Interpreting Graphic Design:
Cultural Imaginaries and Social Productions.

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Objectives

Graphic design influences and shapes the production and interpretation of cultural information and visual knowledge. The Australian Socio-Graphic AIDS Project (AGAP) locates graphic design as a social process in the production of epidemic knowledge, applying a textual-visual analysis to the images and messages of public health prevention campaigns, including brochures, posters and videos. It documents the influence of government policies and community-sector ideologies in the formulation of safer sex campaigns: how campaigns shape public knowledge of the epidemic; how graphic images generate social meanings about the epidemic; and how cultural responses influence designers in a morally charged arena.

The research objectives of AGAP are threefold. *(1)* Empirical analysis of the diversity of Australian HIV/AIDS strategies and documentation of the contrasts in contents and texts of the campaigns. *(2)* Exploration of graphic designs of safer sex campaigns, official strategies and public responses to the initiatives. *(3)* Evaluation of the material culture of the campaigns and how they influence what can and cannot be said about safer sex practices.

Methods

HIV/AIDS representations are overlaid with images and narratives which resonate with collective memories and historical signifiers about contagion, contamination, plague and the inevitability of death. AGAP analyses the divergent and intersecting facets of safer sex campaigns, images and texts during the past two decades. It draws upon published reports and unpublished strategies, including the development of campaign materials from advertising briefs, archives and private papers.

Textual-visual analysis focuses on chronological and diachronic patterns of the campaigns in the documentation of changes and variations in the styles and types of messages. For instance, what do they reveal about official policies and public anxieties concerning disease and infection, and cultural imaginaries about immorality and pollution? Triangulation, comprising two or more methods of data collection, explores the layered or rich texts and diverse signifiers of campaign materials, and associated multiple social realities of the epidemic.

Main Findings

The *sine qua non* of graphic design is to influence behaviour and knowledge, to communicate information with the construction of messages in an arresting and comprehensible manner. The design practice needs to be contextualised with regard to material and social functions, intentions and purposes. Critical and programatic observations by Cross (1981), Frascara (1997), Fry (1999), Margolin (1995), Swann (2002) and Teymur (1981) concerning the status of design studies informs the analysis of HIV/AIDS campaign materials.

AGAP is a timely intervention in design history and design research, in particular focusing on social constructions and cultural imaginaries of the epidemic. It analyses HIV/AIDS representations as constitutive and productive of cultural and moral discourses about contagion, disease and transgression. Textual-visual analysis grounds images and texts in the social construction of epidemic knowledge, and critically assesses the orthodoxy that graphic design is an aesthetic or professional process innocent of socio-political constraints and influences.

The conceptual significance of the research questions the detached or neutral role of graphic designers in the development of briefs, the manufacture of designed objects and the production of graphics. The practical significance of the research is the 'unpacking' of symbolic values embedded in the making of graphics, and the contextualising of design practices in the shaping of social meanings in visual culture.

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Introduction

For more than two decades the public consciousness of HIV/AIDS has been informed by statistical data on infection and death rates, discourses on medical and social research, and a proliferation of graphic representations of the epidemic. The urgency in HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention concerns behavioural change, and in this regard shares similarities with measures in the control of venereal diseases, so far as both have been viewed as socio-sexual crises which 'must take into account traditional and transitional moral attitudes and conditions relating to gender, sexual identity and taboos' (Close 1995: 23). Since awareness and educational campaigns are designed, informed and implemented in conjunction with official policies and national strategies, the influence of contextual factors – economic, geo-political, socio-cultural – highlights the importance of language and representations in health messages and associated public graphics. Although HIV/AIDS is perceived primarily as a health issue, the focus on behavioural and social issues is just as pertinent since the strategies implicate cultural stereotyping of gender, race and sexuality, and the resultant visibility/invisibility of classes of bodies, and types of individuals (Donovan and Chan 2001). For many, graphic responses to HIV/AIDS represent the *face* of the epidemic or, more accurately, the multiple realities of the epidemic in the sense that HIV/AIDS representations are overlaid with images and narratives which resonate with collective memories and historical signifiers about contagion, contamination, plague and the 'inevitability' of death.

