

Graphic Design Practice: Impersonation, Invocation and Multiple Audiences

AnneMarie Ennis

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Abstract

Graphic Design Practice: Impersonation, Invocation and Multiple Audiences

AnneMarie Ennis

This thesis is a study of the multiple stages of interpretation through which textual meanings take public cultural form. It takes the form of an ethnographic study and focuses on the structures and interpretive frameworks through which graphic designers work, and on the routines of practice they employ. Using observations collected over the course of an intensive week spent within a large design/branding studio, and transcripts from a later series of interviews conducted with graphic designers from other environments, I describe some of the key structural and social forces at work within this field of cultural production, and the effect of these forces on the practice of creative producers.

The specific purpose of this study is to describe some of the working practices of graphic designers, and to discover how specific routines of practice reinforce conceptions of audience during the design process. While considering this central problematic, I address several sub-questions. While considering this central problematic, I addressed several sub questions. First, how do routines of practice impact the cultural productions of graphic designers? Second, how do graphic designers reference, and in referencing construct, their various audience groups? And third, how do designers use these projections/presumptions within their encoding practice?

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Introduction

The first time I explained my research project to a designer at SFP, the downtown design/branding studio where I was about to begin my ethnographic fieldwork, he asked me “who on earth would care about design practice?” “How,” he asked, “was it possible that anyone would not understand what designers did?” “You academics,” he said as he walked away, “you guys get away with everything!” Later, I was being introduced to the staff, the question arose again and again. Why was the description of the structures and interpretive frameworks through which graphic designers work, and of the production practices that they employ, so important? As Marilyn Crafton Smith notes,

Much of the emphasis in graphic design has focused on the object and its production strategies. If graphic design is reconceived as a cultural practice in the larger sense, further critical consideration can be directed to the various ‘moments’ that proceed from the designed object’s production. Design can then be theorized in terms of the various moments that constitute the life of the object. (307)

Simply put, I believe that by understanding the culture of production, we are better equipped to critically engage with the product in question, and to appreciate the influence it has within our culture.¹

This thesis is a study of the multiple stages of interpretation through which textual meanings emerge into public cultural form. It takes the form of an ethnographic study and focuses on the structures and interpretive frameworks through which graphic

¹ Sol Worth calls for this type of ethnography of visual communications, or rather cultures of communication in 1980 advocating an approach that includes “social and cultural dimensions of visual communication into a model of meaning and interpretation” (Dornfeld 8). Worth called for us to try to understand “how, and why, and in what context, a particular articulator structured his particular statement about the world” (Worth 197, qtd, in Dornfeld 1998).

designers work, and on the routines of practice they employ. Using observations collected over the course of an intensive week spent within a large design/branding studio, and transcripts from a later series of interviews conducted with graphic designers from other environments, I will describe some of the key structural and social forces at work within this field of cultural production, and the effect of these forces on the practice of creative producers.² The specific purpose of this study is to describe some of the working practices of graphic designers, and to discover how specific routines of practice reinforce conceptions of audience during the design process.³ While considering this central problematic, I will address several sub-questions. First, how do routines of practice impact the cultural productions of graphic designers? Second, how do graphic designers reference and, in referencing, construct their various audience groups? And third, how do designers use these projections/presumptions within their creative practice?

While studies from the fields of cultural and critical studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of the social role and daily process of creative producers in fields such as fashion design, music production and advertising, little work has been done on the specific routine working practice of the graphic designer. As Matt Soar has noted in his work Graphic Design, Graphic Dissent: Towards a Cultural Economy of an Insular Profession (2002), there is a great lack of critical attention, or indeed any type of attention at all, paid to the cultural production of the designer: “[...] not only is there a

² Taking my cue from Dornfeld, I mobilize here Bourdieu’s conception of the “field” of cultural production. Bourdieu describes this field as “the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated” (Bourdieu 135). As Dornfeld notes, “the field metaphor allows us to discuss both agency and process in terms of structural relations [...] By seeing production as a cultural field we attempt to locate simultaneously and in relation to each other the perspectives and interests of producers, production staff, [administrators], viewers, and the myriad institutions with which they interact” (Dornfeld 198)

widespread disinterest in studying cultural production (and commercial cultural production in particular) but, as we have seen, most people are not even sure what 'visual communication design' is – as an array of artifacts, let alone as a cultural practice” (Soar 39).

Recently, scholars from the fields of Communication and Cultural Studies have begun to address this question of “who makes the images” (McRobbie 186). I rely heavily on several of these interventions for this research work, primarily Soar’s (2002) exploration of the realm of cultural production associated with graphic design.⁴ In addition, writings by Lavin (2001), Blauvelt (1994), Margolin (1994), Crafton Smith (1994), Beirut et al (1994,1997,1999, 2002), Soar (2000, 2002) provide multiple points of entry into the culture of graphic design production. That said, there is a lack of critical writing from the fields of Communication and Cultural Studies about the daily practice of this specific group of cultural producers, and the impact their practice has on media and audiences. My aim for this study is to contribute to the studies of cultural production by focusing on the personal experiences of this relatively unexplored group of cultural producers.

Ethnography and Cultural Production

This research study began with a long and slightly discouraging series of false starts. In early January (2005) I set out to find a large design/branding studio in which to conduct observational work for this study. I had thought that a multi-person

³ When I refer to graphic designers, I am referring to creative workers who use digital and analogue methods to create visual solutions for the communication needs of their clients.

design/branding studio would be the best place for me to catch a glimpse of how the cultural production practices of graphic designers played out in daily work, and so I began sending out letters and calling studios. Based on the amount of work produced by designers about their own field of production, I innocently assumed that gaining access to a design studio for my own research would be quite easy. The replies I received quickly taught me about the depth of the private institutions' (and especially of the design studios') reluctance to engage with academia: 21 of the 22 letters and phone calls that I made ended in polite rejections.⁵ Luckily, one studio did express tentative interest, and it happened to be a tier-one national firm! I immediately booked a train ticket to Toronto to meet with the Creative Director, and to prove my mettle as a researcher. After a half hour meeting which was heading quickly in the direction of another refusal, we began talking informally over coffee about design, and the design education system. Based on a common passion for the letterpress, a common dislike for Photoshop filters, and my credentials as a 'real' designer (established through my knowledge of traditional mockup methods no longer taught in most design schools), I was in, and I immediately scheduled a week when the majority of the 40 staff members would be in the office for me to come in and observe the working practices of Spencer Francey Peters.⁶ This encounter spoke volumes about the dynamics of commercial cultural production, illuminating the enforced distance between academia and professional practice, the active hierarchies within the

⁴ This study is an examination of the contradictory impulses, both institutional and subjective, that are embodied by graphic designers, and includes a new theorization of the culture of production proposed by Johnson (1986/1987).

⁵ Further discussion of the concerns associated with ethnographic research within spaces of commercial cultural production can be found in Radway (1991), Lutz and Collins (1993), and Dornfeld (1998).

⁶ Traditionally, this type of ethnography could be considered symbolic interactionism, the goal of the study being to illuminate what interactions mean, the research being considered successful if it shows how a particular reality is socially constructed. Symbolic interactionism is seen as a useful way to study specialized group activities. For further references, see Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method (1969).

design community, and the reluctance of designers to expose their personal practice to non-designers.

I have no doubt that the personal dynamics at work during the time I spent at Spencer Francey Peters (hereafter “SFP”) greatly influenced the observations that I have incorporated into this research project. Though I was introduced as a fellow graphic designer, and though the staff of SFP frequently asked questions about my own personal design practice, the social role that I occupied during my time there was clearly that of ‘researcher.’ “How are we doing?” and “is this helping you?” were common questions, as were joking references to gorillas-in-the-mist, lab rats, electrode tests, surveillance cameras and big brother. During the time I spent observing the culture of production at SFP I was able to participate in many meetings and informal gatherings, but was excluded from many as well (specifically from meetings where sensitive client work was being discussed). During the formal meetings that I *did* observe, the directors, designers and account staff did not address me at all, and for all intents and purposes acted unaware that I was in the room. My dual position as a graphic designer and as a researcher may have been a factor here: once within the meeting space, I was able to blend in by laughing at “in” design jokes, nodding at design references, and using body language and mannerisms that I had internalized during my own practice as a graphic designer in a studio setting. I was not, however, able to remain so consistently invisible during the rest of the day: discussions around the foosball table in the kitchen changed from talk of contract disputes to talk of federal politics and weddings when I came in the room, and designers frequently asked to see my notebook, asking why I was, or was not, making

notes on a specific subject.⁷ I was asked not to conduct audio or video recordings while at SFP due to proprietary concerns, and so, for this study, relied on my own notes, often recorded during frequent trips to the stairwell outside the SFP office space. After a day spent observing at SFP, I would return to my room to write up detailed versions of these field notes, which then served as my data for the second chapter of this thesis. For this reason, I do not include long quotes, and rely instead on a (re)presenting of data based partially on participant input and partially on my own interpretations.⁸

The dynamics of conducting ethnography within a culture of highly educated, culturally empowered subjects, who for the majority occupy a higher social status than myself in my position as ‘researcher’ are addressed in Nader’s work on “studying up” (Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up, 1974) and Moffat’s work on ethnography within one’s own culture (Ethnographic Writing About American Culture, 1992). Janice Radway also notes the consequences of conducting ethnography within a culture that has equal if not greater access to their own self-representation than the ethnographer in “Ethnographies Among Elites: Comparing Discourses on Power” (1991). Radway explains that, as with all ethnography,

[...] ethnography among an elite enables the ethnographer to learn something about an unfamiliar and alien cultural world. At the same time, it results in a disquieting encounter with people who often interact with the ethnographer in an unusual and wholly unexpected ways. (Radway 9)

⁷ I often refrained from taking notes during conversations, relying instead on my memory to recall what was said as taking notes seemed to alarm some of the designers. Twice, a designer asked me if they could see my notebook. By sharing my notes (on both occasions), I was able to establish a more personal relationship with the designer.

⁸ I was prompted by Radway to engage in a more reflexive process, and after having written a version of the chapter that takes as a focus this ethnographic work, and the specific practices of SFP staff, I sent it to SFP in order to give the staff of designers a chance to clarify, and continue to participate in, my analysis. None of the participants in this study have formally requested pseudonyms be used. However, due to the discomfort expressed by the designers and staff at SFP, I have avoided using specific names wherever possible

I note specifically Radway's call for ethnographic practices that pay attention not only to the power balance between ethnographers and studied, but also to the highly self-constructed boundaries between the two social groups.⁹ These boundaries become especially visible when, as Radway notes,

[...] the ethnographer's cultural power, which is lodged in her position, in her warrant to use words to know others, and in her access to channels for the distribution of these words, is paralleled by her subject's mastery of similar if not even more extensive resources and by a roughly equivalent access to less powerful populations. (Radway 5)

In the construction of this particular ethnography among elites, it was clear that my position as academic was held as a reference point within the culture of production that I was observing. As Radway explains:

Not only is it likely that both the ethnographer and her subject will already have formulated a representation of the other prior to their encounter, but it is also possible that they will have communicated with their peers about a figure so significant to their construction of themselves and their work. (Radway 9)

The interviews I conducted with individual designers later in Spring 2005 also raised methodological and ethical issues. In contrast to the work involved in organizing my ethnographic fieldwork, the process of setting up the interviews was very simple, requiring only a series of emails to former colleagues still practicing within the field of graphic design. The interviews themselves were each approximately one hour long, and were structured as conversations with guiding themes that I had prepared in advance. The themes changed slightly as the interviews progressed, due to a focus that was developing from these conversations. Each scheduled interview was conducted over the phone and taped on micro-cassette, transcriptions of which I then coded thematically for

⁹ For a further discussion of the boundaries between academic theory and design practice, see "Theory is a Good Idea: Some thoughts on the resistance to theory in graphic design criticism, history and practice" presented by Matthew Soar

use in the third chapter of this study. Though each interviewee asked whether specific answers to questions were satisfactory, and whether “I was getting enough stuff” (Justin, April 28, 2005), all interviews ended with the designers commenting positively about the experience. Though issues of my personal subjectivity were minimized in this interview process, the fact that all of the designers I interviewed were personal acquaintances forced me to address the dangers of “over rapport” and “indebtedness” (Bosk 204).

Bosk (Forgive and Remember: Managing Medical Failure, 1979) outlines three main concerns specifically for those conducting ethnographic work, which also apply to the discussions that I had with designers. Bosk warns that the gift of access may entail:

(1) The danger of over-rapport so thoroughly merging with the subject’s point of view that one cannot achieve the critical distance necessary for analysis; (2) the danger of over-indebtedness so thoroughly feeling a sense of diffuse obligation that one can no longer assess what one does and does not properly owe his subjects; and (3) the danger of over-generalization, so thoroughly idealizing one’s subjects that one sees their behaviour as representative of all persons in a class. (Bosk 204, qtd. in Dornfeld 1998)

I hope to have avoided these three dangers in my use of interview data I collected by not attempting to analyze the point of view of the subject, but rather using their words as anecdotal evidence (in order to avoid over-rapport), and by presenting the experiences of each designer specifically as those of an individual, not of a larger group or class (to avoid over-generalization). The danger of indebtedness does remain a running concern in this thesis project. I am attempting here to present not a critical, but an exploratory view, of the process of individuals. The urge to present a pleasing and flattering profile of the designers that I interviewed is a strong one, especially as they were so accommodating

with their participation in my research project. To this end, I attempt to present the views and stories of the designers that I interviewed without excessive interpretation or contextual framing.

Organization of Thesis

This thesis follows a thematic progression, from the macro to the micro, beginning with a review of relevant literature and terminology, and with a positioning of my research work within the genre of ethnographies of cultures of production. I will then focus on assembling a description of some of the working practices of graphic designers, beginning with a description of the “occupational formulae” (Negus 510) employed in a specific design studio, followed by an examination of individual routines of practice, using a series of interviews done with individual designers.

An exploration of the working themes used in this research project begins *Producers and Spaces of Production: a Review of Literature*. In this general and brief overview of the relevant literature guiding my research, I attempt to summarize current theorizations of the graphic designer, practices of media production and our understanding of ‘audience.’ A large part of this chapter is a general discussion of graphic design as a culture of workers and as an industry, a discussion which I carry through to an examination of graphic designer as part of the larger category of cultural workers using the writings of Bourdieu (1984), Negus (2002), and Reich (1993). To introduce work done on creative workplaces, I will review studies of cultures of production as the offices of National Geographic (Lutz and Collins, 1993), a public

television documentary studio (Dornfeld, 1998), and a country music recording label (Ryan and Peterson, 1982) all of which combine to provide a theoretical basis for description of the working practices of graphic designers. After defining practice as a series of routines or formulae, I will outline the twinned practices of encoding/decoding as proposed by Hall (1980 a), and the current state of end-user audience research [Morley (1980), Ang (1991), Radway (1991)], with the intent of building a foundation of current conceptions of decoder/audience groups. This chapter serves to orient a discussion of the working practices of designers within the larger context of critical and cultural theory, and to define the main concepts and terms used throughout this thesis work.

As Lutz and Collins note in reference to the creative process of photographers, cultural production is “a social and creative act in which negotiation and struggle result in the ultimate artifact” (Lutz and Collins 12). In chapters two and three, I will attempt to unpack moments of negotiation and struggle in the daily practice of graphic designers, and to isolate specific practices within the process of encoding. Chapter two, *Structures and Spaces of Design Production: The Design Studio* takes as its focus the specific working practices of one type of graphic designer: the member of a large design/branding studio. My aim in this chapter is to develop a description of the conditions within which the graphic designer practices as a cultural subject, and to better understand how those structural conditions impact the type of work that designers do. More specifically, I will describe several “routines of production” (Ettema 91), or “occupational formulae” (Negus 510) employed by the designer within a specific structure of production. To do this, I will use the observations made during my ethnographic fieldwork to describe the

interpretive frameworks in action within the specific culture of production of a large design/branding firm; namely Spencer Francey Peters, located in the business centre of Toronto, Canada. I will begin with a brief history of my site of research, and an outline of the institutional hierarchy of this culture of production. In order to explore how designers at SFP find spaces and moments of agency, I will outline my observations of how the creative decision-making chain at SFP works, and how information about audience is provided to designers working within this culture of production.

Chapter three, *Structures and Spaces of Design Production: The Freelance Designer* is a description of how some of these same routines of practice are employed by the individual designer, outside of the institutional structure of the large design studio. In this chapter, I use interviews conducted with five freelance graphic designers as points of departure for an examination of issues of creative practice, authority, audience research and appropriation within cultural production. I will use these discussions to describe how independent designers are employing “routines of production” (Ettema 91) as tools within the creative decision making process. I will start with a description of the field of freelance design, and of the specific five designers that I interviewed. I will then outline how freelance designers work within this specific structure of creative practice. What does the daily practice of the freelance designer look like, and how is it different from the practice of the designer in the studio setting? I will examine the role of client relationships in the creation of stages of the design process. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the role and source of routines of practice in the work of freelance graphic designers.

The last chapter of this thesis, *Audience(s) and the Practices of Graphic Designers*, is an exploration of the ways that graphic designers engage in complex and often invisible or unacknowledged practices of production in order to create design solutions for multiple audiences. By analyzing these practices of production within a system of “product image(s)” (Ryan and Peterson 1982), we are able to better understand how it is that designers work using their institutional context to generate creative work for their multiple audience groups. Furthermore, by examining the individual and evolutionary product stages that a final design embodies before becoming a final design solution (a deliverable), we are able to see the spaces in which multiple audiences fit. As Ryan and Peterson outline, and as observations with designers at SFP and in freelance situation support, each stage of production is addressed to a different audience group. The framing of design work as a series of small couplets of encoding and decoding, each with a specific audience in mind, thereby allows us to examine how it is that designers position themselves as audience members for conjectural and evaluative purposes. How, then, are designers engaging in *impersonation*, proxy audience membership for the purposes of evaluation and creative idea generation? (Smith 45) In this chapter I will consider the ways that designers conceptualize, research and access their multiple audience groups within the creative process.

