

# Precis: graphic design theory "design and reflexivity"

Profession



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Precis: Graphic Design Theory “ Design and Reflexivity” by Jan van Toorn, 1994. Verbal and Visual Rhetoric, University of Baltimore Publication Design Master's Program, Spring, 2011 Dutch graphic designer Jan van Toorn is known for his radical ideas about what the function of design should be, and what qualities designers should possess and promote with their designs. Van Toorn’s distinctive style is messy, peculiar, and deeply interwoven with political and cultural messages, unapologetic with their intent to force critical thinking upon viewers.

Van Toorn advocates design which encourages the viewer to reach their own conclusions, insisting that designers shouldn’t function as objective bystanders, but instead, designers have an important contribution to make. Design is a form of visual journalism and van Toorn urges designers to take responsibility for their role as “ journalists. ” Van Toorn begins his argument by stating that all professions contain a certain level of schizophrenia--inescapable contradictions, including graphic design, which must balance the interest of the public with the interests of the client and the general expectations of the media profession.

To survive, design must “ strive to neutralize these inherent conflicts of interest by developing a mediating concept aimed at consensus [.... ] to accepting the world image of the established order as the context for its own action. ” (Page 102, first paragraph) By reconciling the differences of various ideals and opinions, and establishing a cultural norm, design develops a “ practical and conceptual coherence” in mass media, thereby legitimizing itself--legitimized “ in the eyes of the social order, which, in turn is confirmed and legitimized by the contributions that design make to symbolic

production. (Page 102, second paragraph) The cultural industry, comprised of corporations, the wealthy, the educated, and the powerful elite, dictate to the rest of society what is popular, distasteful, and overall socially acceptable, imprisoning design in a false sense of reality. Design becomes stagnant as it conforms to the ideals put forth by the ruling class. Van Toorn refers to this stagnation as “intellectual impotence” and designers tend to deal with it in two ways.

Designers either resist the assimilation into popular culture by attempting to redefine or “renew the vocabulary” or they integrate smoothly into the “existing symbolic and social order.” (Page 103, first paragraph) The lines separating these two approaches have become blurred with the rise of post-modernism and proliferation of niche marketing, as competitors try to distinguish themselves. Van Toorn observes that “official design continues to be characterized by aesthetic compulsiveness and/or by a patriarchal fixation or reproductive ordering. (Page 103, second paragraph) Van Toorn then begins to examine what he refers to as “symbolic productions,” specifically ads, commercials, etc., which misrepresent reality. These symbolic productions are ideological instruments, serving private interest in the guise of a universal one. (Page 103, last paragraph) The so-called “dominant culture” doesn’t serve to integrate different social classes; rather, it contributes to the facade of an integrated society, by forcing all other cultures to define themselves by an established set of rules, fostering a “communicative dependency. (Page 104, first paragraph) Van Toorn argues that everyday life is falsely represented and causes tension between ethics and symbolism. In order to make what van Toorn refers to as an “

oppositional cultural production," the designer must take care not to create a specific alternative to an established convention, but to simply present it in a creative and new way, while keeping the universally accepted concept intact.

A designer's opportunity to upset the status quo can only be sought when a political or ideological shift is underway, which results in "creating new public polarities," usually targeting real social problems. (Page 104, last paragraph) Now the designer can encourage an oppositional stance, one that goes against the communicative order. The ultimate goal of this approach is to evoke questions and reflection among the public and encourage a more pragmatic view of reality, forcing them to identify their own needs and desires.

Van Toorn cautions that despite the ever-changing nature of culture, design has to be "realistic in its social ambitions." (Page 105, paragraph 3) The awareness of the unstable relationship between the symbolic and the real world requires a high level of discernment and critical thinking ability. Design must recognize "substance, program, and style as ideological constructions, as expressions of restricted choices that only show a small sliver of reality in mediation." (Bottom of page 105, to top of page "106)