The *sine qua non* of graphic design concerns the communication of information via the construction of messages which function as visual responses for the user in a meaning-making process. For HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention, this process of meaning-making is predicated on the effective transmission of information in the form of graphic messages between the authorial voice(s) and the intended user(s). Textual and visual content in graphic designs construct multiple relationships within culture and society, relationships which generate multiple meanings. Besides articulating textual and visual codes in communicating knowledge, the nuances of graphic design also imply the social and political processes which underpin the obverse message, and provide a rationale for the construction of particular types of discourses, and provide a sense of the beliefs they embody and the meanings they are intended to convey (Chaplin 1994; Joblin and Crowley 1996; Tyler 1996). The material culture of HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention programmes in the print and electronic document attitudes towards, and beliefs about, the epidemic.   The graphic representations which are employed record critical responses to various presumed

'dangerous' sexual practices, ranging from the earlier denunciation of categories of promiscuous individuals, to the later emphasis on safer sex practices (Chan and Donovan 1999). Central to an understanding of graphic responses to the epidemic in Australia is the textual-visual analysis of HIV/AIDS material culture in the context of cultural imaginaries about, and social productions of knowledge of the epidemic.

Australian HIV/AIDS Strategies

Resources for HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention programmes in Australia are provided at three levels: governments (from federal and state health departments); non-government agencies (including state and territory AIDS councils); and community-based organizations which focus on grass-roots constituents (for example injecting drug users, sex workers' collectives). The broad diversity in the range of resources which promote HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention reflect government policies and more generalised societal attitudes towards infection control, social behaviours and sexual practices. HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention share similarities with health programmes for breast cancer and heart disease so far as the respective strategies are predicated on a socio-behavioural model which encourages change for the benefit of the individual, and the good of the community. The significant aspect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic exemplifies the complexities in designing health messages for a non-homogenous population. HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention campaigns require appropriately focussed information and follow-up interventions, and they need to be attentive and responsive to the immediate concerns of, and the socio-cultural composition of, a diversity or actual or potential constituents.

Evidence from national and international surveys indicates that government strategies which adopt 'generic' messages aimed at a presumed homogenous population are not particularly successful (Watney 1992). Textual-visual analysis of HIV/AIDS resources indicates that materials produced at government levels are mostly cautious in the use of language and imagery, compared to the more explicit nature of the materials produced by non-government organizations (NGO) and community-based organisations (CBO). An image, whether it is a drawing, a graphic or a photograph, conceals as much as it reveals (Sontag 1978). In this sense, epidemic representations can be used, intentionally or otherwise, to deny or exclude specific lived-experiences and voices from the broader discursive terrain, as they can also be inclusive in the recognition of a diversity of identities in strategies for interventions and preventions (Chan and Donovan 1999). Whereas government campaigns are designed to address a presumed homogenous and mainstream audience, NGOs and CBOs sell their messages to identified minority constituencies, and in this sense they seek to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Even so, despite governments' arms-length funding of NGOs and CBOs, which allows them tacit concessions in the use of explicit language and imagery, they risk official censorship and withdrawal of funding it they are deemed to overstep the sensitive boundaries of moral turpitude, political sensibility and public propriety.

Visualising HIV/AIDS

Susan Sontag has pointed out:

> Strictly speaking, AIDS – acquired immune deficiency syndrome – is not
> the name of an illness at all. It is the name of a medical condition, whose

consequences are a spectrum of illnesses. In contrast to syphilis and cancer, which provide prototypes for most of the images and metaphors attached to AIDS, the very definition of AIDS requires the presence of other illnesses, so–called opportunistic infections and malignancies. But though not in that sense a single disease, AIDS lends itself to being regarded as one – in part because, unlike cancer and like syphilis, it is thought to have a single cause (Sontag 1989: 16-17).

