and Pepsi (Figure 13) were among the corporations wanting Carson to avoid the obvious “big sell” by packaging their brands as cultural content. Figure 13 depicts two of the five Pepsi advertisements designed by Carson. Even though they lack some of the rawness evident in his magazines, they still have the essence of an individual mark. And reinforcing the personal style is the use of the first person in the copy (“I wanna...”).

The success of the first-person mode is the creation of an empathetic target audience – a group of people who strongly identify with the visual narrator. But, equally, there is the possible alienation, an inevitability of such pointed communication. But rather than regarding this alienation as a weakness, when managed appropriately, it is one of the first-person mode’s most unique and powerful characteristics. As we have seen, the visual narrator’s ability to simultaneously recruit and alienate via the first-person mode is ideal for a publication such as *RayGun*, whose attraction is that it speaks to a subculture rather than a popular culture: its appeal to many may well be its lack of appeal to most.

For *RayGun*, mainstream acceptance could spell disaster. This concept of the dual action is supported by Mary Douglas, who writes in her article “On Not Being Seen Dead: Shopping as Protest”, “shopping is an agonistic struggle to define not what one is, but what one is not” (1996: 104). She sees shopping as a form of protest, people often choosing what others reject as a form of “cultural affiliation” (1996: 82). This could certainly be said to be true for the consumers of *RayGun*, who seem to revel in levels of visual discomfort and illegibility that would frustrate many. This delicate system can be balanced by considered application of the first-person mode.

The weakness of the first-person visual narrator

Any aesthetic declaration that is “extreme”, beyond what is considered to be in the “normal range” – whether it is a particular visual style or music genre, for example – is likely to garner responses that are equal and opposite in force. After reading much of the commentary on *RayGun* it becomes apparent that there are as many dissenters as there are sympathisers. And it would be too simplistic to claim that all alienation is strategic – used to monitor audience appeal – as was previously argued. It is more than likely that a visual narrator operating in the first-person mode could cause misdirected alienation – that is, they alienate those that they are attempting to attract. This is one of the potential drawbacks of a mode that unashamedly reveals an explicit perspective. The more that is revealed, the more there is to dislike; a lack of ambiguity leaves little room for bipartisan support. The reader reviews on Amazon illustrate this: “Am I the only teenager in the world who found Holden Caulfield ... whiny, creepy, and not particularly someone to identify with?” (Northern Lass, USA) and, even more pointedly, “I freaking hated Holden Caulfield” (M “CultOfStrawberry”). Consequently, to effectively exercise the first-person mode an astute understanding of the target audience is required to prevent the potential of bypassing all audiences, as there is no guarantee that misdirection captures another, albeit unintended, group of consumers.

Just as the process of identification can fail when using a personalised narrator, so too can the desired audience experience of authenticity. What is interpreted as a sign of “honesty” and “humanness” could equally read as “incompetence”, “carelessness” and “inattentiveness”, resulting in very little trust or faith in the quality of the information delivered by the visual narrator. There are some occasions where fallibility is not appropriate – operating instructions, road signage, financial statements, to name a few. But, just as the previous issue of “misdirected alienation” shows, this is a problem of inappropriate application rather than an inherent weakness of the first-person mode.



Figure 12: Orbs (Ray Bans) advertisement by David Carson

Designing Distance: a first-person visual narrator
Kate Sweetapple

Message
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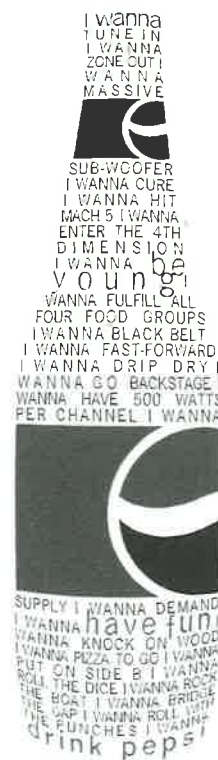


Figure 11: Nike advertisement by David Carson



Figure 13: Pepsi advertisement by David Carson

Another weakness of this visual narrator is the potential for them to be perceived as self-centred. The problem of communication that is filtered through a singular perspective is that it is limited; potentially myopic and one-sided; potentially unreliable and egocentric; potentially solipsistic and self-indulgent; potentially tedious. In fact, the novelist Henry James refers to first-person narration as that "accursed autobiographic form which puts a premium on the loose, the impoverished, the cheap and the easy. Save in the fantastic and the romantic ... it has no authority, no persuasive or convincing force" (cited in Leaks, 1996: 167). Whilst David Carson may think that "it can be deadly boring if you don't put yourself in it" (cited in Blackwell, 2000: 133), others are sure to disagree. And, as can be seen in fiction, any highly distinctive character can easily evolve into a caricature – consisting of nothing but predictable idiosyncrasies and meaningless characteristics. Once belief in the character is lost, one of the fragile threads that keeps the reader connected to the story is broken.

