# Power Dressing: a critique of design authorship

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In 1996 Michael Rock wrote the influential article, "Designer as Author", an overview of authorial criticism and its potential application to graphic design theory and practice. At first glance, 'graphic authorship' offers much, hinting at the emerging role (both real and imagined) of a practitioner with greater authority and autonomy in the creative process. But unfortunately, 'first glance' is all that many have taken. Like much of design's plundering of other theoretical closets, we have borrowed a term that is both unfashionable and ill-fitting. Of course it would not matter if design's version of the author was a little out-of-date if it filled a hole in its meagre wardrobe. But as I will point out, the 'designer as author' cloak fits few (Bruce Mau wears it most convincingly), reveals rather than covers our sins (encouraging the designer-as-creative-hero model), and does little to emphasise design's unique features (offering no insights into the word/image relationships particular to this form of communication). It would be fair to say that the superficial use of the term 'author' has left design rather scantily clad.

1

This paper is an overview of the issues of authorship and design as they have emerged through the nineties. Firstly, I will discuss the shifts in meaning of the term 'author' from the perspective of literary theory, and how its various mutations are significant to design. Secondly, I will discuss the uneasy partnering between authorial criticism and design, how the term author been misused/used in the context of visual communication and lastly, its contributions to and limitations in design discourse.

### Authorial criticism

In their most orthodox form an author is "a person who writes any kind of literary or non-literary work." (Gray 1992: 37) Yet the author is also a mechanism by which we order, classify, value and understand a text, making their relationship to the text culturally determined rather than natural. The author is as much a product of the work as the work is a product of the author. The consequence of this cultural determination is a term whose finer points are historically dependent. From the pre-Romantic to the Romantic to the post-Romantic period, the notion of authorship has shifted.

Although the term 'author' pre-dates the Romantic period (1780–1850), it is this period that created the figure as it is commonly known today: an enduring, mythologised figure who is marked by originality, autonomy, and even 'genius'. They are the individual not only central, but in fact singularly accountable for and in control of a text's inception and meaning. During this period the idea of the author shifts from its medieval designation as an 'authority' – (auctor) or bearer of truths – and similarly, from its classical designation as an 'imitator' – one who reproduces or composes – in contrast to one who originates. (Bennett 2005: 58) This shifting significance of the idea of originality coupled with an emerging ideology of individualism proved fertile ground for the conception of the author as 'creative genius'. (Bennett: 58) And although twentieth century literary theorists have disputed this characterisation – an individual whose talent is inspirational, indescribable, and untraceable – contemporary criticism and popular consciousness still cast the 'author' or any figure central to acts of creation – music, fine art, film and design – in this light. As the majority of readings on design and authorship will attest, the Romantic figure of the creative genius endures.

While the Romantics championed originality and maintained a belief in the unmitigated independence of an author's work, a counter-view was developing. A belief was emerging in the impossibility of true authorial autonomy: the written text was to be critiqued as a shared construction whose meaning can be attributed to not only the writer, but to the historical and cultural placement of the text, and to the readers themselves. It is at this point that we see the author slipping from the privileged position as the sole originator of intent, at the origin of texts.

A foundational concern of early post-Romantic critique (New Criticism and later Formalism), was the rejection of biographical and psychological criticism. Central to this perspective is the essay, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1954), by American critics Wimsatt and Beardsley. As its title suggests, they denounce any analysis of a text that takes into account authorial intention, believing that the text itself contains all the material required to understand the work. Quite simply they answer "the question of whether or not our sense of what a text means should be determined by our sense of what the author meant by it [with a] resounding 'no'". (Bennett: 76) A common misreading of this essay is to assume that Wimsatt and Beardsley deny the existence of authorial intentions within a

2

text. On the contrary, they claim that the intentions of an author that can be found within the text, but these intentions should be only be understood as they are expressed in the text: a critic should not search for intentions external to the text.

Finding new ways to further sideline the Romantic author were the Structuralists and eventually, the Post–Structuralists. They also supported the futility of authorial intent as a means of criticism, but questioned New Criticism's conviction in the ability of a text to surrender all meaning. Instead, this new period of criticism privileges the readers, the structure of a text and the historical and social contexts of language as the primary producers of meaning. Evidenced most famously by Barthes essay, "Death of the Author" (1968), is the idea that what a written work means is at the sole discretion of the reader. Taking his lead, it could even be argued that the reader, not the author, becomes the creator of the text: Barthes not so much diminishes authorial responsibility as dismisses it entirely.