This goes some way in explaining the difficulty in representing HIV/AIDS during the early years of the epidemic, and why metaphors and similes – pestilence, plague and pollution – were frequently resorted to in order to comprehend, materialise and visualise the moral and mortal consequences of an infection across a range of discursive, ideological, political and theological other levels. It was some time before intervention and prevention strategies focussed on issues such as awareness and education, care and support, discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS, legal and human rights, and the specific needs of ethnic and indigenous communities, which provided a plethora of themes for the graphic representations of HIV/AIDS (Kippax *et. al.* 1991).

Textual-visual analysis of Australian HIV/AIDS material culture shows differences and diversities in approaches and intentions. Besides a diverse variety of graphic formats in the print and electronic media, the materials reveal an appeal to a range of emotions and responses, from fear and frustration, through to love and hope. Australian graphic responses during the early years of the epidemic emphasised celibacy, negation and guilt, and relied upon hyperbolic and scare tactics about the effects and the consequences of becoming infected with the virus. With more accurate information about the epidemiology of the epidemic following from gradual awareness of the significance of the Franco-American isolation of HIV as the putative cause of AIDS in 1983 and 1984, and the subsequent unravelling of the mechanisms which indicated the viral damage to the human immunologic system, graphic messages began to employ, if tentatively, images and representations of compassion, hope, humour, support and understanding (Chan and Donovan 1999).

During the early years of the epidemic, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention messages relied upon images which incited fear of decomposition, disease and death. The 1987 Commonwealth government's national HIV/AIDS awareness campaign personified HIV/AIDS in the guise of the *Grim Reaper* and announced the likelihood, if not the inevitability, of the broadening of the spectrum of infection to heterosexual men, women and children (Donovan 1997). The sombre voice-over identified homosexuals and injecting drug users as the initial infectees and pollutants – the 'carriers' – and in this way the narrative reinforced the conventional public health bifurcation of health and disease and, at the same time, underscored conventional medico-political idealisations which, from the late nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, positioned syphilitics as public health enemies and, in the same manner, conflated contagion with immortality and sexual excess (Brandt 1988; 1991).

Cultural Imaginaries and Meaning-Making

As knowledge about the 'causes' and the transmission of HIV/AIDS became accessible outside the medico-scientific profession, along with the alarming

escalation of global and regional infections, textual and visual metaphors were variously employed to alienate *and* humanise the epidemic. In the electronic and print media, graphic images visualised the effects of HIV/AIDS on the human body whilst, at the same time, linking the syndrome to an array of cultural imaginaries: aliens, enemies, invasion and warfare (Donovan 1998). In contrast, NGO and CBO campaigns sought to humanise the epidemic in the guise of cartoon characters to counter, lighten and personalise the death-associated representations favoured by official public health campaigns, and media narratives.

The generic campaigns favoured by governments address a contrived and fictional homogenous population. The campaigns devised by AIDS councils and community-based organisations use codas and diacritics intended to resonate emotionally and symbolically with their constituencies. Icons, images, symbols and signs are devised to visually enhance messages which incorporate embedded and referred meanings of the images, representations and texts. Although frequently clichéd, these graphics nonetheless play on the cultural imaginaries and representations that the virus has for gays and bisexual males, gays, lesbians, injecting drug users, and sex workers. Interestingly, lesbians, transgenders and heterosexual women were mostly absent from these early campaigns. Thereagain, women are usually absent from government campaigns unless they are able to be portrayed as 'fallen' or 'wanton', and therefore actual or potential reservoirs of contagion and disease.

Graphic images of the molecular structure of HIV – the aetiological agent presumed to lead to AIDS – are neither reflections nor replications, least of all are they reproductions of the 'cause' of the epidemic. They are representations infused with meanings and, in this sense, the graphics devised and generated by NGOs and CBOs frequently challenge the dominant naturalistic paradigm that the syndrome is primarily a discrete biomedical phenomenon, or a disease entity. It is in this sense that Paula Treichler has characterised HIV/AIDS as an 'epidemic of meanings or signification'. She argues that epidemic representations are infused with meanings which comprise contradictory and multiple denotations, over-determined by signifiers and complex significations as to what the epidemic actually is:

> [T]ry as we may to treat AIDS as 'an infectious disease' and nothing more, meanings continue to multiply widely at an extraordinary rate. This epidemic of meanings is readily apparent in the chaotic assemblage of understanding of AIDS that by now exist (Treichler 1999: 11. Also Treichler 1988).