Chapter One

Producers and Spaces of Production: a Review of Literature

My aim for this research is to add to the growing number of explorations of contemporary cultures of production, and to specifically examine working practices of graphic designers. In this way, I am attempting to structure a poetics of graphic design, examining how design works are constructed to have effects and uses throughout the designer's craft. By conducting ethnographic and interview research, I will consider how, as Dornfeld explains:

[...] implicit and explicit theories of practice applied by the producers, the social world in which they live, the production apparatus (institutions and practices), and broader cultural tendencies all inflect the text with a complex of meanings (and condition the text's reception). (Dornfeld 87)

The aim of this chapter is to introduce key terminology and issues that I will be discussing throughout this thesis work. Before beginning an analysis of the practice and culture of production of graphic designers, working themes used in this research such as 'graphic designer', 'audience,' and 'practice' must be identified and explored. As a way to better position my research within current debates, I will organize this chapter into three sections. The first will be an examination of current understandings of the graphic designer, and of graphic designers as a culture of workers. To create a foundation for the analysis of practices and spaces of design production in the following chapters, the second section of this chapter will look briefly at the ways that creative practices have been studied in relation to cultures of media production, and will explore the terminology concerning creative work practices. The last section of this chapter is concerned with

present articulations of ‘audience’ and will focus on ways that conceptions of ‘audience’ are integrated into practices of creative production.

Graphic Design/ Graphic Designers

As designer, design journalist and design critic Steven Heller has suggested in his introduction to the 1998 anthology of writing from the field of Design Studies [Looking Closer 2 (1997)], “Graphic design has been seen but not heard.” What, then, informs the discourse about graphic designers? What voices add to the statistical definition of graphic designers, and what makes up the current descriptions of graphic designers? The current conception of graphic designers as a culture of creative workers is understandably vague, given that design as work has been defined as the “conception and planning of all products made by human beings.” (Margolin p.x)¹⁰ And so, with the hope of narrowing down this broad category of creative workers, I offer a statistical definition of the design work force.

When I describe graphic designers, I am specifically referring to the creative workers that plan, evaluate and create visual solutions for the communication problems of their clients. Using a variety of analog and digital media, graphic designers create fonts, images, magazines, newspapers, journals, annual reports, publications, promotional displays and marketing material, logos, signs and signage systems, web pages, computer interfaces, and multimedia projects. According to the occupational description offered by the Bureau of Labour Statistics in the United States, designers are “people with a desire

¹⁰ Margolin is, in this specific quote, describing all forms of design, including product and industrial design but I believe that his thoughts are in keeping with the broad and vague popular understanding of graphic design work.

to create. They consider cognitive, cultural, physical, and social factors in planning and executing designs appropriate for a given context.” (Occupational Outlook Handbook 2004-05) In the United States, there were approximately half a million designers in 2002, 212,000 of whom were graphic designers (of which one third were self employed, nearly five times the proportion for other occupations) (Occupational Outlook Handbook 2004-05). Every year, over 200 schools in the US, and over 30 in Canada, graduate new graphic designers; not surprisingly, it is anticipated that the numbers of graphic designers in the work place are expected to grow exponentially in the near future (National Survey of Graphic Design Salaries and Billing Practices 2003).¹¹ On average, graphic designers earn between \$25 000 CAD and \$93 000 CAD annually (depending on experience and job classification). According to a 2003 survey, 94% of Canadian graphic designers work full-time, 51% have formal training in design at the post-secondary level and 28% of graphic designers have been in the industry less than five years (National Survey of Graphic Design Salaries and Billing Practices 2003).¹²

The study of graphic design/designers suffers from a low level of visibility outside of the “insular” audience of graphic designers (Soar 2000). Yet Heller raises an interesting point about the omnipresence of design work, and the lack of critical discussion, or even general understandings of the culture of graphic design production (Heller 1997). Graphic design is indeed widely seen: it forms the majority of the

¹¹ In Canada, a Bachelor’s degree in Visual Communication design is presently only offered by the University of Alberta. Most colleges offer a diploma in graphic design, and graphic/visual communications studies have been integrated into the curriculum at many universities. The Ontario College of Art and Design, The Alberta College of Art and Design, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design offer elite programs for design education in Ontario, Alberta and Nova Scotia respectively.

mediated communications that we consume every day. It is not, however, widely heard. The emerging field of Design Studies – critical writings about design by, and for the most part directed towards, practicing graphic designers and design educators – provides one of the only spaces of discussion about this ever-present and yet unseen community [Blauvelt (1994), Margolin (1994), Crafton Smith (1994), Beirut *et al.* (1994,1997,1999, 2002), Soar (2000, 2002)]. The notion of Design Studies as a discipline originates with design historian Victor Margolin, who describes the field of Design Studies as:

That field of inquiry which addresses questions of how we make and use products in our daily lives and how we have done so in the past [...] Design Studies encompasses issues of product conception, and planning, production, form, distribution, and use. It considers these topics in the present as well as in the past. Along with products, it also embraces the web of discourse in which production and use are embedded. (Margolin 115)

For an “unheard” community (a reference to the slow emergence of Design Studies as a critical/theoretical voice outside its own boundaries), designers produce an enormous amount of print and web-based publications about their work and world. Soar has argued that the work created by designers is in reality, meant for an audience of peers, with the public target market as a secondary consideration. He explains that “[...] the primary audience the intermediaries have in mind is their peers, such that the increasingly professionalized discourse of visual communication designers, for example, is *about* design and designers *for the sake of* design and designers” (Soar 41).

Descriptions of graphic design (and graphic designers) generated by, and

¹² AQUENT is a national talent/placement agency that regularly conducts salary surveys of creative industries such as graphic design. The Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario (RGD) is a provincial branch of the Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC).

circulating between, practicing members of the design community, present three distinct imaginings of graphic design. Each of these theorizations of graphic design developed at a particular moment in history, and each co-exists within the broader definition of graphic design practice today. As design theorist Richard Buchanan explains:

Design began as a trade activity, closely connected to industrialization and the emergence of mass communication. After a period of time, professions began to emerge, with traditions of practice and conscious recognition of a distinct type of thinking and working that distinguished our professions from others. Professional practice diversified in many forms— in a process that continues to the present. However, we are now witnessing the beginnings of the third era of design, marked by the emergence of design as a field or discipline. (Buchanan 64)

These three conceptions of graphic design (as a trade, profession, and field) that categorize current understandings of graphic designers and the work they do. For my own work, it is the literature from within Design Studies that engages with design as a field or discipline that I have found to be the most helpful as I try to build a framework for my understanding of graphic designers and graphic design practice. Though in this literature review I focus on from literature engaging with the discipline, or as Gunnar Swanson defines it, the “liberal art” (Swanson 1994) of graphic design, I recognize there exist dozens of other publications and books describing design as trade (guides on techniques and tools/software), and as profession (magazines such as Communication Arts, Eye, Print, Wallpaper, How and ID) which provide spaces for discussions about the business and craft of graphic design (Bailey 2000, Soar 2002). As Soar has noted, the majority of these design magazines give the “appearance of comprehensive coverage” while pursuing interchangeable editorial agendas, reducing the impact of the volume of independent publications on the design community (Soar 2002). That said, these publications are an important contribution to the discourse of graphic design as they

make up what can be argued as the loudest voice within the larger chorus of Design Studies.

Works produced by, and for, the graphic design community inform not only my scholarly understanding of graphic designers and their practice, but also serves to educate both new and experienced members of the graphic design community about their own cultural community and professional environments. Through these publications graphic designers are exposed to examples of the practice of their colleagues, both local and international.¹³ Contributing to this discourse are the constantly updated discussion blogs and websites hosting debates about the professional role and social responsibilities of designers, as well as interactions around more practical concerns of technique and skills. Popular examples of online spaces for designers to discuss their practice and to publicize their work include www.surfstn.lu, www.designobserver.com, www.k10k.net and www.underconsideration.com/speakup. The practice and public work of designers is also exposed through promotional websites, awards annuals, online portfolios and design competitions, forums through which designers are exposed to some of the best practices of their colleagues, both local and international. According to Soar, the creation of this self-promotional works allows for a “ [...] discursive space [...] that can support and even sustain a variety of themes, some of them trivial, others of them poignant or culturally and politically informed. It is also a resolutely insular space that remains, for the most part, hidden from public scrutiny- but is, in no small degree, the lifeblood of the visual communication design community” (Soar 49).

¹³ The most commonly referenced example of these highly valued periodicals is Communication Arts which provides a graphic design, illustration and interaction design annual every year.

Theoretical and technical discussions about design work continues on both bookstore and designers' bookshelves in the form of tomes describing the work of any number of legendary design firms, including accounts of the field of graphic design presenting a studio in full "presentation mode" (Flemming 31), featuring idealized views of the work done within a studio space and disguising more mundane aspects of design practice from the public.¹⁴ Celebrated recent examples include Bruce Mau's Lifestyle (2000), Stefan Sagmeister's Made You Look (2001), Tibor Kalman's Perverse Optimist (2000), and Tolleson Design's spinrinsewashsoak (1999).¹⁵ These works combine to describe graphic design as "a form of aesthetic expression, communication, persuasion, information management, problem-solving or as a vehicle for social responsibility and/or political activism" (Smith 300).

The majority of work describing graphic design is done through an analysis of the final production, be it a printed magazine, book, communication campaign, product package, signage, branding, web or interactive work, and not through an analysis of the living practice of graphic designers. In fact, entire anthologies of design work, stating a focus on Design Studies more generally concentrate only on what rhetorician and design theorist David Flemming calls "the impenetrable artifact" (Flemming 41).¹⁶ This engagement with product (design as noun), as opposed to with the process of design (design as verb), leaves a void within the critical discourse of Design Studies.

¹⁴ Further discussion of the presentation of design studios in "presentation mode" can be found in Design Talk: Designing the Object in Studio Conversations (Flemming 1988).

¹⁵ A further discussion of the role of self-published, self-authored, monographic retrospectives of studio work by graphic designers can be found in Rick Poynor's Battle of the Big Books (2001).

¹⁶ Consideration of this issue can be found in Margolin 1989, 1994, Bush 1994, Blauvelt 1994, Lupton 1994).

Consequently, most of the work produced about the graphic design community takes a textualized view of design, and frames the individual designer as creator of a predestined and idealized design solution. This textual/object oriented focus within Design Studies then “underplays the significance of the complex processes which allow for the production of both designers and design artifacts”, denying “the complexity surrounding the circumstances in which such artifacts are distributed, received and/or consumed in and through various segments of society, and increasingly, societies” (Blauvelt 208).

This focus on the textualized artifact is also present in many existing analysis of the profession of graphic design. Categorizing design works by their celebrated creator, or the aesthetic movement from which they originated, denies the role of the situated individual designer and creates an understanding of graphic design as the product of inspiration, not practice [Buchanan (1992), Swanson (1994), Winkler (1994)]. As historian John Walker notes in his work Design History and the History of Design (1989):

The bulk of literature on design consists of “partial” studies in the sense that there are books on designers, products, styles, design education etc., but what is lacking is a general account of how all of these specific studies interrelate and, taken together, constitute a coherent totality. (Walker 68-73, qtd. in Blauvelt 1994)

For this reason, though I find many of these studies of textualized artifacts to be relevant, few are helpful for this particular research work. To better define the daily practice of graphic designers, I turn instead to critical writings about design which focus on the social and cultural role of the graphic designer. At this point in time, it is primarily these

contributions which guide the tone and content of graphic design conferences and annuals.¹⁷

Publications such as the three-part edition of Visible Language (Issue 28.3 Critiques, Issue 28.4 Practices, and Issue 29.1 Interpretations), and the four Looking Closer anthologies (collections of articles focusing on design criticism, edited by design icons Michael Beirut, Steven Heller, William Drenttel, Rick Poynor, and Jessica Helfand) have, in recent years, provided a space for investigations into what Andrew Blauvelt terms design's "discursive spaces," emphasizing the:

[...] opacity and complexity of relationships which allow for the production of graphic design and graphic designers, the understanding of the performative effects of such production, a critical understanding of the role of the subject (designer and audience)[...] (Blauvelt 215)

These contributions create an understanding of the "cultural activity of graphic design as one rooted in particular social practices"(Blauvelt 215). This genre of writing, to which the vast majority of contributors are practicing graphic designers, then serves as an academic forum, comparable with fields of film, art and literary criticism, exerting an influence not found in the "journalistic criticism" of professional design magazines (Poynor 57, qtd. in Soar 2002). The impact of this new focus on design criticism within Design Studies can be felt in the themes of recent American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC) conferences, notably the 2000 AIGA Collision conference, examining issues of convergence, the 2001 AIGA Looking Closer design education conference, the 2003 AIGA Power of Design conference, billed as a

¹⁷ For a further discussion on the growth of design criticism in the 1990's, see Building Bridges Between Theory and Practice (Rick Poynor 1994).

summit for the exploration of sustainable design practice, and the DesignThinkers conference series (2000-2005) held by the GDC. What still remains unseen from this angle, however, is the more typical daily creative work of the graphic designer as a specific type of creative worker, engaged in a specific type of cultural production.

Using both statistical information about the industry of graphic design, and works created by graphic designers, allows me to more clearly define graphic designers and their practice. That said, to provide a stronger framework for a descriptive study of graphic design practice, it's also important to define how creative workers and cultural producers (using the broader Cultural Studies definition into which designers fall) are understood, and to take a closer look at cultural theory dealing with emerging conceptions of this specific class of creative workers [Bourdieu (1984), Johnson (1987), Henderson (1990), (1995), (1999), Lutz & Collins (1993), Bogart (1995), Jobling & Crowley (1996), McRobbie (1996, 1998), Dornfeld (1998), Soar (2000, 2002), Negus (2002)].¹⁸ How can my definition of what constitutes graphic designers and their practice be informed by understandings of creative workers at a more general level? Bourdieu's concept of the "cultural intermediary" (1984), and Reich's understanding of the "symbolic analyst" (1993) are both helpful in this way.

From within cultural theory, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "cultural intermediary" (Bourdieu 359) presents itself as a lens for viewing the graphic designer as socially positioned practitioner. In his work Distinction: a Social Critique of the

¹⁸ I address the field of Cultural Studies here, as it is from this tradition that I take my focus on representation beyond the single text, with an understanding of culture as lived traditions and practices (Hall 1980, Grossberg et al., 1992).

Judgment of Taste (1984), Bourdieu analyses quantitative and qualitative data collected about the taste and class divisions present in postwar France to define a new social class.

He names this new social class the “cultural intermediaries”, a group that:

[...] comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decorating and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services. (Bourdieu 359)

By proposing this new working and social class, Bourdieu provides terminology to describe the social positioning of workers dealing in creation of symbolic or abstract goods (such as graphic designers).¹⁹ This allows for an understanding of a new cultural hierarchy, one that includes this subsection of creative workers defined by their non-participation in the categories of business or art. To paraphrase Bourdieu, this class of workers is defined not only by their dealings in abstract, symbolic non-goods, but also by the inherent sense of personal ambiguity which arises from their occupation of a position between the romantic imaginings of their occupation, and the less attractive realities of their daily practice (359).²⁰

Bourdieu’s term “cultural intermediary” has been applied to many groups of workers by theorists with diverse areas of study. Angela McRobbie and Lise Skov both use it to define fashion designers in their works (1998, 2002 respectively). Liz McFall

¹⁹ In his essay “The Work of Cultural Intermediaries and the Enduring Distance Between Production and Consumption” (2002), Negus describes cultural intermediaries not only as the new service or knowledge class, but as workers who act as a *liaison* between consumers and creatives (as in his specific case of record executives). An understanding of the graphic designer as *liaison* is complicated by their dual positioning as both articulator of the production of the creative class with the consuming public, and as producing member of the creative class itself, but the concept of the liaison/gatekeeper serves well to illuminate an important part of their practice (Negus 510).

²⁰ This negotiation is closely felt by the graphic designer, as Natalia Ilyin describes in the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design: “We need to feel that what we create is individual specific, and inspired. But we need to be individual, specific and inspired in a way that does not get knocked down at marketing meetings. We chafe at the restrictions of client, budget, and lack of vision, but without these restrictions we are not designers. We need to speak the language of design (that confluence of influences, one-upmanships, and radical egalitarianism), but we cannot afford to look as though we

uses the term to describe advertising producers (2002), Soar to describe ad creatives and graphic designers (2000, 2002), and Keith Negus to describe record producers in the music industry (2002).

Expanding the category within which I am fitting graphic designers to include the broader understanding of the cultural intermediary (Bourdieu 1984) provides me with a way to position the graphic designer as a member of a specific class of worker, and as a practitioner of a specific type of work: that of mediating the relationship the consuming public has with a product (abstract and symbolic or tangible and consumable), an idea or an event. This definition of the graphic designer as cultural intermediary is currently the most prominent in a long list of categorizations. Graphic designers historically have also been labeled as members of the “cultural mass” (Bell 1976), as “new cultural intermediaries”, “cultural specialists”, “symbolic specialists”, “new tastemakers” (Featherstone 1991), “new petit bourgeoisie” (Bourdieu 1984), “the service class” (Lash and Urry 1987), “creatives” (Florida 2004), and “elite communicators” (Marchand 1985) (list adapted from Soar 2002).

The second description of creative workers from within the field of Cultural Studies that I find helpful for an expanded definition of graphic designers as cultural producers is Reich’s understanding of the “symbolic analyst,” a definition of which I feel adds to an understanding of the creative cultural worker within contemporary society. In The Work of Nations (1993), Reich defines ‘symbolic analysts’ as those who:

care about speaking it too fluently.” (Ilyin 38)

[...] solve, identify and broker problems by manipulating symbols. They simplify reality into abstract images that can be rearranged, juggled, experimented with, communicated to other specialists, and then, eventually, transformed back into reality. (Reich 178)

According to Reich, these manipulations may be done with many different tools, of which symbolic knowledge is only one (thus allowing for an inclusion of mathematical, legal, scientific and financial knowledge into the tool kit of the graphic designer). The symbolic analyst is one who is able to work using symbols or symbolic knowledge to solve a problem, a definition that positions creative work as a cognitive function.

This definition of the work of the cultural producer helps us to better understand the graphic designer more broadly as one who creates (and not just one who is creative), but brings with it a series of complications. Though the definition of the symbolic analyst can be used to understand how designers manipulate and employ symbols (collected through highly valued acts of consumption, as described by Soar in his work of 2002), defining graphic designers as symbolic analysts limits the work of cultural producers to a cognitive function, disregarding the affective side of this economic activity and affording no room for the ways in which graphic designers work using the ambiguity of symbols. More specifically, by using only the term *symbolic analyst* to define the graphic designer, I limit my understanding of the ways that designers use the ambiguity of symbolic components as an impetus for creative risks and as a way to encode multiple and layered meanings. That said, I find Reich's focus on the cognitive work associated with abstract knowledge to be a helpful addition to an attempted description of graphic design practice.