In response to Barthes declaration of the author's demise, Foucault asks, in an essay of equal significance, "What is an Author?" (1969). Foucault also believes the positioning of the author as the origin of the textual meaning to be problematic, but is less extreme in his re-examination of the authorial role. Whereas Barthes does away with the author entirely, Foucault retains the idea of an author for pragmatic reasons. He claims that complete dismissal of the author would result in the transferral of origination from "the empirical characteristics of the author onto a transcendental anonymity." (1979: 144) Consequently, he positions them as mechanisms or functions of discourse. These 'author–functions', four in total, are determined by cultural conditions and applied as both a practical and theoretical device. Foucault summarises their characteristics in the following way:

> *"(1) The author–function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals." (1979: 153)*

Although Foucault has maintained a role for the author, like Barthes, he has all but destroyed the core of the Romantic idea of authorship characterised by originality and autonomy.

So we have seen the primacy of authority shift from the author (Romantic) to the text (New Criticism, early Structuralism) to the reader (late Structuralism, Post-Structuralism). And although further paradigms continue to emerge, the fundamental repositioning from the author as a privileged source of meaning to the author as an agent operating within structures of predetermined meaning is a defining aspect of Romantic to Post–Romantic authorial criticism. And as I will argue, while significant to literary criticism, it is also this repositioning of the author that has most to offer design.

By removing the production of texts from the realm of pure 'authorial expression' to that of 'rhetorical composition', the relationship between 'creativity' and 'technique' severed by Romanticism is rebuilt. While the Romantics cast 'creativity' as something to be venerated and admired, it was not to be learned or analysed. These notions pertain more to the 'technical', a term suggestive of a methodology, a level of awareness or deliberation by the author – a strategy rather than an epiphany – which creates the potential for an

3

outsider to understand how a text is shaped. The following passage from Edward Young's, Conjectures on Original Composition (1759), although comparing genius (originality) to learning (imitation), reflects this oppositional perspective. He writes:

> *Learning we thank, genius we revere; That gives us pleasure, This gives*
> *us rapture; That informs, This inspires; and is itself inspired; for genius is*
> *from heaven, learning from man: This sets us above the low, and illiterate;*
> *That, above the learned, and polite. Learning is borrowed knowledge;*
> *genius is knowledge innate, and quite our own. (Bennett: 58–9)*

It is with this notion of Romantic authorship that design discourse adheres. Everywhere in design there are signs of the demarcation between the imagination and the imitative; of creativity – which cannot be learned or articulated – and technique. At its most obvious (although perhaps more 'technical' than technique), this split is echoed through continuously divisible hierarchies: from creative directors to art directors to graphic designers to 'Mac operators' to production assistants and so on, with each stage surrendering more creative control and replacing rhetorical technique with the technical. But even more pertinent and intransigent to the 'designer as author' debate (at its most superficial) is Young's belief in the innateness of the creative act, and of the subsequent reverence attached to the creative subject.

The post-Romantic perspective, which has been largely ignored by design discourse, does not set the terms of creativity and technique in opposition but instead sees them as indistinguishable. Techniques of representation are not seen purely as translators of pre–existing meanings, nor are meanings independently embedded in language, but rather integral in the generation of meaning: they are intrinsic to creative acts. It is at this is point that the study of authorship is valuable to design, as it provides a model with which to address the creative process. It is not so much the idea of an author, but an understanding of the strategies used by a writer to affect the relationship between a reader and a text, that offers insights into the design process. It is at this point that the label of 'designer as author' is most plausible, as the authorial banner becomes one of orchestration rather than origination.

**'Designer as author'**

Although the idea of self–authorship emerged in the early 1990s, it is possibly Michael Rock's article, 'The Designer as Author' (1996) (one of the most comprehensive studies of the topic), that has assured not only the terms longevity, but more specifically, its literary origin. Had this article not caused so much debate, and had self-initiated projects – or commercial projects with explicit evidence of the designer-self – been referred to as 'entrepreneurial' rather than 'authorial', it is questionable whether the term 'designer as author' would still be current. More than likely the idea itself – the autonomous designer – would have endured, largely because of an increase in speculative and experimental work, but its literary bias may not have, for its grounding in authorial criticism has offered little to a field that craves an expansion of critical approaches.

One can only speculate that the term 'author' endures because of its potential to propel designers beyond the drudgery of service provider and into the territory of the cultural elite. It is this position that mirrors Rock's convincing argument suggesting designers have being unwittingly employing a "modified graphic auteur theory" (1996: 49) for some time.

4

The idea of an auteur was developed by French film critics in the 1950s, and usually attributed to a director whose work transcended typical filmmaking, but most importantly exhibited a distinctive, creative vision – a signature style. English and American critics developed this idea into what is now referred to as 'auteur theory' (Sarris, 1971), which expresses the Romantic sentiment of authorship, transforming filmmakers into 'artists'.