The same can be said for design, when the visual mannerisms become clichés, appearing in support of products and services with similar target markets but with vastly different ideologies. Take for example Poynor's comments on a recruitment campaign for the Army, which shares with *RayGun* youth as its quarry:

In the space of just four years from its launch in November 1992, a design language heralded inside and outside the design world for being "radical", "subversive", "revolutionary", "innovative" and in every sense ground-breaking had been so thoroughly assimilated by the mass media that it could seem an appropriate mode of address for an organisation as unsubversive, unrevolutionary and completely establishment in outlook as the army. (2001: 48-9)

Before long these visual mannerisms lose sight of their heritage altogether and become fodder for the next round of annual reports, whose audience and ideologies bear no relation to the one it was originally targeting. Because overt mannerisms are easily identifiable, they are easy to appropriate by those who want to personalise their visual communication. But a result of this "stylised speech" is potential creation of the ironically named generic individual.

Lastly, a visual narrator operating in the first-person mode could be perceived as being manipulative by an audience who is aware of the trade in their emotions, as well as feeling at times uncomfortable with the explicit orchestration. While most viewers understand that the process is inherently manipulative, a balance needs to be maintained in order for the viewers to feel that their emotional range has been explored rather than exploited. Regardless of the attentive viewer's understanding that the visual narrator is an authorial construction, and in turn, that the "subjective" point of view is illusionary, a level of sentiment can still be regarded as inappropriate (either excessive or unworthy). The viewer could see this as an attempt at cheap sentimentality, a misuse of his or her personal involvement. Such an abuse of trust would make any further investment by the viewer unlikely. Again, a better understanding of how it works, and in which contexts the first-person visual narrator is most effective, circumvents this potential weakness.

Conclusion

By identifying the key characteristics of a literary first-person narrator and locating these traits within visual work I have argued for the existence of distance within communication design. I have argued that J.D. Salinger's textual strategies are echoed visually in the work of Stephen Sagmeister, Ed Fella and David Carson; that the hand-written letterforms in Sagmeister's poster are comparable to the use of personal pronouns; and that Salinger's use of colloquial language is akin to Fella's vernacular typography. It is

also fair to assume that Holden Caulfield would find solace in the pages of *RayGun*, where the visual narrator is contemptuous and anti-establishment, rebellious at every turn.

The length of this article limits the discussion to only one of the possible types of distance, "the deliberately subjective, intimate viewpoint of first-person ('I')." In my doctoral thesis "The Rhetoric of Distance: A Model of the Visual Narrator in Design" (2003), I introduce three further types of mediatory distance. The first of these is based on "the more objective, remote, third-person perspective", where the mediatory involvement is far less explicit. The other two draw on ideas of the omniscient narrator and the "non-narrated". It is through this wider discussion that the potential of distance is fully realised.

The significance of this article is the introduction of distance and the effect it has on the viewer experience. It does not attempt to replace existing communication theories, nor does it attempt to account for the complexity of the reception of visual messages. What it does attempt to do, however, is to identify formal decisions as coherent rhetorical strategies akin to those used by authors to deliver narratives.

Kate Sweetapple

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1.0/6

WELCOME to the inaugural edition of the Message Journal, where the intention has been to place an emphasis on visual communication practice.

The refereed submissions discuss a range of practices and approaches that include the use of socially responsible design and persuasion as well as collaboration with other disciplines to improve safety; framing theory and ideograms within architectural pedagogy to convey complex ideas and relationships; literary analysis to explore graphic design authorship, narrative and viewer experience; discursive dialogue and a non-linear presentation to interrogate and shed light on personal practice; and cartographic metaphors as a means of visualising and investigating the topography of graphic design.

Whilst the essay by the invited author and writer Patrick Baglee focuses on professional practice within the UK, it does so from a particular perspective, having a pragmatic and industry focus. 'Certifiable' addresses the eclectic nature and permeable boundaries of graphic design by highlighting issues and possibilities relating to professional certification. The mapping of the discipline required by certification would invariably suggest, or indeed lead to, a clearer indication of where "the mutual theoretical frameworks and methodologies" may lie. There is also a proposition that academia could take a lead on certification: we hope this will initiate further debate.

Our original intention was to publish a somewhat greater breadth and number of essays; however, 'doing justice' to the visual work discussed, plus the cost of production, has limited us to six. Despite this, we are delighted with the diverse and international nature of the inaugural edition, not only in terms of the submissions but also in terms of the international nature of the peer reviewers and advisory panel. The editorial team would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all those who have contributed to the Message Journal and made it possible – thank you.

We also look forward to the authors presenting their papers at the next Message Symposium at Plymouth University in 2014. For the next edition of the Message Journal, we aim to maintain the emphasis on practice and to set a call that focuses on lettering and text; for further details, please visit www.messageresearch.net.

Victoria Squire, Peter Jones, Esther Dudley

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