Practice

Using Bourdieu and Reich to describe creative workers in general allows me to illuminate graphic designers from above, positioning them within a social and class context and within the larger scope of the industry of cultural production. Reframing graphic designers as not only as those workers who use analog and digital media to create visual solutions for their client's communication needs, but as cultural intermediaries and symbolic analysts more generally, leads me to examine what work is being done to better understand cultures of creative workers. How are creative workers (in general) studied, and how can these studies of creative workers provide better terminology for my analysis of the practice of graphic designers? Before examining the work that informs my thinking about creative practice, it is important to unpack the concept of practice more generally, using three terms that I employ throughout the following chapters: "occupational formulae" (Negus 510), "routines of practice" (Ettema 91), and "technology" (Franklin, 1990).

In my examination of the *practice* of graphic design, I am more specifically looking at the *technologies* at work within design practice. By using the term technology here, I refer to both the constantly updated computers and scanners that make up so much of the physical space of the design studio and to Ursula Franklin's definition of technology as a system, entailing "far more than its individual material components. Technology involves organization, procedures, symbols, new words, equations and most

of all, a mindset.” (Franklin 12)²¹ Within the larger category of technologies of work, as I write about graphic designers and their practice, I will often refer to Negus’ “occupational formulae” (Negus 510), and Ettema’s “routines of production.” (Ettema 91)

The first of these two specific technologies of work, the “occupational formulae” (Negus 510) provides, for us, a way of understanding creative practice as a series of repeated and formulaic steps within work. In his examination of the working practices of music producers (Negus 2002), Negus draws attention to “the habitual, un-reflexive and uncritical adherence to well-established production and occupational formulae” (Negus 510) as a way that cultural intermediaries are able to make creative work while staying on budget and schedule. As Negus outlines:

[...] symbolic material is constructed as a result of very well-established routines that require little effort of sourcing (updating old stories, re-writing old songs, re-packaging old programs or novels). Such routines make working life easier (enabling workers to deal with the pressure of time, deadlines and production schedules-- to keep the presses rolling or the manufacturing plant running). These routines also introduce a sense of certainty or predictability into the process, encouraging the adherence to formulas and patterns of working that have proved successful in the past. (Negus 510)

I use the term “occupational formula” (Negus 510) to describe the systematically determined work practices of graphic designers in conjunction with a similar term offered by Ettema: the “routines of production” (Ettema 91). In their analysis of the work practices of television producers, Ettema offers the term “routines of production” as a description of the shortcuts or corporate habits that “energize the producer’s creative

²¹ Much writing has been done on conceptions of *practice* and *technology*. For a further discussion, see DeCerteau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984), Lastsra (*Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, 2000), Franklin (*The*

abilities” (Ettema and Whitney 47). Ettema builds here on the work of Hirsch (1977) and White (1950), who explain that what we commonly understand as individual creative input is often the result of a production routine. These routines of production, according to Ettema, serve to create a perspective in the creative workplace that is conducive to doing the specific tasks at hand, to create organizational vocabulary and to socialize new recruits to the workplace. Stuart Hall makes reference to a similar phenomenon, identifying the “social practices” of production in his work The Determinations of News Photographs (1972), explaining that “the ritual practices of news production” are “the actual routines by which the ‘labour’ of signification is ordered and regulated.” (Hall 1972 qtd Soar 2002).²²

By employing the terms “occupational formulae” (Negus 510), “routines of production” (Ettema 91) and “social practices” (Hall 1972), I am better able to specify the technologies of practice that I want to focus on in this study, namely the daily work practices of designers and the routine ways that designers address, and interact with, their audience. Given these narrower concepts, how can I understand practice as a more general category?

Current understandings of creative practice are largely informed by the growing field of Cultural Economy [or the study of the ways in which economics are performed and enacted by the very discourses of which they are supposedly the cause (duGay, 2002)]. Within this field of study, several influential ethnographic studies of creative

Real World of Technology. CBC Massey Lecture Series, 1990), Hacker (Pleasure, Power and Technology, (1989)

workplaces have recently appeared. Examples include Henderson (1990, 1995, 1999), Lutz & Collins (1993), Du Gay & Pryke (2002), McRobbie (1996, 1998), and Negus (2002). Several of these studies from the field of Cultural Economy take as their focus the culture of design and advertising. Examples include Crafton Smith (1994), Mort (1996), Du Gay (1996, 1997), Nixon (1997), and Soar (2000, 2002). Taken together, these works create a very general overview of the state of ethnographic research exploring the field of Cultural Economy, and for our purposes, create a map of types of ethnographic and case study work done within the broadly defined category of cultural intermediaries. Creative practice and creative practitioners are understood slightly differently in each of these works, and with that in mind, it is the studies of Dornfeld (1998) and Lutz and Collins (1993) that significantly impact my own examination of the work practice of graphic designers. I examine these two studies specifically for their focus on the habitual “routines of production” (Ettema 91) present in two types of creative work-place culture.

In his ethnographic research Producing Public Culture (1998), Dornfeld examines the frameworks of practice within creative industries, illustrating the socially grounded practices which come to define the production of public television documentary makers. Dornfeld frames producers of public television as a grouping of consumers, though with a unique stake, moving in and out of the position of surrogate audience as needed. Taking an ethnographic approach to the study of this particular type of workspace (that of the production offices), and this particular type of work (the producing of a television

²² For a more in depth discussion of Hall’s understanding of routines of practice, see Soar, Encoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising Production (2000).

documentary for the Public Broadcasting Service of America about childhood development and family situations), Dornfeld explores the ways that practitioners theorize their own practice, and the ways that their cultural production is shaped by its context. Dornfeld raises issues of how we understand the active, interpreting producer as active, interpreting agent, and how producers are engaged in negotiating issues of authorship, identity, interpretation and authority. Most importantly, Dornfeld discusses the role of audience within creative production, outlining the ways in which creative producers evaluate their work using proxy membership in various audience groups (Dornfeld 66).

While Dornfeld focuses on ways in which producers' ideologies and projection of audience affect their encoding process, creating constrained readings of their work, Lutz and Collins [in their work Reading National Geographic (1993)] use a similar methodology to examine the structuring practices and ideologies of a corporate entity, examining how the corporate ideology of National Geographic guides the "looking practices" of photographers employed there (Lutz and Collins 14). Through an examination of the site of production, and extensive interview work with individual photographers, Lutz and Collins examine the influence of a site of production on the creation practices of supposedly objective photographers. By framing the site of production (or rather, the ever-present ideology of the site of production) as a one of the eyes, as it were, behind the lens, Lutz and Collins are able to use their workplace ethnography to illuminate the encoding practice of photographers. Lutz and Collins do not argue that workplace ideology determines the type of photography created for the

magazine, but rather that through the structure of the workplace, the intent of the photographer is often subverted or rendered less valuable:

Producing pictures, captions and layout is a social and creative act in which negotiation and unacknowledged struggle result in the ultimate artifact, rather than a singular plan deliberately followed through. (Lutz and Collins 12)

Similarly to Dornfeld's work on public television production practices, Lutz and Collins provide a perspective on the ways in which individual acts of production can be linked to a social context. What I find most informative for my own work is their application of the dual concepts of *charge* and *brief* which they use to separate that which defines the intentions of the producer from the projected expectations of the client (Lutz and Collins 53). I mention this point specifically here, as it is this definition of brief and charge that I will be examining later on in this research project.

These two analyses of structures of creative production, though general in their references for a study of graphic design workplaces, both draw attention to a key term in my own research work: *encoding*. In examining the work culture of graphic designers, I am attempting to examine production practices that make up the creative output of this group of workers. In his work "Encoding/Decoding" (1980), Stuart Hall provides a way of working through the productive practices of designers, describing the communication of information through mass communication not as a straight line between sender, message and receiver, but rather as a series of articulations, or intersections, between spheres of production, circulation, distribution, consumption and reception.²³ According

²³ A limiting structure in the analysis of cultural production is the ever-present dichotomy between production and reception. This dichotomy between production and reception was, historically, served by a use of conduit and

to Hall, this process is completed through the transformation of produced information into social practices by decoders (in the case of the production of graphic design, by the audience or target market). In this model, a specific audience removed from the culture of production is held as the primary understanding of “decoders”. Hall holds two events within the communication of information to be determinate: moments of encoding and moments of decoding. It is the moments of encoding, or the encoding work of the graphic designer (using Hall’s terminology) that I am focusing on here in this research project, and it is primarily practices of encoding to which I refer when I discuss the practice of graphic design production. Using the two determinate moments of encoding and decoding, Hall explains degrees of understanding and misunderstanding of messages as degrees of symmetry within the process of media production and consumption – relationships of equivalency between the positions of the ‘personifications’ of encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. (Hall 1980) The natural lack of symmetry between the personifications of encoder and decoder allows for a diversity of response to media texts, multiple readings that, while never individual and private, are simultaneously possible, defined by the social situation of receivers. Hall’s terminology of encoding-producing and decoding-receiving, provides language to explore the work designers do to minimize the un-balanced and asymmetrical nature of their relationship with their audience, the ways in which they invoke the actively decoding audiences within their work practice, and the ways in which the relationships between encoding and decoding within the specific work of the designer complicate our understanding of the production process. Chapter four of this thesis is an examination of methods which designers use to minimize

transmission metaphors of communication. For further discussion of these models of communication, see Shanon & Weaver (1949), Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Reddy (1979), and Carey (1989).

the asymmetrical relationship they have with their remote audience groups. Throughout this research work, I use Hall's notion of encoding/decoding at a micro level, examining the ways that the graphic designers engage in small encoding/decoding couplets throughout their practice, often taking on the role of both encoder and decoder (Hall 1980).

Audience

In the following chapters, I describe the graphic designer as both encoder and decoder. To do this, I am working from a model that highlights the designer as both producer and audience member, both essential positions within their work. As has been explored in McRobbie's work on fashion designers (1998), Bourdieu and Featherstone's description of the work of 'cultural intermediaries' (1984, 1991 respectively) and Soar's examination of the working practices and social position of graphic designers and advertising industry creatives (2000), producers of culture enter into their practice as members of many distinct audience groups, and carry with them the conditions of their own social world into the encoding process. Bourdieu, for example, explains that works created by cultural intermediaries:

[...] both in style and content [...] bear the marks of their authors' socially-constituted dispositions (that is, their social origins, retranslated as a function of the positions in the field of production which these dispositions played a large part in determining). (Bourdieu 20)

With this conditioning, the designers approach the creation of design work, or rather the encoding process, with a specialized and specifically cultivated view of the world, influenced by their social standing, family and leisure life, interests and upbringing. As

an elaboration on this point, Soar, in his work Encoding Advertisements, Ideology and Meaning in Cultural Production (2000), makes the argument that cultural producers, a category which includes graphic designers, exist not only as members of larger communities of audiences, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as members of what he calls “an autonomous, or self addressing entity.” (Soar 431) They are an audience unto themselves; the elite consumers of their own productions. In this aspect, creative producers become members of what Soar proposes as a short circuit within Johnson’s larger circuit of culture (Johnson 1986/1987), channeling cultural capital to cultural intermediaries in a sped-up cycle of consumption and production long before it arrives within the sphere of the public at large. Soar’s conception of the short circuit of production allows us to position the cultural intermediary not only as a member of a singular audience determined by their demographic position, but as occupants of several audience groupings at once, and most importantly, as members of an elite audience of cultural producers and consumers. With Soar’s (2000) short circuit model in mind, we can then re-frame audience membership as a tool of creative production, adding this tool to the ability of designers to reframe themselves as surrogate audience members for the purposes of what Smith calls the *evaluative feedback loop* (Smith 45).

By presenting cultural intermediaries as both encoders and decoders within a cycle of culture, Soar opens the discussion to an exploration of the ways that remote audiences/decoders (*i.e.*, those not occupying the dual role of encoder and decoder) are integrated into encoding practice. By more clearly defining the practice of graphic designers as, in part, a practice of encoding (Hall 1980), we can position the graphic

designer as distinct from their decoding “audience”. An understanding of *audience* as an issue and as a term is an essential part of our theoretical framework, as it is the role of audience in the development of design solutions that forms one of my primary points of focus in this research work. I have adopted Winkler’s term “end-user” (Winkler 133) throughout the following chapters to refer to what Hall calls “readers” and other reception studies refer to as audience or viewer. I chose this term to position all other parts of the communication circuit as producing agents. The term “reader” is commonly used in Cultural Studies to suggest a pro-active response to cultural products. I will use the term *end-user* in the following chapters to address a wider variety of potential responses to designed texts.

The practice of decoding, and the work of audiences, has been thoroughly examined over the last 20 years. Developments of qualitative research methods aided by ethnographically oriented approaches have offered many new insights into the reception process for both the humanities and social sciences. For example, Janice Radway’s study of female romance readers (Radway 1991) and David Morley’s study of the British Nationwide audience (Morley 1980) both drew upon the assumption that reception was a situated phenomenon. In his ethnographic research, Morley suggests that a focus now be placed on “the economic, political, and ideological forces acting on the construction of texts” (Morley 15) as a way to better understand their reception, a suggestion that has been carried through in the active-audience studies of Ien Ang (1991). Audience analysis now includes the study of reception as a facet of everyday life, and as an integral cultural practice, with an understanding that to be “active” as an audience is not necessarily to be

“powerful” (Ang 100). However, a primary focus on audience reception/decoding work leaves us with, as Dornfeld defines it, “a shallow view of texts that arrive in the home pre-encoded with the dominant ideology of an institution or class segment, awaiting decoding by the subjected or oppositional viewer” (Dornfeld 16).

What is missing from these sources of audience research literature is an understanding of multiple and simultaneous audiences within the encoding/decoding relationship. Dornfeld makes reference to the various users within the evaluative system of creative work (Dornfeld 1993), and Smith refers to “proxy audience membership”, again for the purposes of evaluation (Smith 45), which are both key to my understanding of audiences within creative work. But it is a study of country music songwriting practices that I find most helpful for expanding my understanding of the role of audience groups within creative production. In their work The Product Image: The Fate of Creativity in Country Music Song Writing (1982), Ryan and Peterson present the concept of the “product image” system of creative production, whereby the creation of a single product is divided into a series of smaller products, each with a separate and equally important target audience in mind. Each of these stages then represents a product image: a defined imagining or set of expectations generated by a particular audience group. By presenting a way to talk about graphic design as the making of a series of products, Ryan and Peterson open a dialogue about multiple and simultaneous audience groups that is unexplored in other Cultural Studies literature.

Even with the benefit of Ryan’s and Peterson’s insights, an understanding of

audience members as participants in the process of communicative exchange does not, in itself, constitute an understanding of the audience. Despite a focus on the role of the audience and on audience reception within critical and cultural theory, graphic designers as practitioners and theorists have not yet begun to focus on audience reception to graphic design work (Lupton & Miller 1996). Writings on audience reception from within Design Studies often focuses instead on usability and legibility issues, invoking the audience as a tool only for pragmatic aesthetic critique. This lack of research on the decoding practices of audiences from within Design Studies is perhaps indicative of debates about the role of research in design more generally [Dishman (2002), Rhea (2003), Laurel (2003), Ireland (2003), Geertz (1973), McDaniel Johnson (2003)].

In Elicitation Methods in Experimental Design Research (1999), Strickler outlines the general lack of focus on background audience research as a design practice stating that:

[...] within our field, the term “design research” has meant the (usually brief) literature and visual reference search performed by design practitioners as they learn about subjects related to a client’s product and services. Remarkably, questions regarding how an end user might interpret, interact with, and act on designed communication objects generally have been presumed to be addressed adequately by the designer’s intuition. (Strickler 28)

By describing the practice of design research as “information gathering, sometimes information synthesis, but rarely as the testing of conceptual models, or the testing and application of data from findings in sociology or psychology” (Winkler 133), Winkler addresses the main debate surrounding design research, and by extension, designer’s understandings of their audience. Frances.C. Butler echoes this description of the production of graphic design as a practice conducted in the absence of any research about

the audience: “[...] not only are there no tools for audience evaluation or participation in graphic design, but also designers decry the invasion of academic carpet-baggers who are likely to interest themselves in audience assessment” (Butler 158).

Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to situate my research within literature from the fields of Cultural, Media and Design Studies. I began with a definition of the graphic designer as worker, and of the graphic design industry, employing work from Design Studies and invoking the self descriptive work of graphic designers to narrow my definition of what, exactly, we understand graphic designers to be. By examining what Poynor outlines as the twin fields of *design journalism* and *design critique* (Poynor 1995), I have attempted to outline the wealth of contributions arising from within the graphic design community. Understanding the readily accessible (though arguably exclusive) discussions of design as trade, profession and field allows us to better understand points of debate within Design Studies. An overview of the work produced within the field of graphic design allows us to observe the silences within the discussion – specifically the lack of focus on the daily practice of the individual, subjectively-positioned graphic designer. I then explored that definition using the work of Bourdieu and Reich to define what it is that I mean by cultural producer when I use the term to describe graphic designers. Next, I explored an understanding of the work of graphic design as a practice of encoding which provides a helpful starting point for a more general discussion of graphic design as a practice, as does an overview of the research surrounding audience work and analysis. Throughout this chapter, I invoked

ethnographic studies from within the field of Cultural Studies to inform my understanding of creative work practice. Though much larger in scale, these works allow me to orient myself within a discussion about the role of ethnography in the examination of spaces and practices of production, as well as the practices of production of individual workers.

With this review of relevant literature as a foundation, I will now move on to a description of my own observations of the cultural practice of graphic design work in a specific social context of production: the downtown Toronto design studios of Spencer Francey Peters.

Chapter Two

Structures and Spaces of Design Production: The Design Studio

In order to better explore the roles occupied by graphic designers within the circuit of culture, and how it is that designers exercise agency within their creative process, I traveled to Toronto to observe graphic designers during their daily practice over the course of a week in March 2005. This chapter takes as its focus those observations as well as discussions I had with the staff of Spencer Francey Peters (SFP), a design and branding studio in downtown Toronto. With an excellent reputation for corporate branding work and a 40-person account management and design team, SFP has won national acclaim for its large-scale corporate identity, interior way-finding and signage, brochure/ newsletter/ annual report/ magazine, packaging and presentation design work for international and national clients.²⁴

During my time at SFP, I had the chance to informally interview account executives and directors with a wide range of experience in the design industry, and to review internal work guidelines published by SFP. Most importantly, my resident week at SFP was a chance to observe the creative methodology of graphic designers during meetings, discussions and daily practice. My aim was to develop an idea of the conditions within which the graphic designer as a cultural subject works, and to better

²⁴ SFP clients include such brands as Laura Secord, Canada Post, TransCanada, Second Cup, the Royal Ontario Museum, Imax, Blacks, the province of Ontario, Four Seasons and Imperial Oil/Esso.

understand how those structural conditions impact the type of work designers do and the processes they undergo.