An analogy can be drawn between designers and directors, Rock points out, as both work collaboratively directing various projects with varying degrees of creative control, the overall signification being a result of the initial content and its visual execution. He also sees the reasons for design's adoption of the authorial banner as similar to that of film's development of auteur theory, which was intended to elevate "what was considered low entertainment to the plateau of fine art." (1996: 48) Regardless of the contradictions, particularly evident in design and film, the establishment of an author has developed into a necessary component in constituting work as high art. Bennett writes:

> *The counter–inuitive and counter–factual project of discerning an individual*
> *subjectivity at work as the ordering agent for the indisputably collaborative*
> *medium of film indicates the extent to which notions of 'art' and the cultural*
> *prestige on which it is based are bound up with a need for and an investment*
> *in a conception of the author as autonomous, unique, original and individual.*
> *(107)*

In accordance with Sarris's criteria – which include demonstrable technical expertise, a stylistic signature, and a consistency of vision and interior meaning through choice of projects and cinematic treatment – Rock reveals the following designers to be "probably" worthy of auteur status: Fabien Baron, Tibor Kalman, David Carson, Neville Brody, Edward Fella, Anthon Beeke, Pierre Bernard, Gert Dumbar, Tadanori Yokoo, Vaughan Oliver, Rick Valicenti, April Greiman, Jan van Toorn, Wolfgang Weingart, and many others. (1996: 47) It is the combination of 'technical proficiency' and 'a signature style' that single these designers out from many others. But at this point Rock asks, "if we add the requirement of interior meaning, how does the list fare?" (1996: 48) The field is instantly reduced. Designers such as Bernard and Van Toorn pass muster because of their 'political affiliations', whereas Carson and Baron are ousted as 'stylists', albeit 'great' ones. Brody and Valicenti also make the grade through an attempt to imbue their work with 'inner meaning'. While I agree with Rock's categorisations so far, many wouldn't. Herein lies the dilemma of auteur theory: How do you discern what exactly inner meaning is? Is a certain amount required before auteur status is reached? This enigmatic attribute, referred to by Rock as the "'I can't say what it is but I know it when I see it' aspect" of auteur theory makes it problematic and has resulted in its lack of popularity among film theorists. (1996: 49)

Rock likewise abandons auteur theory and instead proposes sites where 'graphic authorship' may already exist. And although the inclusionary nature of this taxonomy – activists sit alongside children's book illustrators – may disturb purists, it is indicative of both the fact that we are yet unsure of who exactly qualifies as a designer. It is no wonder that the title of 'graphic authorship' is so elusive. This reads as much as an exercise in emphasising the diversity of designers' roles as it does an exploration of potential author-ship. He includes the following: artist books (Diter Rot, Tom Phillips, Warren Lehrer, Tom Ockerse, Johanna Drucker); activist work (Gran Fury, Bureau, Women's Action Coalition,

5

General Idea, ACT–UP, Class Action and the Guerrilla Girls); writers and publishers of material about design (Josef Muller–Brockmann, Rudy VanderLans, Paul Rand, Erik Spiekermann, William Morris, Neville Brody, Robin Kinross, Ellen Lupton and J.Abbott Miller) and author/illustrators (Sue Coe, Art Spiegelman, Charles Burns, Ben Katchor, David McCaulley, Chris van Allesberg, Edward Gorey and Maurice Sendak). Bruce Mau's S,M,L,XL and Irma Boom's work for a Dutch corporation, are also included, as are April Greiman, Allen Hori and Tom Bonauro – for work that uses "the medium of professional graphic design to create self–referential statements and compositions." (1996: 52)

But although Brody has designed magazines; Spiekermann, visual identities; Greiman her fair share of brochures and Hori, no doubt a letterhead or two; none of this work has lead to their standing as 'graphic authors'. So where does this leave the 'average' graphic designer, whose existence as such is dependent on this type of work? Surely no closer to sharing the authorial title. And whilst I agree with Rock's inclusions, I wonder whether such a lengthy debate of authorship is justifiable for a few worthy players?