Material Cultures and Social Productions

The material culture of HIV/AIDS public health campaigns relies upon images and texts to inform about the epidemic in general, and caution about 'risk behaviours' and 'risk practices' in particular. Yet the deployment of factual, neutral and 'non-censorial' information is, inevitably, overlaid with historical, legal, political and social resonances about contagion, miasma and pestilence (Bashford and Hooker 2001; Ranger and Slack 1991; Rosenberg and Golden 1992). The resonances are barometers of the historical, moral and social 'collective memories' which have influences on contemporary government strategies, medical discourses, political rhetorics, religious orthodoxies, public anxieties, and the appropriateness of what kind of information should be allowed to be circulated in the public domain.

Ordinarily, graphic representations are taken to be reflections, or replications, in the sense they are assumed to be reproductive images of individuals and/or material objects which, in our mundane everyday lives, are taken-for-granted in their singularity to stand for a class of similar individuals and/or material objects. Yet it is not the supposed *certainty* of representations, but their *plasticity* in the shaping and structuring of meanings, embedded in taken-for-granted graphic representations, which is of interest. It is in this sense that Stuart Hall argues that:

> [R]epresentation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean* (Hall 1982. Also Kazmierizak 2003).

From the early 1980s, HIV/AIDS in Australia has overwhelmingly impacted on gays in the inner-cities of Melbourne and Sydney. Funded by the New South Wales Department of Health, and produced by the AIDS Council of New South Wales, the *Our Love Means Safe Sex* campaign of 1992 consisted of four posters and postcards, and print advertisements in the gay press (Madeddu 1992). It sought to portray the inner-city Sydney gay community as diverse yet coherent and integrated by communal responsibilities and shared values. The campaign purposely employed contradictory and exaggerated sets of diacritic – images, signs and symbols as cultural markers of difference *and* inclusion – as ironic visual representations of hetero-normative stereotypes of what these people are *because* they look flamboyant and outrageous.

The *Our Love Means Safe Sex* campaign employed contra-cultural images aimed at the intended audiences of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders, supposedly attached to an idealised 'community', represented as diverse but nevertheless coherent, integrated and supportive. The graphics played-out with a range of stereotypes in the pairing of dissimilar 'types' of queers: the Muscle Mary with the Drag Queen, the Bear with the Asian Youth, the Aboriginal/Islander with the Grey Gay, the Male Nun with the Leatherette. Whatever the combination love, romance and sex might take, the message was to play safe and not act foolishly or impulsively least their partners in particular, and the community in general, be placed at risk of infection. The four high quality posters constructed cultural imaginaries of an inclusive community diverse in sexual predilections, and idealised it as a collectivity with shared values and communal responsibilities. The reality is quite different: inner-city Sydney gay culture is racially and sexuality segmented and hierarchically structured, for example, the 'inferiorisation' of non-Anglo-Australians, marginalisation of Asians, and invisibility of Aboriginals (New South Wales 2003).

Official and unofficial Australian HIV/AIDS campaigns have as much to do with political rhetoric as they have to do with the dissemination of information about safer-sex practices. One instance is worthy of note. The Victorian AIDS Council/Gay Mens' Health Centre campaign of 1990, *When You Say Yes…Say Yes to Safe Sex*, featured two young men fully clothed embracing and kissing. This was the first Australian campaign devised to reach young homosexual and bisexual males through the mainstream mass media; it addressed those not attached to gay communities or involved with the gay 'scene'. In part the message read: 'Making the

first move might be scary, but more guys than you think have sex with other guys. It's natural, and if you're safe you'll have a great time'. The poster provided straightforward information about safer-sex practices, but the mention that condoms should be used for anal sex attracted the anger of politicians and the condemnation of conservative community and religious groups (Goggin and Hee 1990).