I had hoped that the studio I was walking into would be filled with discussions of performance and audience, and that I would leave with a better understanding of how designers perform the audience to which they are speaking in order to conjure up the right language for an effective conversation. Arriving on a Monday to a silent office, filled with a staff of designers working away under headphones on their individual tasks, I realized quickly that I would have to approach the issue of creative work, and self-reflection about that creative work, much differently than I originally planned. The patterns of work practice I observed at SFP raised questions for me about how the creative decision chain works within a large organization such as SFP, how the designer works within a prescribed system of creative production, and how the graphic designers position themselves in relation to multiple audiences throughout the life of a project.

A Brief History of Spencer Francey Peters

As Jeanette Hanna explains in a 25-year retrospective promotional package released by SFP:

[...] Spencer Francey Peters has a well-established national and international client base, and a diversified portfolio of services including brand strategy, naming and identity, communications design and digital media services, that continue to evolve to meet the needs of the changing market. Many of its accounts are household names in Canada including the ROM and Scotia Bank. (Spencer Francey Peters Celebrates 25 Years of Connecting the Dots)

SFP is 25 years old. It has grown within the Toronto market from a team of two graphic designers specializing in rock show promotion, and creating work for local bands and magazines (as SlickBros, 1972-1977), to a larger studio serving cultural and commercial clientele (FiftyFingers, 1977-1986), all the while maintaining a core creative team and increasing their pool of designers. In 1982, FiftyFingers was incorporated as the Spencer Francey Group, initiating a specialization in corporate communications, and coming to the attention of the international design community through awards from Time Magazine and design trades.²⁵ During the 1990s the Spencer Francey Group continued to expand, opening offices in Ottawa and San Francisco, and moving into the new field of computer-aided design. In 1990, the Spencer Francey Group was bought and merged with a British design group (Michael Peters Design), and became Spencer Francey Peters, taking on international accounts such as Four Seasons Hotels (a client with whom they continue to do business). In 1995, Spencer Francey Peters partners bought back their company from their British owners, and with continued collaboration with Cundari advertising (also based in Toronto) and partnerships with behind-the-scenes production and programming teams, increased their client base, positioning SFP among the most well-known design firms in Canada.

Members of the internal audience of Spencer Francey Peters

Today, SFP includes a group of nine graphic designers: two to three project directors (senior designers responsible for the design solution from concept to completion, directing the work of junior designers while holding authority over final

²⁵ Awards won by the Spencer Francey Group in this period included a Juno for best album cover art, United Nations Citations and selection as a Harvard Case Study for the work done on Ontario Hydro, and a mention in Time Magazine as having created one of the 10 best designs of the year for 1986 (SFP inc 2004a).

design decisions), three senior designers with extensive expertise and education in the field of design (responsible for creating graphic applications such as collateral material, environmental graphics, books, magazines, corporate identities and branding from concept to completion), and three junior designers (entry-level designers who have been out of school for less than five years, responsible for creating composites, layouts and final art for solutions directed by senior team members).

As I was introduced to the group on the first day, distinctions of expertise were immediately made clear – designers were introduced by their position as well as their name. However, in contrast to experiences that I have had working in and with design firms of different sizes, the distinctions of technical specialization were not immediately made clear. As Clark Spencer (Creative Director) explained while showing me around the office, SFP uses a ‘virtual team’ model where print designers can be called onto an interactive design project team to lend their expertise, and interactive designers can be called to participate with static or print work as well. Working alongside these ‘virtual teams’ of graphic designers are members of the production staff, workers with a design background and specific (highly valued) technical skills who are in charge of proofing and completing design solutions, readying them for final printing and vetting them for problems and errors. These production workers occupy a specific place within the corporate hierarchy of SFP, able to make demands of the designers, and yet uninvolved in the design process until the final proofing stages.

By dividing the work of conception and of execution between the senior and junior designers, control over the final design product is retained by the senior staff, who are then perceived as the brains behind the work, and as the ones who bring coherence to the task at hand. This distribution of tasks, expertise, experience and education within the SFP studio setup is common to successful design firms within Canada.

Though I am focusing in this chapter on the team of graphic designers at SFP, they constitute only one of the divisions of the company. Working alongside the graphic designers in the studio space are the Communications Director, the Interactive Director, and the Creative Directors. This latter group controls general conceptual and stylistic direction for all design projects and assigns individual task loads to the design team, production artists, photographers and other outsourced workers while selecting vendors and retaining final creative authority. Finally, there is the Brand Strategist, who combines business strategy with brand management expertise to ensure the creation of consistent brand experiences relevant to the client's target audience, the development of brand positioning recommendations and definitions of branding personalities, and properly managed market research.

These elite members of the SFP team are involved in every project that comes into the company, and supervise all client design work. On the other side of the office

space, separated by the offices of the creative, communications and interactive directors, sit the account management team, a group of workers with business and marketing experience who act as key contacts between the designers and the clients.²⁶ The account management team is divided into account managers and account executives, and works in close contact with the designers, sitting in on every client meeting and providing guidance and client information in the form of the creative brief and input throughout the creative process.²⁷ This general corporate structure has positioned SFP as “equal parts research and development lab, office and atelier” (Dean Martin, April 1, 2005).

Structures of practice at Spencer Francey Peters

One of the best ways to illustrate the day-to-day practice of graphic designers at SFP is to recount one of the first meetings I observed – a standard planning meeting between a Senior Designer, the Communications Director, the Brand Strategist, and an Account Executive. After the morning routine of discussions of current events and pop-culture over coffee at the foosball table in the kitchen, we gathered in the aptly named X-Height boardroom, at a large roundtable surrounded by dry-erase boards.²⁸ The Brand Strategist and the Account Executive led the meeting, guiding a discussion around

²⁶ The account management team at SFP was entirely female, and was referred to by an Account Executive as “an estrogen environment.” In contrast, the design team at SFP was half male and half female, but was referred to by female staff from both the design team and the account management team as a “testosterone zone”.

²⁷ Account executives at SFP have experience with marketing and public relations, and often have formal educational training in the form of a Bachelor of Commerce. They are most often not graphic designers, and often make reference to their lack of design background as a way to convey a demand for information and work from the designer.

²⁸ X-Height is a reference to a typography measurement: the height of the lower-case letters of a font relative to the uppercase letterforms. The three boardrooms of SFP were similarly named: the largest was labeled *Em Space*, and the smallest was labeled *Ident*. Clients would have seen these design terms clearly on entering these meeting rooms, reinforcing the positioning of the design studio as not just another business environment, but as a space of creative work.

planning for a request-for-proposal made by a long-term hospitality industry client who was introducing a new time-share accommodation service to its established brand.²⁹ The Account Executive had prepared a brief account of the needs of the client: what the design piece must do to instill confidence in the purchase decision, reinforce pride in ownership, and emphasize the client's brand values. The brief included basic limitations at play, as well as the deliverable elements of the design work. The Brand Strategist was on hand to show examples of similar work done for relevant brands, and to guide creative brainstorming, while the Designer and Communications Director worked together under the guidance of Brand Strategist and Account Executive, deferring decision-making and creative veto to them.

I found this striking as it counteracted my assumptions about how the creative process at a major studio would work. I had thought that the creative team would present ideas to the account executives, and yet the design work here was prescribed by the Account Executive, to the Designer, who was tasked with "making it happen." The language of the meeting was at all times informal, reflective of the hierarchy of decision-making, and focused on marketing terms [contemplating the "get" and the "ceremonial value" of the item (Account Executive)] rather than on the design and aesthetic of the

²⁹ A *request for proposal*, or RFP, is part of standard practice at SFP: clients often shop around between design firms by calling for proposals to design problems, and hiring the studio with the best solution. Often the proposal will highlight cost cutting solutions for the client, though during my time observing at SFP I saw several proposals being developed which focused on creativity regardless of unit cost. Participating in this is risky for design studios, as time, budget and resources can easily be lost if the client chooses another firm. This practice is much frowned upon by the Graphic Designers of Canada, as well as by the AIGA.

finished work.³⁰ As the Designer and the Communications Director took notes on the room's white board, the focus of the meeting remained correlated branded experiences, the effect of which the designers were to replicate for this client. In this meeting, as in many others over the next week, the end-user audience was identified only in terms of their brand associations and alliances. As in many other cases designer engagement with the project, and with the client, was dependent on the budget allocated. References were continually made to project work that had been done for the same client years before, which could be repackaged and updated for this particular task, and to designers who, having completed something similar, could offer guidance and suggestions for cost-cutting and time-saving strategies. What I found most interesting in this meeting was that mentions of audience in this meeting were constantly shifting, with "audience" identified at various times as the client, the stakeholders within the client organization, the client's customers, members of other design firms who were also competing for this job, and the internal staff at SFP (specifically the Creative Director). The desires and needs of all these different audiences were a running concern within this meeting, and were often overlapped, or conflated, by the designers. The meeting concluded with the designers leaving to "cook up some magic", to be presented to the internal audience at SFP within the week.

This 45-minute meeting summed up a specific type of design practice in three clear ways. First, the designer in this meeting was tasked by the Brand Strategist and the

³⁰ The "get" and the "ceremonial value" are descriptive terms that attempt to quantify the user experience. The "get" of an object is its social or cultural capital, or the incentive for the end-user to interact with the object. The "ceremonial value" is a measurement of the value of the experience of consumption, or the hidden benefits/ enjoyment experienced

Account Executive with “doing [his] magic”, and with coming up with a solution that would “wow” the client-audience, (with the unspoken assumption that within a different frame of rationalization, the design solution would also serve to impress the multiple audiences of creative directors, brand strategist and the account executive). The assumption was made clear that to create, the designer must be left alone with the pertinent information, and some helpful examples of branded experiences, and left to his individual creative process. The Senior Designer in this case stated that “he would just come up with something that they would like,” referring to the Account Executive and the Brand Strategist as the primary audience at that specific moment. The Senior Designer and the Communications Director were being asked to rationalize their creative decisions entirely differently for each one of the five audiences addressed, and to do so in the absence of any detailed information about who exactly these audience members were.

The second clear point: all end-user information necessary for the designer to produce a solution to the design problem was filtered through the client, the Brand Strategist, and the Account Executive before being passed to the designer in the form of task, or brief.

The third clear observation was that, in contrast to SFP’s promotion of originality and unique solutions for individual clients, the restrictions of budget and of client guidelines tempted the designers at work on the project to rely upon standard and tested solutions, pushing them towards with what Negus calls “the habitual, un-reflexive and

by the user through interaction with the object. In a market of similar competitive products, the “get” and the “ceremonial value” become important factors in customer satisfaction.

uncritical adherence to well established production and occupational formulae” (Negus 510) to create work while staying within budget and on time.³¹ As Negus outlines

[...] symbolic material is constructed as a result of very well established routines that require little effort of sourcing (updating old stories, re-writing old songs, re-packaging old programs or novels). Such routines make working life easier (enabling workers to deal with the pressure of time, deadlines and production schedules-- to keep the presses rolling or the manufacturing plant running). These routines also introduce a sense of certainty or predictability into the process, encouraging the adherence to formulas and patterns of working that have proved successful in the past. (Negus 510)

How, then, does the designer integrate the social context of the design studio into their creative decision-making process? And how does this social context come into play as a tool, rather than as an influence, in the construction of parameters for design solutions? I find that the best model for showing how considerations of the culture of production are employed by designers, is Griswold’s (1987) conception of the *charge* and the *brief*, which she builds from Bandaxall’s (1985) work on the role of intention within artistic work.

Using Griswold’s conception of the *charge*, the initial stage of creative work, the designer is first tasked with “a general and immediate prompt” to act. (Griswold 1987) For graphic designers at SFP, this charge would come in the form of a client request for work, mediated through the account executive and directors of the company. Within this request are the unspoken social and technical expectations entailed in the decision-

³¹ Stuart Hall makes reference to a similar phenomenon, identifying the “social practices” of production in his work The Determinations of News Photographs (1972, qtd, in Soar, 2000), a notion that Ettema examines as well in his analysis of the “routines of production” (Ettema 91).

making process, such as the secondary effects of the design work (a logo, for example, must not only convey the name of the company or product, but also the social position and aspirational values to be associated with the brand). Added to that are the specific tastes to be indulged (those of the client as well as the end-user audience) and the social expectations of the client (their expectations about how the work with which they have tasked SFP will be realized).

After the details of the charge have been established through meetings with the client representatives and a pooling of institutional knowledge about the client as audience (a process which at SFP is handled by both the designer and the account executive), the designer then develops his/her own *brief*. The *brief* is described by Griswold as a structuring of the design problem determined by an analysis of the tasks to be completed (often, at SFP, called “deliverables”), the designer’s socialization within the field of graphic design work (their educational and social training), the naturalized process and expectations which exist as a consequence of the specific context of production (often referred to as the “SFP way of doing things”), which encompass processes as well as the technical constraints and aesthetic conventions guiding the decisions made by the designer (Griswold 1987).³² Griswold’s model thus allows for the

³² One of the first things that I learn about the SFP team, and their practice of creative production, is the importance that is placed on the SFP way of doing things at every stage of the creative process. In reading their promotional material, and in examining such office elements as the art on the walls it is clear that the process at SFP functions as more than a way of doing, it has become a commodified element of creative work which carries value for clients, and which functions as a promotional feature for SFP. Clients are often shown the design space, and are encouraged to explore the library and studio environment. However, the studio is set up in such a way that the more mundane spaces of production (cutting rooms, storage, designer meeting rooms and junior designer’s offices) are kept from view. In this way, SFP stays in presentation mode at all times.

incorporation of the social conditions of the workplace as constraints and guidelines used by creative workers in their practice. Within the designer's process at SFP, these details are compiled, along with the technical details of the client's charge, into a creative brief: a short document used as a technical plan for the execution of the task at hand. However, not all details of the charge and brief are included in this document. Information such as the social expectations of the client, the common analysis or understanding of the end-user audience, the aesthetic conventions for the work to be produced, and the social structures guiding the production are conveyed to the designer through meetings with the client, the account executives, and the social environment of SFP as a place of practice. It is ideally with all of this information, documented and undocumented, that the graphic designer enters into the series of encoding and decoding couplets that constitute design work within a large firm.

The Codified Creative Process: Brief, Discovery and Development

Using these notions of charge and brief, how can I describe the ways that the creative process at SFP actually works? In discussions with designers at SFP, I noticed two distinct ways of positioning clients, either as an organization deserving of a new, fresh and innovative solution (with the attendant time, expense, and effort considerations), or as an organization best served with a *template design*, based entirely on previously commissioned work (the repeating of successful design work done in the past, altered and updated for the current campaign or promotion).³³ This distinction was

³³ *Template design* was the term used most frequently by designers at SFP to describe this type of work.

an important one in assignment determination, as well as in the development of a budget for the client, and was re-iterated during meetings and internal discussions throughout the course of the project. Assignments for clients with proven national brand identities were labeled as “repeat work,” tasks reliant upon a template look that could be applied by SFP designers to fit many needs. Designers working on this type of project tailor and present their work almost exclusively for the client as audience, one clear advantage of a design solution which has already been approved by other levels within the hierarchy at SFP, and by the general end-user audience. On the other hand, designers working on a non-template communications or branding campaign for a new or more “adventurous” client proceeded in a different, yet equally-prescribed creative procedure, called the *SFP creative process*. I use the word *prescribed* in this instance to draw attention to how adherence to a specific, institutionalized creative process was expected for more innovative or unpredictable design as well as for template work. As a studio SFP has a clearly-outlined creative process which functions as a supervisory document, as a client-oriented promotional element of the SFP experience, and as a method of channeling and disciplining creative process in order to develop and execute properly against the client’s strategy. These parameters, enforced by the codified ‘creative process,’ force designers to engage with the client, account representatives, co-designers and end-user audience at different stages, and in different ways, necessitating the re-positioning and re-labeling of their work at each stage of the process.

In internal guidelines and promotional writing, SFP describes their creative process as beginning with “the creative briefing and end[ing] with the delivery of final

art” (SFP Toolkit Document No 0.0, *Creative Process*, 2004b). Internal toolkit documents distributed to, and used by, designers, explain that:

Following a creative process allows you to pay attention to different elements at different times so that ultimately the final product is greater than the sum of its parts. The creative team is at the heart of this process, but at varying times collaboration or contribution is required with client services, strategy and production in order to complete development. (SFP Toolkit Document No 0.0, Creative Process 2004b)

In talking to senior designers at SFP, this process was referred to repeatedly and consistently as the SFP way of designing. To be more specific: the SFP creative process was held by all, account managers and creatives alike, as a fundamental differentiator of SFP from their competitors and as a distinctive and profitable element of the design work created by SFP. This creative process consists of three major steps: creative briefing, discovery and creative development.

The first of these steps, the creative briefing, was described as an element in the designer’s creative process, but in the short period of practice that I observed, was a step taken only by the account executives, who would assemble a specific document from discussions with the client.³⁴ Once the *creative brief* (which serves as a form of quasi-legal agreement between SFP and the client) has been completed, approved by the client and introduced to the designer, the creative team moves to stage two: discovery. At this

³⁴ Key sections of the creative brief document include: assignment description, context, communications objectives (for example: “Express key benefits of the highlight property, and convey that [client] property is unparalleled “shared ownership opportunity”), target audience, current perceptions, desired response, most persuasive ideas, support, brand character and execution/legal guidelines and mandatories. Often, a creative brief contains no more than a list of requirements and deliverables.

point, the designer identifies possibilities – tone, manner, and attitude – without committing to any particular direction. According to the designers I spoke to, operationally there are three main activities that take place during this stage: group brainstorming, individual development of what the designers called “the big ideas,” and mood or concept boards.³⁵ Brainstorming, according to guideline documents published by SFP, consists of large group meetings where ideas are generated and recorded, but not yet categorized or evaluated. This element of the creative practice, though promoted as an ideal element of the SFP service by directors and company literature, is vulnerable to time and client restrictions, and so is not always evident. As I observed in the SFP studio, these stages of the creative process were treated informally, and taken on spontaneously by the designers amongst themselves. Brainstorms often took the form not of large board meetings, but of gatherings around someone’s desk, or of the gathering of inspirational material from other designers, and mood/concept boards were likely to appear not as finished presentations, but as piles upon desks or doodles on meeting notes. At this point in the process, designers create for an internal audience of co-workers from both the design and account management side of the office, and pitch their solutions appropriately, referring to the technical aspects of the work when addressing the production staff, the marketing and client-pleasing aspects when talking to the account management staff, the cost effectiveness and ease of implementation when talking to the directors, and most frequently, the aesthetic or *look-and-feel* when addressing co-

³⁵ Concept or mood boards consist of swatches and sketches presented informally by the tasked team to an internal audience of co-designers in order to generate a unifying idea and aesthetic for the project.

designers. The product (or deliverable) at this stage is not usually shown to the client.