While Rock's 1996 article remains a seminal text on design and authorship, the ten years following have produced other notable contributions to the debate. Steven McCarthy's input to the debate has been consistent, preceding Rock by a year with a paper to accompany the exhibition 'Designer as Author: Voices and Visions' (North Kentucky University), and more recently, "Designer as Author: Diffusion or Differentiation?" (2002) (co–written with Cristina de Almeida). McCarthy continues to define and revise his nominated models of authorship, the current categorisations being: 'Graphic Design as Advocacy', 'Design for Art's Sake', 'Collaboration of Equals', and 'Entrepreneurial Opportunities'. And although useful in their attempt to outline the various relationships between a designer and the content, this discussion does little to resolve what has to be the essential problem of the authorship model: the focus on 'who' created it rather than 'how' it was created. Rock, making similar categorisations, acknowledges this point in his final sentence, "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)

Ellen Lupton, aware of the contradictions and limitations of the author as designer coupling, argues convincingly for the alternative: 'The Designer as Producer' (1998). Using Walter Benjamin's 'Author as Producer' (1934) as a starting point, Lupton dismisses the overt association of a written text by the term 'author', favouring instead the rhetorical dimension of a producer's role. Designers do not need to become writers, she argues, instead they should look to direct content through production decisions – drawing parallels to the role of a film producer who brings together the divergent skills of writers, cinematographers, editors, actors, and so forth – in a work of shared authorship. Arguably it is an analogy that sits more easily with the current role of a graphic designer, but as Rick Poynor points out, it is no less 'romantic' than the authorial label. He queries Lupton's assumption that designers will be dominant in the production power struggle, particularly given that previous limitations of power have fuelled the 'designer as author' debate. (2003: 146)

In his book No More Rules: Graphic Design and Post–Modernism (2003) Poynor devotes an entire chapter to 'authorship'. Like Rock's earlier article, it details the abandonment of the established 'author' by literary and cultural theorists whilst discussing sites of existing and developing graphic authorship. A consensus is arrived at through the similar inclusion of artist books, activist work, design writers and publishers, and avant–garde practitioners

6

(Rock's list of Kalman, Brody, Mau, et al, is refreshed by the additions of design groups, Tomato and Fuel). While the length of Poynor's paper affords greater discussion of individual works, his most original contribution to the debate is the acknowledgment of the potential of graphic authorship to emerge in fields other than graphic design. He asks, "Why shouldn't content–makers coming from other areas and directions seek greater control of the graphic process?" (140) The question is answered through the inclusion of publications developed by writers with a considerable level of visual content such as Diary of an Amateur by Graham Rawle and House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski. Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (2000), a collection of comic strips edited into a novel, won the Guardian First Book Award in 2001 – a prize usually reserved for a conventional piece of writing. And had, at the time of Poynor's writing, Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, a novel with photographs and experimental typography been awarded the Book Illustration category and overall winner at the V&A Illustration Awards 2005, it would have no doubt joined this list of hybrids. It seems that these authors have responded to El Lissitzky's 1923 declaration that 'The new book demands the new writer'. (Poynor: 140)

With the rise of this genre from both sides of the word/image divide, it is no wonder Poynor declares that the "problems of authorship have been exaggerated," (147) even though it is not only these emerging publications to which he refers. But this statement depends greatly on what it is that 'authorship' purports to offer design. Arguably it has proven its worth by challenging the orthodox view that design practice is purely service–oriented. And, as Kenneth Fitzgerald points out, "for many designers, use of the term 'author' is only a metaphor to point towards a new role in the creative process and a search for a new language." (1997: 22) The designer as author debate has therefore been a useful mechanism with which to discuss issues of ownership and authority, as well as emerging design practices. But who initiates the work and to whom should that work be attributed are scant contributions to design's limited discourse.

Yet further examination of the author in literary theory reveals that the pragmatics of ownership and origination are but one of its functions. An understanding of the role of an author also provides writers and theorists with insights into the creative process. For example, an examination of the author–narrator paradigm provides an understanding of how the reader engages with a text and subsequently how to achieve specific reader experiences. It is this approach, an understanding of the author as both an instigator and component of rhetorical strategies that has the most to offer design.[1]

## Conclusion
Regardless of the inadequacies and complexities of the 'designer as author' analogy, it continues to grow, finding fertile ground in new genres. Yet its fundamental attraction for designers – its privileging of power – remains flawed. While the title of author may lay claim to ownership, authority and acknowledgement for designers, a designer's real power remains in their ability to create successful visual outcomes. Yet for design, authorial criticism does little to reveal 'how' it is that designers design or how messages

1. A comprehensive examination of the role that the author–narrator paradigm can offer design criticism is provided in my doctoral thesis, "The Rhetoric of Distance: a model of the visual narrator in design" (2003) (unpublished).

7

are communicated – it does nothing more than supply an illusionary point of origin, a 'who', for the semiotician's 'what'. Design criticism's 'authorship-lite' remains a missed opportunity to investigate aspects of the communication process that are well documented in literary theory yet remain under-examined in design.

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