Critics contrived the poster to be an enticement for inexperienced adolescent males to 'convert' to homosexuality, to a life of depravity and to an early and inglorious death. The Advertising Standards Council ruled the campaign offensive, imposed a Restricted or 'R' certificate and banned its publication in the mainstream print media. A few months later the Melbourne chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP/Melbourne) produced a witty pastiche showing Marie Tehan, the Victorian state opposition shadow health minister who was outspoken against the campaign, frigidly embracing and kissing one of the models with the slogan, *When You Say No…Say No to Marie Tehan.* Banned from publication in the mainstream print media, the original campaign was successfully promoted at university orientations in subsequent years.

Conclusion

Perhaps more than any other disease entity during the past one hundred years or so, HIV/AIDS is a marker for contemporary cultural imaginaries, disseminated across the range of official, media, medical and public discourses, and is a signifier for the demarcation between healthy (normal) heterosexual bodies, and contagious (abnormal) homosexual bodies. The modern scourge is evocative of cultural phantasies about dangerous and excessive bodily fluids – blood and semen – similar to the manner that syphilis was constructed as a thought-object from the late nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century (Gilman 1988; Showalter 1990).

HIV/AIDS graphics have as much to do with cultural constructions of the syndrome as they have to do with the visualisation of bioscientific or naturalistic representations of the epidemic. The graphics published in fashion magazines and medical and scientific journals – *The Face* (1985), *Medical Journal of Australia* (1983), *Scientific American* (1987) – are idealised 'naturalistic' representations which, in the public arena, inform interpretations, meaning-makings and the structuring of taken-for-granted configurations of what the epidemic is culturally imagined to be. In this sense, graphic reproductions of the molecular structure of HIV – mistaken as 'evidence' of the syndrome – are thought-objects in the sense that they are contrived to be read as though they are definitive and therefore 'real' entities. It is in this vein that Simon Watney argues there are two over-determined sets of images of the epidemic:

> "[O]ne focusing on colour-stained electron-microscope derived images of HIV, usually misdescribed as the 'AIDS virus,' and other signs of biomedical technology and authority; the other relentlessly constructing people with AIDS as 'AIDS victims', physically debilitated and preferably disfigured" (Watney 1994: 73. Also Watney 1988).

Graphic representations of the putative virus taken from electron microscopes – presumed to be replications of the virus – encourages the visualisation of the

pathogen as the entity which 'attacks' the human immunologic system. Micro-organisms and pathogens are embodied, framed and reproduced – as on the front cover of *Scientific American* (1987) – as though they are perfectly formed alien inorganic mechanisms, biological hand-grenades primed for detonation, their 'purpose' being the wanton destruction of human life (Treichler 1999).

The dissemination of information about disease and health in public health campaigns conventionally resorts to the authority of bioscientific and naturalistic paradigms which privilege 'causes' and 'effects'. These graphic representations are neither neutral nor universal. They are productive in the sense that images and texts articulate and reflect cultural formations and moral discourses which have material effects, practical consequences and visual intentions. The purpose and rationale of graphic design – the effective deployment of images and texts to announce, communicate and underscore messages – is to provide information and/or to sell products and services, in this instance information about risk behaviours and the consequences of 'fatal' illness.

The textual-visual analysis of HIV/AIDS public health campaigns goes beyond the mere unpacking of discourses of aesthetics, design and style. It focuses on the contextual interpretation and the material culture of contemporary public images, their relation to historical models, and the constraints of official censorship and political rhetorics in relation to the acceptability of graphic symbolisms, textual contents, and visual representations (Chan and Donovan 2000). What is needed are analyses of the social productions of the material cultures of HIV/AIDS, specifically how medical *information* about the epidemic is commodified and objectified for consumption as public *knowledge* about the modern scourge (Donovan and Chan 2003).

Acknowledgement

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