Throughout this process, designers are asked not only to be creative, but also to work beyond specific needs outlined by their internal audience of account executives and directors. For example, in a meeting of two senior and two junior designers about a digital presentation design for the Royal Ontario Museum, the request to see the brief, previous client work, and the emails passed between client and account manager took precedence over any discussion of end-user audience, or aesthetic possibilities, indicating a deference for the boundaries set by other members of the production chain. However, when referring to the project itself (initially meant to be a simple web-site look-and-feel to be implemented by the client's in-house programmers), the designers suggested new ways of approaching the work, such as a *Flash*, *QuickTime* or virtual tour presentation, necessitating a call for a return to reality by the Digital Director.

At every stage of the creative process at SFP, designers are asked to use a logic of conjecture, thinking and working *abductively*, as opposed to *deductively*, or *inductively*. As Nigel Cross explains, "deduction proves that something must be; induction shows that something is actually operative; abduction merely suggests that something may be." (Cross 110). As one design firm's promotional monograph put it: "How many designers does it take to screw in a light bulb? The punch line, of course, is, 'Does it have to be a light bulb?'" (Cahan and Associates 87) Using abductive reasoning, designers approach

a problem by generating many potentially successful solutions, using this method to provide a solution to an often ill-defined design problem. At SFP, this takes the form of a wall of solutions generated during designer meetings: sketches, photocopies and digital sample solutions to a design problem that are posted by the tasked team in a designated spot, and left to be vetted and added to by the design staff at large. This abductive conjecture/reasoning process then allows the designers to work within a practical system, supporting a chain of decision-making while applying their assumed skills at producing novel, unexpected solutions from incomplete information within an atmosphere of uncertainty (Cross 105).

The third officially recognized step of the SFP creative process is creative development: the development of a design solution to completion or to a stage where it can be pitched to the client. At this point, designers described their audience as the client, and the client's client (indicating an awareness of internal hierarchies within the client's organization). Project Managers described this stage as the refinement of three to ten *look and feel* solutions to be presented to the client for feedback. At this point, a Project Director referred to the need to create a narrative thread of the piece, in order to extend the discussion of the design work beyond preferences and aesthetics. This reference to "narrative thread" is in keeping with the way that all members of SFP describe design work as the telling of a story, and of brands as the visible summaries of a company's mythology. Having presented several solutions, each with an elaborate rationalization to the client-audience, a direction is chosen and the development of a final

solution is begun. Junior designers described this creative development stage as including client education. According to one, “clients often don’t know what they want,” and it is the job of the designer to convince them of the best choice for their needs, even if that means claiming authority as to what those needs are. In this stage of the design process, as the Creative Director outlined, “writers, photographers, illustrators and any outside suppliers are sourced, budgets approved, and work scheduled. Detail design continues until the final approved scope, format structure, number of pages etc., is complete...what we call final design.” (SFP Toolkit Document No 0.0, Brainstorming 2004c) This stage often requires multiple presentations to the client-audience, each with varying degrees of revisions, which are often undertaken by a junior designer and supervised by a senior designer.

Summary

Designers, especially in a large firm such as Spencer Francey Peters, engage in complex and often invisible or unacknowledged practices of production in order to create design solutions for multiple audiences. As Dornfeld has outlined, creative work is at all times constrained by constructs, and creative production is inherently shaped by its contexts (Dornfeld 1998). By examining their daily practice, and by exploring the codified creative process of the design studio, we are able to better understand how it is that designers use their institutional context to generate creative work. However, this way of understanding the practice of graphic designers is predicated on the institutional structure of a large agency, and on the position of designers within a larger group of workers. How, then, does the structure of freelance design work impact designers: what

new or modified routines of production are used and how do designers alter their process when working as freelancers or independent workers? In the next chapter, I will describe how it is that freelance designers addressed these issues, how they structure their own independent practice, and how this practice compares and contrasts with that at SFP, using a series of individual interviews during Spring 2005.

Chapter Three

Structures and Spaces of Design Production: The Freelance Designer

In the previous chapter, I focused on the ways in which graphic designers practice within the structure of a large design/branding studio. I took as my space of inquiry the working environment of a large downtown Toronto graphic design studio (SFP), and used the observations that I made there as a starting point for an exploration of the ways that designers address and employ their multiple audience groups during creative practice. During this analysis, the institutional structure and codified creative process at SFP often dominated the individual designer's descriptions of their creative process.

In order to explore the work practice of individual designers *outside* the structure of a large design studio, I conducted individual interviews with five practicing graphic designers, all of whom have experience working as freelance designers as well as in smaller design studio settings.³⁶ These conversations centred upon issues of professional creative process, and “shortcuts”, or routines of production used in their daily practice (Ettema 91). In this chapter I will use samples from these interviews as points of departure for an examination of the daily practice of freelance graphic designers. The patterns of work practice I observed at SFP raised questions for me about how the creative decision chain works within a large organization such as SFP, how the designer works within a prescribed system of creative production. In this chapter, I will describe

³⁶ I chose to supplement my ethnographic work with interviews because I found that at SFP, the guiding structure of the design studio was the answer to many of my inquiries about practice. “That’s just how we do it here was a common response to many questions. By interviewing freelance designers, I am able to explore how designers work creatively outside the structure of the large design studio, and the attendant codified creative process.

how it is that freelance designers addressed these issues, how they structure their own independent practice, and how this practice compares and contrasts with that of designers at SFP.

A brief overview of freelance design practice

When I refer to *freelance designers* I am referring to designers that are self-employed, or who conduct most of their business outside of a studio or agency. According to the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, 30% of designers are self-employed, nearly five times the proportion of all other professional fields. A recent market study estimates the number of freelance designers in the United States at 74,000, a population expected to expand to 86,000 by 2010. Freelance revenues in the USA in 2004 totaled US \$3.4 billion (The U.S. Graphic Design Business 2004-2009). According to the Graphic Designers of Canada market survey in 2003, the percentages of designers working in freelance compared to larger studio settings is comparable with the US market, where 75% of design businesses employ under four people, and 90% employ less than ten people.

The independent graphic designers that I interviewed are typical of freelance designers in Canada in that all have a small freelance practice supplemented by contract work, or with work at a small design studio. A common goal expressed by all five designers was to be able to work freelance fulltime, as they believed that this would allow them to choose clients and projects that aligned more specifically with their own interests and passions. All five designers have a minimum of four years' post-secondary

education, and two have pursued part-time education as a way of staying current with issues of technical production. Four of the five practice in the Edmonton, Alberta design community (the fifth in Toronto) and all work primarily in the fields of print and interactive design. Four of the five interviewees are male, one is female, and all are under 30 years old. Most importantly, all of these designers work within a small design community and are informed by the practice of the other interviewees. This quickly became apparent during interviews, as they often referenced each other's work and professional practice.

Working as a freelance designer entails, for the most part, full responsibility (both creative and practical) for all aspects of the chain of production. In this way, the freelance designer inhabits the multiple roles outlined in the studio culture of SFP: the freelance designer works as Creative Director, Senior Designer, Production Staff, Account Representative and Brand Strategist simultaneously. While the design projects brought to freelance designers are often smaller in scale than those undertaken by the larger firms, the freelance designer is also working without support, and often on a smaller budget.³⁷ When granted a larger budget, freelancer Dave explained that it was common to “farm stuff out” by hiring a production-house to finalize details of the final design when possible.³⁸ The freelance designers with whom I spoke found their work through networks of colleagues and friends, relying upon their reputation in much the

³⁷ Freelance designers often net 26% less than what a designer in a studio setting earns. (National Survey of Graphic Design Salaries and Billing Practices). However, the professional stresses of freelance greatly increase the personal costs of doing freelance work. As Justin explained: “Even though at work, that 400 dollars is like a week or something but since its freelance its like, no, it’s not enough money. It’s never enough money. It depends what it’s for, I did Nokomis for like 50 cents, well no, not even, like 300 bucks and that’s it. But I saw it as a project.” (Justin, April 28, 2005)

same way as SFP relied upon former successes to bring new client work, and were continuously engaging in networking opportunities in order to find new projects. To give an example, Justin³⁹ was hired to design a prestigious fashion design company website through a close friend who knew a founding member of the company, and Jon⁴⁰ was chosen to design c.d album packaging through his musician brother-in-law.

The culture of production of the freelance designer is inherently informed by the culture of the design studio. Though all of the freelance designers that I interviewed worked out of home offices, four of five occasionally hold at least part-time positions at a smaller design studio.⁴¹

Structures of Practice of the freelance designer

What, then, does the daily practice of graphic designers in freelance settings look like? How does the practice of these designers differ from that of their colleagues in larger studio settings? Perhaps not surprisingly, the freelancers that I interviewed described the structure of their practice as remarkably similar to that of the larger design studio (such as SFP). This may be a result of internalizing the structure of a larger studio before moving on to freelance work, or it may be a way of satisfying both their own and

³⁸ Dave is a 25-year-old anglophone white male from a small town in Alberta who moved to Edmonton to pursue graphic design. He has six years experience in publishing, journalism and editorial design, as well as in print and interactive design, and holds a Bachelor of Design degree from the University of Alberta.

³⁹ Justin, a 24-year-old francophone white male, is a print and interactive designer, and has seven years experience working in smaller design studios and a thriving freelance practice focusing on interactive and inter-media work. He lives and works in Edmonton, Alberta, and received his undergraduate degree in Visual Communication Design from the University of Alberta.

⁴⁰ Jon is a 30 year old white male and is an award winning print designer, working and living in Toronto, Ontario. He has ten years print design experience, and has practiced in England and Canada. Jon also received his undergraduate degree in Visual Communication Design from the University of Alberta.

⁴¹ The taking on of any freelance work at all while under contract to a design studio is often basis for immediate dismissal, though it is common, albeit unacknowledged, practice in the industry.

their client's expectations (specifically the expectations of the client who has worked with design studios in the past, or of the designer who has worked with design studios in the past). Suffice it to say that the designers that I spoke to could not fully separate the structure of the studio from that of freelance production. During interviews, all five of the freelance designers that I spoke to used the same language as that used to describe the codified creative process at SFP and relied on an extremely similar breakdown of tasks to structure the creative process, with the only difference being that in their case, the creative work was not divided among members of a team, but taken on by one individual. With this similarity in mind, how then does the freelance designer manage the various stages of the production of design alone? Without this hierarchy of designers and directors, how does a design project move through the various stages of the decision-making process in a freelance setting?

I was surprised at the difficulty that these freelance designers had in articulating their decision-making process, especially as (similarly to SFP) each freelance designer that I interviewed held their creative process to be that element which made their practice different (and better) than that of their colleagues and competitors. Every time that the topic of making creative decisions in the design process arose in conversation, each freelance designer discussed instead their approach to client relationships. This distracted and frustrated my efforts, as I was not planning on discussing client relationships, and had been anticipating the designers would be able to articulate their creative process to the extent that it had been described at SFP. However, I was wrong to differentiate between discussions of daily decision-making process in the freelance setting, and the

labour of client-work. I came to see that, in the freelance design setting, this work of client education and relationship building takes the place of the formalized discovery stage that I saw at SFP, and acts as an essential factor in this specific type of design practice. In interviews with freelance designers, I found all five interviewees divided their own practice into two distinct stages: ‘discovery’ (work done with the client in preparation for creating a piece of design), and ‘creation’ (work done in the privacy of the home, often without outside input or evaluation, to be presented as a finished piece to the client at the end of the process).

The codified creative process of the freelance designer

And so, what “routines of production” (Ettema 91) are entailed in the daily practice of these two stages of freelance work (‘discovery’ and ‘production’)? When I spoke to Raoul⁴² about the discovery stage of his freelance work, he explained that:

The first step of my process which is essentially the discovery stage is the longest, time intensive part of the process. It starts with an intensive analysis [...] I start with a needs analysis, a cost analysis, what do you do, what does your brand do, we will review the brand, we will review where the brand is taken, also start talking about where you want your brand to be in 1, 3, 5 and 10 years, right? [...] then we got a bag of data that we can then work from to create a creative direction, a creative platform. (Raoul, May 12, 2005)

Raoul then described how a project continued on through the stages of ‘production’ following the initial client meeting in a more independent setting, away from client input. By dividing these two stages, he was able to present the final mockup as a finished piece, removing the necessity for the multiple evolutionary stages of production taken on by a larger studio with a larger variety of audiences. As Raoul explained:

The creative platform actually outlines the step-by-step checklist of what you are going to design. It articulates it in words and paragraph form. I am going to choose this font, and this works in the following way, and here is how it is going to impact your audience, and with colors, green whatever. [The client] can read it and they can understand it, right? But then when you come back to them, with the mockup, of what you did, it completely blows them away. Seriously. And then you say 'here is the design!' (Raoul, May 12, 2005)

Justin described his approach to the 'discovery' stage of his freelance practice as slightly less formal than his practice in a studio setting, explaining that in freelance situations, he accepted a lower price in exchange for creative freedom, removing the need for meetings and client relationships entirely.

For really small stuff, freelance, like at [named retail client], I didn't even meet the people [...] I feel weird about it, because it is almost like I did a disservice to design as a profession you know for saying that you can do a website for \$800, or \$600 or whatever, but it was like whatever we do is what we are going to do. (Justin, April 28, 2005)

In interviews with these freelance designers, the stage of "discovery" was described as informal, and as a chance to develop a relationship with the client (which the designers that I spoke to often characterized as *research*). This informal approach to the discovery stage, and to client relations, was also taken by Dave who explained that in retrospect "I just went in there and had a real informal chat with her, and told her my approach" as the first stage his creative process. By working independently, freelance designers are called to take on the role held by the Account Executive at a larger design and branding studio, and are no longer insulated from the client by an account

⁴² Raoul is a 27-year-old Phillipino-Canadian male, who lives and works in Edmonton, Alberta. Raoul has 8 years experience working in print design and in branding, and now works exclusively as a freelance designer. Like the other interviewees, Raoul received his Bachelor of Design from the University of Alberta (a four year program).

management team, necessitating an inclusion of client relations into the creative process (which we have seen is not so major a concern in a larger studio such as SFP).⁴³

When working in a freelance situation, the designers that I interviewed greatly reduced the number of distinct stages needed to create the final deliverable, or rather, a final design solution.⁴⁴ Whereas at SFP the final work (using the example of a book cover) went through stages such as a sketch, a pitch, a proposal, a comp, and finally, a proof, before being described as a book cover (or the deliverable, using the language of the designers), freelance designer works with fewer stages, often reducing the evolutionary steps of a final piece to mockup, proof and deliverable.⁴⁵ In this way, the freelance designers that I interviewed were able to manage their projects while working alone without the support network of a larger staff. Raoul even argued adamantly against the creation of more than one mockup, stating that “When you present the client with three mockups from one concept, obviously one of them is going to be the right one, one of them is going to be a dud, and the third one is going to be a compromise between the right one and the dud right? So yah, it makes the process way more efficient. It allows the designer to design what they want to design” (Raoul, May 12, 2005).⁴⁶

When compared to the stage of ‘discovery’ at SFP, it would seem that the “discovery” stage of freelance design practice is simply a concentrated version of that

⁴³ Client relationships at SFP were mainly handled by the team of directors and by the account team, not by individual graphic designers.

⁴⁴ This reduction of the individual evolutionary stages of the final project also is a reflection of the reduction of distinct audiences involved in freelance work.

⁴⁵ Where at SFP, the project information was filtered through account managers, brand strategists and creative directors before reaching the junior and senior designers, in the freelance situations described to me by these designers, the

which happens in the larger design studio. However, one key difference between the discovery stages in these two settings was the importance placed on client education. The freelance designers that I interviewed listed this as a key aspect of their creative practice (specifically for creative idea generation), whereas at SFP, the education of the client was included in the stage of creative development, and entailed justifying or rationalizing a specific design solution. A reoccurring theme in my conversations with freelancers was this invisible labour of *client-work*, specifically the work which designers do as a part of their daily practice within the client-designer relationship to earn and maintain the authority to make creative decisions. As Anna⁴⁷ described, the initial stages of client-work are an essential element of a successful design process:

[...] if the client was to come to me and say ‘I want to design this thing and I have this company that I am starting up’ and so on, I would usually sit down and talk with them about what it is that their goals were, what it is that they are all about... kind of get a sense for the person too, I mean every single project represents them in a way [...] and then go through that generic step. You have to do a lot of meetings, and sometimes I just feel like I have to sit with the client for hours. (Anna, April 27, 2005)

During the conversations that I had with freelancers, the process of *client-education* was repeatedly referred to as the most effective way of gaining the authority to make creative decisions within the client/designer relationship. As used in these conversations, client-education is the commonly used term for the rationalization and justification process entailed in creative practice, a process that serves to establish the authority and expertise of the individual designer to make creative decisions. Because

project information was communicated directly to the designer by the client. This served to shortcut the amount of guesswork involved in the creation of multiple solutions to a single design problem.

⁴⁶ At SFP three to ten *look and feel* solutions were common for every client project.

⁴⁷ Anna, a 25-year-old Asian-Canadian female is a print designer, and is a graduate of the Bachelor of Design program at the University of Alberta. She has six years of print design experience, focusing on the arts community in Edmonton.

this element of the ‘discovery’ stage is so important to the overall project, it is the freelance designer’s ability to *sell* ideas to the client that becomes essential. As Jon explained, the process of earning creative authority through client education often takes the form of verbal rationalization and justification of aesthetic/visual creative decisions:

A client is somebody who comes to you for your expertise and you give them your professional opinion, and but at the same time it’s always a challenge [...] If I change something from red to blue, I don’t know how that is going to affect the client [...] you are just using fuzzy logic, or just feeling your way through things a lot of the time, and to use words to sell them to the client becomes really important. (Jon, May 3, 2005)

This practice of client-education is a way for the individual graphic designer to pitch the client not only their creative authority, but also their technical abilities (or, as Justin described, “[...] it’s almost like I had to make them feel like this could actually happen, this is possible these days with current technology”). Client-education, a process that at times calls for more formal written explanations sent over email as well as face-to-face presentations, also serves as a chance to sell the client on the un-tested skill set of the graphic designer. Perhaps most importantly, implementing client-education into the ‘discovery’ stage of a freelance project allowed Dave to “convince them that what they are getting is worth what they are paying for” (Dave, April 27, 2005).

By verbally justifying and rationalizing creative decisions, and by building a relationship of trust with the client through the offering of an explanation for a relatively ambiguous process, designers establish a creative authority within the client/designer relationship, gaining authority as not only creators but also cultural critics. As Ellen Lupton has noted:

The designer-as-critic is not simply an obedient extension of marketing, but aspires to go *beyond* what people already want, and *teach* them to want something better [...] the designer is a cultural expert occupying a view from above. Hovering beyond the teeming crowds, the designer hands down master plans for reform. (Lupton 105)

Employing client-education as a tool of practice then authorizes the designer to make creative decisions, and to engage in encoding, on behalf of the client while remaining, as design journalist Paul Ninji notes, members of a profession which is “somewhat isolationist...tucked away from the world, working in offices far removed from the maddening crowd.” (Ninji 196)

Though the practice of design is not, as we saw in the previous chapter, inexplicable, it is the creative and intangible skills that are emphasized and valued during the client-education stage in an effort to employ the cultivated mystique of the graphic designer towards the establishment of creative authority within the client/designer relationship. By convincing clients of the value of these skills through justification and rationalization, designers make specific aspects of their process accessible, couching the process of graphic design, and its attendant “occupational formulae” (Negus 510) in quantifiable language, and ultimately maintaining and contributing to the vague public conceptions of professional graphic design practice. As Jon explained:

To me there is that magic component [...] there is no doubt in my mind that design can bring incredible value to business or whatever to any kind of organization [...] but at the same time, because you can't measure, you rely so much on justification, justifying in your own words why it is good, trying to convince people, and there is never any scientific numbers to prove anything. In a sense, designers become sort of myths themselves. People expect you to be a certain way. That is where the authority to make decisions comes from [...] there is that kind of, you know, mystique or whatever. (Jon, May 3, 2005)

Is this mystique then retained and valued as a method of maintaining and policing the boundaries (both professional and aesthetic) of the visual communication designer's status and profession?⁴⁸ As Soar explains, maintaining a focus in popular discourse on the creative gifts of the graphic designer, rather than on the practical skills and routine know-how becomes a tool for self-preservation, since "[...] one way for designers to protect their professional competencies (*i.e.*, the monopoly of knowledge that is already perceived to be under threat in some quarters) is to remain hidden or obscure" (Soar 45). The use of exclusionary language, and the creation of a monopoly of knowledge then reinforced by the hiding of daily routines of practice away from the client's view, can serve to both create and protect the authoritative status of the designer, especially important in a freelance position where there is no firm to back up the designer's claim to authority. However, the maintaining of a mystique surrounding the work of designers also runs the risk of relegating designers to a position of pseudo-professionals, "brought in to smooth the edges, improve the palate and make the medicine go down more easily." (Frayling 1993, qtd. in Laurel 2003)

The consensus amongst the freelancer designers I spoke to was that they were granted much more creative decision-making freedom when the client is 'educated' enough to relinquish creative authority, and therefore that the work done in the 'discovery' stage directly impacted that done in the stage of creation. When working with a client from a music school, Dave explained that he:

⁴⁸ For further discussion of the hierarchies within design practice, and creative workplaces more generally, see Glaser's "Art Hierarchy" in *Art is Work: Graphic Design, Interiors, Objects and Illustration* (2000).

[...] just went in there and had a real informal chat with her, and told her my approach, and the education was a part of it, what she would be getting, and how to use it, and rationalized everything I did, and it was marvelous, because it was establishing that first basis of trust. I mean you can do more, and are trusted to do more, and it just works so much better because they feel like they are getting not only the deliverable, but they are learning things, and becoming more prepared to deal with things like this in the future. (Dave, April 27, 2005)

Through the invisible, and often un-billable, work of client education, the designer earns the authority to make creative decisions, and is positioned as expert in the encoding of messages for the client. As a secondary benefit, client education frames the client's understanding of the design process, imposing a mystique around creative work, which creates spaces for designers to engage with private "routines of production" (Ettema 91) while still maintaining creative authority.

Occupational Formulae and the Production Routine in Freelance Practice

Following the 'discovery' stage, which all of the client work entailed, freelance designers begin the stage of 'creation.' The freelance designers that I spoke to described this stage as a solitary one, characterizing it as a period of time spent in front of the computer, preparing a final solution for the client. During this stage, freelance designers generated several solutions to every design problem, narrowing their work down to a single solution that was then presented without reference to the rejected solutions that came before. Though the freelance designers that I spoke to all described their process of idea generation slightly differently, the one common element was their reliance upon formulaic solutions to create a design solution on demand for any client.

We saw that at SFP one of the important elements of design practice was the reliance upon a series of what Negus has termed “occupational formulae”, specifically the use of standard and tested solutions, often created for the client as part of a past project which could be relied upon to generate an acceptable design solution (510). Despite SFP’s premium on originality, these standard solutions to design problems were used frequently for template clients. But reliance upon routines of practice was not only a function of the large studio setting. Faced with heavy workloads and the added work of client education, the freelance designers that I interviewed also employed these same routines in their practice, though in a slightly different way. While the designers at SFP have a long client history and a series of tested solutions to draw upon in the development stage of their practice, freelance designers are often working with a client for the first time, and do not have a team of colleagues to draw tested and accepted solutions from. As a result, the freelance designers that I spoke to constructed their design solutions by using routines present in design magazines, and vernacular (or low culture) design.

During our conversations about working process, each freelance designer that I spoke with expressed apprehension about consuming and referencing work exclusively from within the contemporary North American graphic design community. To stay “on top of all that” was referred to as an important aspect of design practice by Raoul, who explained that “my book shelves are packed full of design (books), C.Ds. I still read your typical design magazines and stuff like that because I have to stay on top of things” (Raoul, May 12, 2005). But, as most of the freelancers that I interviewed explained, consumption of the cultural ephemera produced within the design community was a

necessary evil. “Sometimes, you know, I admit it, I do (emulation work) like that too.

You kind of have to, when you are like banging out ideas and your time is billable”,

admitted Jon. He went on to explain:

I think the worst thing that a designer can do, I think one of the worst things, is just scour through [Communication Arts] magazine or something like that. But a lot of people do, it’s just what happens, you know, time constraints, they just want a sampling of I call it, well [we] call it turntablism, where it’s like you are just looking for a quick style that they can ape. (Jon, May 3 2005)

Employing these ‘routines of production’ (Ettema 91), freelance designers are able to hasten the process of creative production, reducing their work-load and guaranteeing an acceptable design solution for their client. Only freelancer Anna expressed misgivings about relying exclusively upon her own personal formulae. The other freelancers focused their concern primarily on over-reliance upon routines present in design publications.

You see them developing the tricks, like [some specific designers] rely on the gradient a lot, and lines. And [a co-designer] was saying that he does squares, just squares, and type and a layer, and a little bit sideways, and you end up mimicking yourself, you end up typecasting yourself, it’s ridiculous, and I find that is more of a struggle. Not to rely on my own kind of tricks, knowing that if I want to make this type sit on a page, I know how to do that, I know how to put that element right there and it is going to be alright, it is going to be awesome. And exactly like my last project, which is also awesome. That is more of a struggle I find, to challenge yourself to not rely on your own tricks. (Anna, April 27, 2005)

The focus on the role of routines in my discussions with freelance designers serves to illustrate specific features of freelance practice in two ways. First, by working alone, outside a social network of designers, freelancers are forced to rely upon external sources to find their “occupational formulae” (Negus 510); namely design magazines and samples of successful design from outside of their group of colleagues and friends. This differs from the practice of studio based graphic designers at SFP, who are able to access

formulaic solutions through discussions with co-workers and through the institutional structure of the studio space. Second, the dividing of the stages of ‘discovery’ and ‘creation’ by our subject freelancers supported and cemented the assumption that to create, the designer must be left alone, a situation which supports the reliance upon “occupational formulae” (Negus 510) for creative idea generation.

Summary

My aim in this chapter was to develop a description of the conditions within which the freelance graphic designer practices as a cultural subject, and to better understand how those structural conditions impact the type of work that designers do. Outside of the large studio structure, freelance graphic designer practice is in many ways similar in structure to that we observed at SFP. However, freelance practice offers us two specific insights into the daily practice of the graphic designer: an examination of freelance design practice shows us the importance of client work and client education to designers, as well as the different sources that provide “occupational formulae” (Negus 510). The freelance designers that I spoke to took on, as a part of their daily practice, the role of account representative, creative director, brand strategist and production staff as well as that of graphic designer. As a result, the stages of the decision-making process were greatly reduced. Freelance designers work within the two separate stages of ‘discovery’ and ‘creation.’ During the stage of ‘creation’, in a structures similar to that at SFP, freelance designers rely upon “routines of production” (Ettema 91), referencing material from inside the design community, as well as their own previous experience, as a shortcut in the creative process.

Having closely examined how graphic designers work within two separate but linked structures of design production (the large scale studio and the independent freelance setting), we now have a better image of how it is that designers make creative decisions, and how those decisions are guided by the structure in which they are made. While investigating these two separate cultures of production, I was struck by the ease with which designers considered multiple and separate audience groups within a project. Contrary to my expectations, designers habitually and casually referred to the client, the end-user and their team of colleagues as different, and equally important, audience members. If we accept that designers, as cultural producers, are engaged in the practice of “encoding” (Hall 1980), how can we complicate that notion with the introduction of multiple and overlapping audiences for a single end-product? How does this multiple audience model work within a system of encoding and decoding practice (Hall 1980) and how do graphic designers (working in both freelance and studio settings) address the needs of their multiple and distinct audience groups? In the next chapter I will address the ways that designers address and access their multiple audience groups, and the ways that those particular audience groups are invoked within the creative decision making process.

Chapter Four

Audience(s) and the Practices of Graphic Designers

When I began my ethnographic and interview work, I had envisioned coming away with a clear confirmation of my belief in the audience as the main point of focus within the design process. I had assumed that the designers fit within the singular encoder/decoder (Hall 1980) relationship, acting as conduit between the client and a singular audience, and creating design works deliberately using the language or vernacular of their end-user audience (their remote decoding public). Despite my own experience as a graphic designer, creating for multiple and separate audience groups, it was only after my discussions with studio designers and freelancers that it became clear a different understanding of the role of audience within design practice was warranted. In order to better understand the culture of production of graphic design, I had to take into account the multiplicity of audiences for whom designers create work.

As I learnt while observing at SFP, individual graphic designers remain aware of not simply the singular audience of their end-users (the remote, targeted market to whom the communication is conventionally addressed), but of multiple audience groups throughout the process of designing client work. During the discovery, development and creation stages of creative practice, design work was directed towards a series of overlapping, yet separate audience groups including the client, senior members of the client's organization and the senior level directors, account management and designers

within their own studio space. This conception of the multiple audience groups at play during the stages of creation and discovery in the graphic design process was certainly supported by the bureaucracy and structure of practice at SFP, but is not only a function of the large design studio. Freelance designers also engage multiple audiences during their encoding practices, presenting their design differently to peers, competition juries, client's representatives and end-user audiences. Freelance designers often describe presenting their work in dramatically different fashions for their acknowledged multiple audiences. This awareness of multiple audience groups within solo freelance practice was reflected in my discussions with freelancers, all of whom described their difficulty in balancing the needs of the client audience and of the end-user audience group, a compromise made all the more difficult by the dominance of the client in a freelance design process.

So, every design solution consists of a series of individual audience-designer relationships, necessitating different forms of rationalization, presentation, and language choices tailored to each different audience group. This targeting of different audiences throughout the stages of creative decision-making changes how we frame the process of encoding/decoding within creative practice. With an understanding of the multiple audiences to which the designer addresses the various stages of one design project, we are able to re-phrase the encoding/ decoding process (Hall 1980) as a series of small couplets, each engaging a different audience group and each informing the final design solution.

In this chapter I will address the ways audiences are integrated into the structure and practices of graphic design. I will begin by examining the ways that multiple audience groups are considered within the creative decision-making chain, and how the needs and expectations of different audience groups come to determine the structure of design work. I will then question how designers go about understanding these audience groups, and what shortcuts or “routines of production” (Ettema 91) designers use to research audiences of all types. Next, I will question how the designers’ multiple audiences are integrated in the evaluation and creation of design solutions. How do designers invoke their audience groups within creative practice, and more specifically, how are designers learning how to act as proxy members of remote audiences about which they have no insider knowledge?

Multiple Audience Groups and the Creative Decision Making Process

Throughout my time observing at SFP and interviewing graphic designers, it was clear that conceptions of multiple audiences were incorporated into not only the process of post-rationalization of creative decisions, but also into the creative decision making process. Having observed this, it is clear that specific “routines of production” (Ettema 91) are being used by designers in order to research their multiple audiences and to invoke those audiences in an evaluative manner during the different stages of design work. This invocation of audiences must, then, inform the creative decision making process.

Considering the structural forces at work within the designer's creative process – the concern for multiple audiences throughout the process, the distancing of the designer from their audiences, and the restrictions which force the use of routines or formulae for production – how is it that conceptions of multiple audience groups are included within the studio space and within creative decision-making structures? If what I observed at SFP and in interviews with freelance designers is accurate and generally applicable, and if designers are being asked to address the needs of multiple audiences at any given time, then what does that tell us about systems they employ to make creative decisions? In their work The Product Image: The Fate of Creativity in Country Music Song Writing (1982), Ryan and Peterson outline four types of decision-making chains within creative workspaces: the assembly line, which entails an acknowledgement that all creative product must pass through people and stages before completion; the craft and entrepreneurship model, which positions creative workers as skilled artisans, tasked by their employers; the audience image and conflict model, which frames creative work as a competitive practice; and the convention and formula model, which assumes a world of creative workers who all share common standards of evaluation and practice, and who use their shared normative to reach common goals (Ryan and Peterson 23).

However, it is their fifth model, itself an accumulation of the other four, that better explains how designers structure their work practices to address the many audiences of concern during any design project (Ryan and Peterson 23). In that model, Ryan and Peterson describe the *product image* as the determining factor within the

hierarchical decision-making chain, providing a space for the integration of various, equally important audiences into an understanding of creative production. Using their model, we can divide the production of a piece such as a book cover design into smaller cycles of production. The project changes from a sketch, a pitch, a proposal, a comp, and finally, a proof, before being described as a book cover. Each of these stages then represents a product image: a defined imagining or set of expectations generated by a particular audience group. An analysis of production work as a 'product image' system also creates a space for an understanding of standardization within creative practice, as Ryan and Peterson explain: "The most common way of doing this is to produce works that are much like the products that have most recently passed through all the links in the decision chain to become commercially successful" (Ryan and Peterson 25).

Referring to the creative work as a series of products then provides a way of acknowledging the importance and role of smaller routines of production involved in every stage of production, as well as the various audiences invoked throughout the creative process (Ryan and Peterson 25). At SFP and with freelance designers, this manner of producing works that make use of pre-accepted strategies (or routines) can lead to a development of, if not a house-style, then certainly a common aesthetic tone throughout a design portfolio.

The breaking down and dividing of design work into smaller pieces, each meant for a separate audience group, is a defining aspect of the structure of creative decision-making followed by graphic designers. To give an example: on my first day in the studio

space at SFP, I sat in on a meeting between a senior designer and a junior account rep about a re-branding and re-positioning assignment for a post-secondary educational institution in Toronto. Throughout the 45-minute discussion, the design work was referred to as the “sketch” (for which the audience was the rest of the internal SFP design team), the ‘comp’ (which was produced for an audience of comprising the client), the ‘proof’ (which was directed at a high level within the client organization), and finally the ‘deliverable’ (a finalized piece directed at an audience of teenagers and their parents contemplating college choices within the Toronto area).

The language used by graphic designers to rationalize creative decisions also changes markedly depending on the intended audience. In this particular meeting at SFP (in which I now figured as a type of audience), the final deliverable (a logo design with accompanying examples of brochures and signage to which it could be applied) was described to me using information about the photographer, the font used, the colour choices and the design influences behind the final solution.⁴⁹ When the same piece was described to the account representative, the language used centred around “the due diligence” of the design team to provide a functioning solution, budget figures, and issues of feasibility.⁵⁰ I would expect, following this model, that the language used when presenting the proof to the client-audience centered around the building of the brand’s

⁴⁹ The decision to describe the work in my presence using the terminology of typography and design was, most probably, a result of my self-description as a graphic designer.

⁵⁰ *Due diligence*, was used here not as a legal term but as a description of the institutional duties of a branding/design firm. *Due diligence* was used by a senior designer and by an account executive to describe the decisions that were made to support a successful client relationship and an effective design campaign, often at the expense of creative innovation. *Due diligence* was also used to refer to the caveats owed to the client as they embarked on the final stages of their design project. Examples of doing *due diligence* would include warning the client of risks due to creative choices, or anticipated difficulties/added costs due to design choices.

“narrative”, as well as on descriptions of the meaning of the symbols and colour chosen. This specific tailoring of language is also present in the discovery stage of freelance practice, as designers frame their language choices as *client education* when addressing members of their client-audience group. To understand the stages of production in this way integrates multiple spaces of agency and decision-making into the larger context of the chain of production, creating not a formulaic piece, but rather multiple combinations and spaces for creative decision-making. By restructuring the creative process of graphic designers as the manufacturing of smaller products, each with their own intended audiences, we are able to re-conceptualize the designer as a cultural producer for multiple audiences at any given time.

Accessing the Audience: Practices of Background Research

If designers, in both freelance and studio settings, create design work in ‘product image stages’, then how is it that they learn the needs and expectations of those multiple audience groups? How are designers researching audience groups, particularly their audience of end-users? Designers in both studio and freelance situations often work with a limited picture of their end-user, relying on their own presumptions and on stereotypic information provided by the client representative when making creative decisions. As Marilyn Crafton Smith explains in Culture is the Limit: Pushing the Boundaries of Graphic Design Criticism and Practice (2001)⁵¹;

Graphic designers know little about the specific ways their audiences respond to graphic design and the ways that graphic design is made meaningful in their lives.

⁵¹ Smith goes on to criticize how current conceptions of audience, and the current focus on audience members simply as receptors for the intentions of graphic designers, calling for a move away from behavioural models of audience analysis. For further discussion of user centered design, see Jorge Frascara’s User Centred Graphic Design: Mass Communications and Social Change (1997).

Few practitioners or critics have put much effort into understanding these audiences, whether through systematic studies of their audiences or by theoretically assessing the ways audiences make meaning of graphic design products. (Smith 304)

In the design process at SFP, the creative brief and the involvement of the account executive provide a constant reminder to the designer of the needs and desires of the client-audience, their parameters and their expectations. However, what is often absent from the brief, and from discussions about individual projects, is an express acknowledgement of the end-user audience as we commonly understand it, *i.e.*, the audience of users who are conventionally understood as those meant to receive and decode the encoded message (Hall 1980). In marketing terms, this end-user audience would be those who “properly” decode the communication, and ideally change their behaviour to better suit the client’s desires.⁵² Based on the examples of creative briefs that I read at SFP, the most common information included for designers about their end-user audience was a list of brand allegiances, and basic age/income demographic information.⁵³ To illustrate: during a strategy meeting at SFP, the end-user audience was simply defined as a hospitality company’s patrons, who would know what it is to buy a Mercedes car (with its new-owner package), or an iPod (with its highly branded packaging), and not as members of any more specified demographic or psychographic group.⁵⁴ This is not to say that the end-user audience is not an element or concern within

⁵² This definition, or understanding, of audience figures prominently in Hall’s structuring of encoding/decoding, where a specific audience removed from the context of production serves as our main definition of decoders.

⁵³ In a brief for a print campaign for an existing client, the definition of the target audience(s) was “guests and patrons in Four Seasons hotel/resort elevators”. (Creative Brief, March 28 2005). The description of end-user audience was more elaborate when the brief was sent to the designer complete from the client: a second Four Seasons brief sent to multiple firms as a request for proposal included information about their audience’s income and age, as well as the mandatory information about brand allegiance. (Creative Brief, March 28 2005)

⁵⁴ End-user audiences at SFP were defined almost exclusively based on their consumption of a product or service. I did not observe, at any time, discussion of an audience defined as a social or political group, save when they were understood as a political/social group with specific consumption habits.

the design process, but rather that the designer often works from a basic level of information about their end-user, as compared to the extensive research conducted on their audience of clients.

Focusing upstream on client-audiences rather than end-user audiences is a common theme throughout the graphic design practice that I observed. In a discussion I had with an SFP Account Executive experienced in advertising and radio, she mentioned that, if the client had been coming to a radio or television firm, the end-user audience would be of primary concern, and time and money would be devoted to understanding and accessing that specific audience at the most fundamental level. However, as she explained, when clients come to a designer, there is an illusion that the process is magic, and a misconception that, since the work of design/branding is largely intangible, that the end-user audience who could be reached is endless. "Clients don't know what's behind the curtain" she explained, "and they think what the designer can do is magic." When I asked about what information the client provides about their targeted audience, and whether there is an allowance for research in the process, she explained that unless the client comes to her with a clearly researched understanding of its end-user, one will not exist, and will not be included in the creative brief. The Account Executive described the lack of end-user awareness as both restricting and liberating for the designer. Including audience analysis in the creative brief forces the designer to "pull the curtain back a little" and to hold themselves accountable to predefined understandings of target market, yet the consistent lack of a clearly defined audience, in direct opposition to the way that other media producers work, puts the designer in the position of having to create it

themselves, using their own cultural knowledge, stereotypes and assumptions about this prospective audience group.

In discussion with freelance designers, this dependence on an audience analysis provided by the client was described as using "arm chair analysis" (Jon, May 3, 2005) and was described by Dave as one of his biggest professional frustrations:

[...] when I do have the time, it usually comes down to just a few sentences, I mean 'this is going to be for conservative librarians with very little money' [...] and basically you are given a couple of adjectives, and there is very little, if any, research and sometimes there are web resources [...] When you are freelancing, when you are in that studio environment, you try to come up with what you think is good, what you think is interesting, but a lot of the time it is just based on your projection of what you think this audience is going to be like. (Dave, April 27, 2005)

Using the client's understanding of their target market as the sole source of background end-user audience research, though common and effective, was problematic for both independent, and the studio based, designers that I spoke to as this form of audience research positioned the client as the authority on all matters audience-related, leaving the designer without the ability to claim insider knowledge of the audience group as a method of creative rationalization. However, due to limitations of time and budget, designers are often asked to access and engage a targeted end-user audience without any additional research work. Research on the end-user audience seems especially important in a freelance situation. In contrast to the practice at SFP, where the targeted audience was described as often being "just like us," the independent designers I interviewed were working to access and engage groups about which they had little or no insider access or information. In a discussion with an Account Executive, I asked how SFP worked to

communicate with end-user audiences without necessarily doing background research. She replied that the staff at SFP represented the target audience to which most clients were speaking, and that this was one of the reasons that clients approached SFP with their design needs. By standing in as examples of the end-user audience for the client, designers were able not only to avoid doing further background audience research, but were also able to gain a certain level of authority in the decision making process. To illustrate further, when I asked Justin if he was able to avoid background research because of his membership in the targeted audience group, he answered that:

[Often, the end user] is not me at all. No I mean I look at it from my own lens, what I would think or what I think is logical, or stupid or attractive or whatever, but [...] I am not the audience at all, its not me at all. (Justin, April 28, 2005)

The limitations of time and budget and a reliance on the client for information about the end-user audience group often leave the designer with no option but to use research done on their client audience (often included in the discovery stage of freelance practice and the creative briefing stage at SFP) as a substitute for a background analysis of their end-user. Raoul illustrated this by replying to a question about audience research with the following answer: "[...] how can you communicate to the audience if you don't know spit about what they are all about, because you don't know what the client is all about" (Raoul, May 12, 2005). Similarly, Anna felt that the real research work occurred *with* the client, and that the graphic designer ideally works to "say to the client...what kind of stuff can you give to me that helps me know what you are about."

When able to work without the limitations of time and budget, the graphic designer has many methods of end-user audience research at his/her disposal. Within the field of graphic design, audience research/analysis involves, for the most part, the hiring of an external research firm to conduct focus interviews, using qualitative audience research as either a method of “disaster checking”⁵⁵ (Ireland 23) or as an authoritative form of rationalization in order to better sell the product to the client. Qualitative design research today commonly includes such methods as traditional focus groups, super groups of 100 or more people and online discussion groups, one-on-one interviews, or testing parties (where a brand or product is included in a social gathering to solicit opinions and information from potential customers). Less common are situatedness-studies (examinations of how individuals interact with a product or brand), field, digital- or photo-ethnography (observations of the day-to-day lives of the audience/customer for purposes of discovery), or development panels (interactions with a focus group during the development of an idea or concept with the intent of integrating the opinions of end-users into the development process) (Ireland 23-30). Designers (more often from the fields of product and industrial design) will, in extraordinary cases, be tasked to undertake “thick description;” *i.e.*, participant observation with the intention of learning to embody and explore the physicality of the individual user experience (Geertz 34). As Christopher Ireland explains in his introduction to Design Research, Methods and Perspectives (2003), qualitative design research offers “a wide variety of methods that help designers

⁵⁵ This “disaster checking” or post-production research for preventative purposes was referred to at SFP as “due diligence.” In the market in which the designers I interviewed worked, this type of research is carried out by private companies such as, and was usually implemented by the production manager or the creative director, not by the designer. The one area of design production that is *not* tested or “disaster checked” is the creative process of the graphic designer. As we saw at SFP, the designer is asked to work in isolation, employing an unquestioned series of practices to emerge with a final solution for the first of their audiences. Methods of testing the effectiveness of the designers practice are not used, and this lack of testing is unquestioned in the design industry.

reach beyond the constraints of their individual world-views and into a new world of choice and diversity” (Ireland 23).

Clearly, there are methods available that even independent and individual designers could employ to learn more about their end-user audience before approaching a design project. However, as our interviewed designers described it, all of these research methods require extensive amounts of time and effort, and are extremely costly to the client. Since time and budget were listed as the two most limiting structures in the design process, and since audience research is both time consuming and costly, independent designers are often not able to do any formal qualitative audience research. When asked how they went about analyzing and researching their end-user audience groups, none of the designers I spoke with included formal qualitative audience-research methods in their description of their own personal practice, favoring instead a variety of informal approaches. Focus groups, the most common traditional form of audience research, were considered by one freelancer to be more harm than good, consisting of questions just basic questions like ‘do you like it?’, or ‘what do you think of this colour?’ Justin felt this focus group method was not valid because “a focus group isn’t where you ask them all to be designers all of a sudden, art directors or [whatever]” (Justin, April 28, 2005). Often, to save money and time, designers access their network of peers and colleagues, creating focus test groups within their "social circle, and within other social circles” (Raoul, May 12, 2005).

Audience Groups and the Creative Process: Practices of Proxy Membership

Apart from their role in determining the evolutionary stages required for a design project (through a series of product images, or differing needs and expectations of various audiences), in what other ways are multiple audiences invoked and employed as tools for creative production by the graphic designer? Though extensive research about audience groups is not often included within the initial description of the project, conceptions of remote audiences remain an important tool for rationalization within the designer's creative decision-making process. From what I observed, the invocation of audience by graphic designers (specifically those at SFP) was in keeping with Dornfeld's (1998) understanding of the way in which audience is invoked for the purposes of creative decision-making within television production. It occurs in either an *empirical* fashion (the claiming of direct experience with audience preferences: "no one who has seen the proof mentioned that") or a *presumed* fashion (the claiming of a deeper understanding of preferences or knowledge held by the audience: "no one who saw the proof got that part"). In each case, the audience is invoked (in either an empirical or a presumptive manner) for the purposes of creative decision-making rationalization by the designer (Dornfeld 87). This invocation becomes a factor within the rhetoric of design work. Mimesis of this sort is employed by the designers as the practice of the rhetorical use of what someone else might have said, for the purposes of retroactive, or pre-emptive justification. This invocation, or mimetic process, is then integrated into what Smith calls the *evaluative feedback loop*, whereby production is based on presumptions about the intended audience. Smith explains that:

The reader's experience of the work is prefigured – that is, both calculated and pre-enacted– by the author in other ways as well [... They are] all the while testing the local and global effectiveness of each decision by impersonating in advance [their] various presumptive audiences, who thereby themselves participate in shaping the work they will later read. Every literary work – and more generally, artwork – is thus the product of a complex evaluative feedback loop. (Smith 45)

Working in this way, designers then become, for an evaluative moment, proxy members of their audience, whether that audience is the client, the end-user, or their co-designers. Dornfeld captures the dynamics of this temporary positioning of the producer within the framework of audience member:

The process of production requires that the producers act to a large extent as surrogate audience members, putting themselves in the place of their potential audience as they react to the material they are shaping into programs. This is not to imply that the interpretive procedures that producers and viewers employ are identical, but to suggest that producers move in and out of the frame of surrogate audience member. Perhaps the crucial difference is that producers learn (at least partially) to articulate a metatheory of the interpretive frameworks we all employ, and apply this metatheory when making programmatic decisions. (Dornfeld 87)

By constantly “put[ting] themselves in the client's shoes” (Senior Designer, SFP, March 31, 2005), designers are thereby acting as members of various audience groups without background information or research, casting aside their own positioning in order to anticipate, or presuppose the audiences and their desires. The client's shoes are not the only ones that the designer is asked to wear. Audiences invoked in this manner can be the client, the end-user, a designer's co-workers, and the account executives, which is to say, all stakeholders within the process. By invoking these audience groups in

presumptive or empirical manners, the designer is then able to stand in as a proxy member of these audiences for evaluative purposes.

The evaluative functions of positioning the designer as a proxy audience member exist within the design practice in routine activities. They are not easily identified or addressed by the designers, though to an outsider observing the way that language was used in meetings, they were readily discernable. For example at SFP, in a meeting with members of the graphic design team called to discuss a new design for the Royal Ontario Museum's (hereafter "ROM") website, each designer positioned themselves as the client, the end-user audience and the internal design team of the ROM at one point or another for the purposes of evaluating suggestions and ideas presented by the other designers. The designers at this meeting consciously positioned themselves as surrogate audience members, asking each other what they would think if they were the client, the end-user, or the client's stake-holders. This self-conscious positioning did not, however, stop the designers from presuming the audience's desires or opinions through a series of rhetorical shifts. This self-positioning as proxy member of the various audiences in question for the purposes of evaluation appeared in the form of comments such as: "but let's say we are the ROM, we are never going to go for something like that" (Digital Director), and "if I was the backend guy, could I make this work? I think so" (Digital Director). Designers at this meeting were consciously using the perspective of the various audience members to evaluate and re-frame suggestions and ideas as an important stage in the creative process.

By positioning themselves as proxy members of an audience group in order to evaluate solutions, designers create an audience experience that has been “prefigured – is both calculated and pre-enacted” through impersonation and rhetorical invocation of the presumptive audience (Smith 45). However, as I observed designers at work in studio and freelance situations, it became quickly clear that the invocation, or rather the impersonation of audiences by graphic designers was not only useful for idea evaluation, but also for creative generation. The designers that I observed were not only testing through impersonation, they were using impersonation in order to create. I will now move to examine the role of impersonation and mimesis in the creative decision-making process of graphic designers.

Invoking the Audience: Practices of Impersonation

This positioning of the designer as proxy audience member for the purposes of conjecture was best described to me in a discussion with Caryl D’Souza, a junior designer at SFP. Ms.D’Souza told me of a client assignment to design a series of branded t-shirts for a specific audience of 18-to 24-year-old women, which happens to be Caryl’s own demographic. Several designers were assigned to this task, and yet, as Caryl explained, the two young female designers (herself and another junior designer) were specifically assigned, as they would supposedly be able to act as proxy members of a specific audience, *i.e.*, not the audience of clients, nor the audience of co-designers, but the audience of shoppers and viewers (end-users), defined as young women. When I asked whether Caryl had ever done a design task like that before (as most work at SFP is assigned based on past experience with similar projects or the client), she said that she

had not, but that her ability to use her demographic positioning to gain proxy membership in the audience group replaced her experience as a designer in this case. Caryl and her co-worker were working as proxy members of their audience, positioning themselves within this framework as a method of creative idea generation and evaluation. By positioning Caryl and her co-worker as proxy audience members, the design team at SFP was able to generate specific, highly successful design solutions without investing in audience research or analysis.⁵⁶ When I spoke to Caryl about her role in this situation, she described it as simply part of working in a team. She shared her sense of “outrage” at her first encounters with demographic information provided by the client, and described an interaction with a client who specified that Japanese models would be useless in their in-store merchandizing, as they were not attempting to access Japanese customers. Caryl did not, however, see her forced surrogate membership in gendered or ethnically-defined audience groups as offensive or manipulative. On the contrary, Caryl expressed that she was pleased to have “a new point-of-view to offer” to the team. Caryl’s story is in keeping with references to the variety of ethnic origins, age, gender and work experience within the SFP group.⁵⁷ Within this diverse group of professionals there was the ability to cast proxy audience members at a whim for the purposes of design work.

By positioning themselves as proxy audience members for the creation and evaluation of design concepts and solutions, designers invoke their multiple audiences as

⁵⁶ This particular design solution was deemed successful in that every audience group accepted the design solution, and the branded t-shirts were extremely popular with the targeted end-user group. Most importantly, the client was satisfied and continues to do business with SFP.

⁵⁷ As I mentioned, the SFP creative team was equally split along gender lines. To clarify my description of the design team further: 60% of designers were white, 5% Black and 25% Aisian-Canadian. All were Canadian by birth, and all had lived in Canada for most of their lives. In keeping with the national statistics, designers at SFP had an average age of 35 (national average is 36), and all were College and University graduates.

important tools within the creative decision-making process. This apparently simple structure of decision-making is, however, complicated by the need of graphic designers (who are, statistically, of a fairly homogenous cultural and socio-demographic background) to access audience groups about which they have no insider knowledge.⁵⁸ What occupational formulae are used in design work to allow designers to evaluate and generate creative ideas as proxy audience members of these important, yet often un-researched, end-user audience groups?

According to the designers I interviewed, it is through the consumption of ‘low culture,’ or works representing the cultural ephemera of specific remote audiences, that designers are systematically and deliberately learning to employ the common language of the audiences to whom they address their design work. As we have seen, it has been argued that designers participate in a short-circuit of culture, engaging in both Johnson’s cultural circuit, as well as in an interior, accelerated and insular loop of their own, acting as both producers and consumers in a world populated by other cultural intermediaries (Soar 2000). Soar outlines this social cycle of consumption in his model of the cultural short circuit, suggesting that graphic designers mobilize acts of cultural consumption as an essential element of design practice. He suggests that designers consume the work of other cultural intermediaries as a way to tune their cultural readings.

Indeed, their own cultural readings are highly attuned, being “perfect” consumers operating in a particularly rarefied social milieu. They [...] “consume” ads and design concepts written by other people [...] they “consume” award-winning and/or controversial design and advertising

⁵⁸ Graphic designers are part of a relatively homogenous social group. In Canada, over 89% have a college or University education, and though the gender division is almost equal (55% men, 45% women), only 30% of designers are visible minorities. (National Survey of Graphic Design Salaries and Billing Practices)

work; and they gravitate towards any number of fashionable “watering holes” which provide sustenance, inspiration, or even “rip-off material”. (Soar 14)

My discussions with graphic designers tentatively expanded this definition of the creative fuel of design work to prioritize works produced not by other graphic designers, (or members of what Soar refers to as the “insular community of design”) but instead by vernacular creators or members of subcultures considered outside the elite community of cultural intermediaries.

It is by collecting, consuming and engaging with the designed embodiments of the vernacular language of a remote audience that the designers I studied were able to expand the amount of audience groups within which they felt able to act as proxy members.⁵⁹ This “occupational formula” (Negus 510) was defined by graphic designers as the consumption of designed work from *outside* the design canon (often referred to in these interviews as ‘low culture’ or, as Jon described it: “primary source material”) as a way to learn the visual language of an audience group, and to imitate it when called upon to invoke that specific group.⁶⁰ By consuming works produced by, or specifically for, a target audience, our designers acquired the notionally-private language of their end-user audience groups and, by then speaking it, were able to position themselves as proxy audience members for evaluative and conjectural purposes. The consumption of vernacular ephemera became a method to “find out what a certain subculture is all about” (Raoul, May 12, 2005).

⁵⁹ To clarify, when I refer to *remote audiences* I specifically mean audience groups within which designers are not automatically able to claim membership based on age, demographic, sociographic and ethnic heritage.

So we look at them and ask why this font works with this subculture or whatever right? You do that by consuming what they consume [...] All that work has been done before, nothing is new, you just have to learn where to look for it and once you find it, you have to know how to pick it apart and use that language and find out what that language is, and incorporate that into your creative. (Raoul, May 12, 2005)

This fascination with ‘low’ culture, or vernacular design, is not a new, nor a newly documented, phenomenon within design practice.⁶¹ However, with the increased ease of access (through on-line archives and highly fetishized books on vernacular design), it has become an increasingly naturalized component of graphic design practice.⁶² As design critic Jeffery Keedy writes: “So many times I hear designers waxing poetically about some lovely little match book cover, menu design, or hand-lettered sign and how terrific it is – what graphic designer doesn’t have a stash of such found goodies to ‘borrow’ from?” (Keedy 101)

That said, by using the specific ‘routine of production’ (Ettema 91) of consumption (specifically consumption of the cultural ephemera of remote audiences) as a step towards claiming proxy membership in a remote audience group, individual designers in both studio and freelance settings are able to surpass their own subject limitations to create work for end-user audience groups with which they have few

⁶¹ Recent discussions regarding the role of the vernacular in graphic design practice can be found in <http://www.designobserver.com/archives/000300.html>, <http://www.designobserver.com/000281.html>, Keedy’s *I Like the Vernacular...Not* (1993) and Lupton’s *Low and High Design in Everyday Life* (1992)

⁶² Jon explained that he was “finding now that being able to find primary material on the web is getting easier and easier, I find that I use the library of congress from the states, because with digital search engines you just won’t come across stuff, you have to be very specific with that kind of search, its not like going to the library where you just say I’ll head up to this floor and start looking through some crazy books. But I do find that there is some great stuff on there, as people start to archive more stuff.” (Jon, May 3, 2005) For further discussion of practices of fetishization through removal of cultural ephemera from its context see Susan Sontag’s *Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity* (1970, qtd, in Soar 2002).

common points of reference.

This accumulation of visual languages, or vernaculars, serves then as a way to make individual and independent designers *multi-lingual*, able to transcend their own subject positioning to employ the specific languages and symbol systems of their many different audience groups.⁶³ I think it's important, at this point, to note that none of the designers I interviewed acknowledged these 'low culture' or vernacular examples of cultural ephemera to be works of graphic design, created by other graphic designers. This positioning of certain artifacts of design as 'vernacular', or as examples of the everyday/common language (written or spoken) of a particular group, reinforces the standard language of *good* graphic design against a cruder dialect, and a dominant culture of legitimate graphic designers against a secondary 'othered' subculture. As Ellen Lupton explains in Low and High: Design in Every Day Life (1992):

The current attraction to vernacular styles is fueled by a search for spontaneous, unpretentious voices belonging to the idealized aura of a romanticized past [...] or to a noble savagery of a visual underclass (hand-made signage, ethnic food packaging). Appropriations of contemporary vernaculars often project a barrier between a sophisticated "us" and a naive, spontaneous "them" – the ordinary commercial artifact is an innocent object that fails to comprehend its own genius. As in nostalgia, such borrowings relegate the vernacular to a space safely removed from the aesthetic world of the designer. (Lupton 105)

Perhaps because it has become so naturalized as a part of the creative process, the consumption of the ephemera of remote audience groups was seldom described by the designers that I interviewed as audience research. However, as Jon explained: "I mean

⁶³As Ellen Lupton explains; "The term 'vernacular', like the high/low pair, is also relative: it positions a standard against a lesser dialect, a dominant culture against a secondary subculture. The vernacular is the *other* and every discourse has the other." (Lupton 104)

it's going out into the streets and whatever and looking at what is happening" (Jon, May 3, 2005).

Accessing remote audiences in this way was often described by the freelance designers not as a deliberate research method, but as a function of general creativity, or a particular trait of the graphic designer as identity or personality type. Dave and Jon both explained their use of this occupational formula in ways worth displaying in detail:

We know what to look for, what to recognize, [the] potential in things that other people kind of skim over. So part of it is the whole 'wow, we are geeks' part of it. I think consciously people are collecting and consuming, I mean I am not a huge scrap booker, with folders of torn out photos and archives and stuff like that, but some people are, and some people are for that very reason. It's just to surround themselves with stuff, with so much stuff that they can instantly have this reference for any given situation. (Dave, April 27, 2005)

I used to do this thing where I would archive everything, I would take photographs, and I would organize everything, and if I saw something I would digitize it, and make sure it was super high resolution, in case I needed it down the road and it got to the point where it was like an obsession, [...] and if I saw design, I would like paste it into my sketchbook [...] and you gather all this stuff and take it back to the lab and maybe in 5 or 6 months from now I will leaf through all this [stuff], and process, and it will kind of jog something. (Jon, May 3, 2005)

How then do designers integrate consumption as a technology for their work as proxy audience members of multiple remote audiences? By using the language/visual symbol system of that specific group, designers are able to create *deceptively authentic* works: products encoded using the established and accepted 'authentic' language of the end-user audience. Though this may not be a deliberate act on the part of the individual graphic designer, this rhetorical use of the voice of a remote audience group is what allows designers to move seamlessly beyond Smith's evaluation through impersonation (Smith 45) and to instead *create* through impersonation. The visual language consumed

during background audience research processes is employed by the graphic designer as a rhetorical device, and by mimicking established forms of visual communication, designers are able to access their audience using what the end-user audience has come to understand as *their* language.⁶⁴ Raoul elaborated on this in a description of his particular encoding process:

[Mimicry is] totally part of the design process. It's the idea of being able to speak the language you know? If there is a certain type of magazine, and they are attracted to a certain type of magazine, then you are going to take the best, or just decode that design. You shouldn't have to put the work into making sure they recognize it, the work has already been done. And I mean if you produce something that is completely new and they don't recognize it, then it is just going to pass them by. And how then are you doing your job as a designer. (Raoul, May 12, 2005)

As Tim Plowman argues in his work Ethnography and Critical Design Practice (2003), designed artifacts exist as “materialized ideologies, creating our subjective experience” (Plowman 30), and the encoding of these objects with the vernacular of the group to which they are addressed becomes then “an act of attracting attention (hailing), compelling individuals to generate meaning (interpretation), and behave in specific relation to [the] designed artifact”(Plowman 30).⁶⁵ End-user group members' recognition of a particular visual communication then establishes their experience as subjects of a particular ideology, materialized in designed form. As marketing consultant and design critic Thomas Oosthuizen describes, this creation of deceptively authentic communication works from a “top down” perspective, “marketing universal symbols that are then customized to accentuate unique socio-economic and cultural differences...using

⁶⁴ Casual acceptance of the designer as a mimic, rather than as one who is capable, and willing, to generate new ideas was a reoccurring theme in my interviews with designers. As Michael Beirut explained in a recent article in the online journal Design Observer: “No one loves authenticity like a graphic designer. And no one is quite as good at simulating it [...]. Every piece of graphic design is, in part or in whole, a forgery” (Beirut 2005).

a language that the market understands” (Oosthuizen 63). The creation of deceptively authentic works through the use/appropriation of a specific vernacular is also a way for the designer to guarantee a symmetrical relationship between themselves as encoders, and the end-user audience as decoders. As Stuart Hall explains: “The degrees of symmetry – that is, the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange– depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the ‘personifications’ encoder-producer, decoder-receiver” (Hall 131).

Examples of the use of this “routine of production” (Ettema 91), or rather this shortcut to creating an effective work of design through the appropriation of the vernacular of one of multiple important audiences, abound. One example, common in awards annuals at this time is the appropriation of the visual language of hand-made band posters by major labels; a mimicking of a vernacular design style developed out of budget and material limitations by professional graphic designers in order to lend authenticity to the commercial band or label for which they were working. But to be specific, these appropriations are not only of the vernacular of a contemporary subculture, but also often of an era or specific time period as well. Hand-done signage fonts are used to address an audience searching for a certain nostalgia, and the geometric and highly digital stylings of poster design from the rave movement of the late 1990’s now adorn the company letterhead of organizations seeking the elusive culture of “cool.” The ability to cross cultural and temporal boundaries in the search for memorable design solutions is, for

⁶⁵ Here, Plowman employs the language of Althusser’s writings on interpellation and ideology. For further discussion, see *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)* (1977).

designers in both freelance and studio settings, a profitable asset. However, as Keedy explains, “what is needed is an awareness of what crossing cultural/historical barriers actually means, as well as an understanding of the importance of context” (Keedy 102).

Summary

Graphic designers engage in complex and often invisible or unacknowledged practices of production in order to create design solutions for multiple audiences. By analyzing these practices of production within a system of product image, we are able to better understand how it is that designers work using their institutional context to generate creative work. More importantly, we are able to better understand the ways that designers create for multiple audiences throughout the creative process. The framing of design work as a series of small couplets of encoding and decoding, each with a specific audience in mind, thereby allows us to examine how it is that designers position themselves as proxy audience members for conjectural and evaluative purposes.

It is by employing a pre-accepted form of vernacular, and by relying upon a visual language that the end-user will both understand and be engaged by, that the designer guarantees a higher probability of a ‘correct’ (or dominant) reading of their design solution (Hall 1981). It is this practice that allows the designer to act as proxy members for audience groups which are remote and about which little research has been done. But perhaps more importantly, it allows designers to effectively place themselves, having gained the ability to speak the visual language of the group within which they presume, for purposes of evaluation and idea generation, as proxy members of remote audiences.

This occupational formula (Negus 510) is then integrated into design practice in the form of mimicry of the vernacular or visual language of the target end-user audience.

Conclusion

While interviewing designers at SFP and over the phone I was constantly surprised at how obvious the creative practices of graphic designers could be made to sound. The designers that I spoke to described the creation of complex, nuanced and innovative communication solutions to abstract communication problems as if it were the easiest, most obviously simple process in the world. References to addressing multiple audience groups, and to the evaluative and creative uses of impersonation were made casually by designers throughout the time I spent observing and discussing design practice. As a participant at the 2005 AIGA sponsored Design Inquiry weeklong workshop I was presented with the opportunity to discuss my research work with some of the design community's most influential members, and the conversations that I had there often mirrored the discussions I had with designers here in Canada.⁶⁶ According to the designers that I spoke with, the practice of design and the spaces of negotiation and choice within that process had been explained and explored to death (through the multitude of publications and professional spaces of discussion), whereas within Communication and Cultural Studies, creative practice remains a relatively unexplored area of study.⁶⁷

With the cultural work force (the general statistical group into which graphic designers are placed) positioned as the leading growth field in Canada, a better understanding of the structures and interpretive frameworks through which graphic

⁶⁶ Design Inquiry is a weeklong workshop held at the Maine College of Arts in Portland. It is sponsored by the AIGA, and run by a team of volunteers who bring together students, design educators and eminent graphic designers for lectures, collaborative design work, and discussion.

⁶⁷ As I write this conclusion, the amount of discussions regarding practice in the design studio increases. Recent examples include in particular Rick Valecenti's Emotion is Promotion: A Book of Thirst (2005).

designers work, and of the production practices that they employ becomes especially important (Canada's Cultural Sector Labour Force 2004). As Dornfeld has noted, ethnographic studies of creative spaces of production allow us to better understand

[...] how implicit and explicit theories of practice applied by the producers, the social world in which they live, the production apparatus (institutions and practices), and broader cultural tendencies all inflect the text with a complex of meanings (and condition the text's reception). (Dornfeld 87)

By taking on an ethnographic study of the multiple stages of interpretation through which textual meanings emerge into public cultural form, I am drawing from the importance Angela McRobbie places on combining the “sociological work of demystification with one of reconstruction” (McRobbie 12). As Lutz and Collins note in reference to the creative process of photographers, cultural production is “a social and creative act in which negotiation and struggle result in the ultimate artifact.” (Lutz and Collins 12) This thesis provided an attempted exploration of those negotiations and struggles in the daily practice of studio based graphic designers. It is also reply to Soar's (2002) call for future research on the “many thousands of designers beyond the ‘usual suspects’”, and an attempt to move beyond a reinforcement of traditional hierarchies so predominant in Design Studies.

I took on this research study with the intent of describing some of the working practices of graphic designers, and discovering how specific routines of practice reinforce conceptions of audience during the encoding practice. While considering this central problematic, I addressed several sub questions. While considering this central problematic, I addressed several sub questions. First, how do routines of practice impact

the cultural productions of graphic designers? Second, how do graphic designers reference, and in referencing construct, their various audience groups? And third, how do designers use these projections/presumptions within their encoding practice?

I began this research work by orienting my discussion of the working practices of designers within the larger context of critical and cultural theory, and defined the main concepts and terms used throughout this thesis work. I began chapter one, *Producers, Practices and Spaces of Production: a Review of Literature*, with a definition of the graphic designer as worker, and of the graphic design industry, employing work from Design Studies and invoking the self descriptive work of graphic designers to narrow my definition of what, exactly, we understand graphic designers to be. An overview of the work produced within the field of graphic design allowed me to observe the silences within the discussion: specifically the lack of focus on the daily practice of the individual, subjectively positioned graphic designer. I then explored that definition using the work of Bourdieu and Reich to define what it is that I mean by cultural intermediary and symbolic analyst when I use those terms to describe graphic designers. Next, I entered a more general discussion of graphic design as a practice, defining practice by employing terminology from Franklin, Negus and Ettema. With the intent of building a foundation of current conceptions of decoder/audience groups, I outlined the twinned practices of encoding/decoding as proposed by Hall (1980), and the current state of end-user audience research [Morely (1980), Ang (1991), Radway (1991)]. Throughout this chapter, I invoked ethnographic studies from within the field of Cultural Studies to elaborate upon current issues of creative work practice. With this review of relevant literature as a

foundation, I then moved on to a description of my own observations of the cultural practice of graphic design work in two specific social contexts of production: the large design/branding studio (SFP), and the smaller home offices of five freelance graphic designers.

Chapter Two, *Structures and Spaces of Design Production: The Design Studio* was an exploration of the ways that graphic designers, especially in a large firm such as Spencer Francey Peters, engage in complex and often invisible or unacknowledged practices of production in order to create design solutions for multiple audiences. To do this, I used the observations made during my ethnographic fieldwork to describe the interpretive frameworks in action within the specific culture of production of a large design/branding firm. By examining their daily practice, and by exploring the codified creative process of the design studio, I was able to better understand how it is that designers use their institutional context to generate creative work. I began with a brief history of my site of research, and an outline of the institutional hierarchy of this culture of production. I then outlined my observations of how the creative decision-making chain at SFP works, and how information about audience is provided to designers working within this culture of production. While at SFP I observed the ways that designers address multiple audiences throughout their creative practice, and the ways that they integrate their own subject position into the creation of a charge and a brief. My aim in this chapter was to develop a description of the conditions within which the graphic designer practices as a cultural subject, and to better understand how those structural conditions impact the type of work that designers do.

However, this way of understanding the practice of graphic designers was inherently tied up in the institutional structure of a large agency, and with the position of designers within a larger group of workers. In chapter three, *Structures and Spaces of Design Production: The Freelance Designer*, I explored the ways that freelance practice structured and impacted the creative practice, and the routines of production used by designers. In this chapter, I use interviews conducted with five freelance graphic designers as points of departure for an examination of issues of creative practice, authority, audience research and appropriation within cultural production. I started with a description of the field of freelance design, and of the specific five designers that I interviewed. I then outlined how freelance designers work within this specific structure of creative practice.

By closely examining how graphic designers work within two separate but linked contexts of design production (the large scale studio and the smaller context of individual freelance production), I developed an understanding of how it is that designers make creative decisions, and how those decisions are guided by the structure within which they are made. While investigating these two separate cultures of production I was struck by the ease with which designers considered multiple and separate audience groups of concern within a single encoding/decoding relationship.

The last chapter of this thesis, *Audience(s) and the Practices of Graphic Designers*, is an exploration of the ways that graphic designers engage in complex and often invisible or unacknowledged practices of production in order to create design

solutions for multiple audiences. As Ryan and Peterson outline, and as observations with designers at SFP and in freelance situation support, each stage of production is addressed to a different audience group. By analyzing these practices of production within a system of “product image” (Ryan and Peterson, 1982), we are able to better understand how it is that designers work using their institutional context to generate creative work for their multiple audience groups. Here, I argued that by examining the individual and evolutionary product stages that a final design embodies before becoming a final design solution (a deliverable), we are able to see the spaces into which multiple audiences fit. By understanding the role of multiple audiences within the production of graphic design, we are able to examine the ways that designers position themselves as proxy members of their remote audiences, employing the voice of those audience members rhetorically for evaluative and creative purposes. The framing of design work as a series of small couplets of encoding and decoding, each with a specific audience in mind, thereby allows us to examine how it is that designers position themselves as proxy audience members for conjectural and evaluative purposes.

The importance of investigating the daily practices of media making and the culture within which media is produced is clear, and has recently been explored in a variety of fields such as advertising, fashion design, record producing and public television. To better understand the media as a form, and as a force, we must allow for the influence of social structures on the culture of media makers, and we must examine the structures that guide the process of media creation. Here, I attempted to illuminate the ways that designers produce media, and the ways that the structure within which they

work impacts their daily practice. The goals of this research are twofold: first to explore a specific space and structure that guides creative decision making, and to bridge two areas of study that I believe are necessarily connected: Cultural Economy and Design Studies. Secondly, my intention was to draw attention to the ways that audiences can be reframed as an essential consideration in the process of “encoding” (Hall 1981) messages, and to the ways that designers actively engage with audiences at a remote distance.

I now feel better able to answer the graphic designer at SFP who asked “why?” By taking a close look at the structures and interpretive frameworks used by, and imposed upon, graphic designers, I am better able to understand the production practices that they employ. If we are to understand design as a media form, and in a manner different from the textual interpretation so popular in Design Studies, we must better understand the structure of practice that guides the creation of that media form.

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