

## Review of **Visual Communication: From Theory to Practice**

Jonathan Baldwin and Lucienne Roberts

192 Pages

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*Visual Communication: From Theory to Practice* sets out to bridge “the gap between design theory and practice”. To do this, the authors have placed the subject area of graphic design at the heart of a larger theoretical framework, using critical theory to contextualise how visual communication works. This theoretical context is then presented to current designers allowing them to respond and react, mostly using their own work to support their opinions. Targeted at students studying graphic design, this book takes the form of an introductory text that aims to establish graphic design as a field that exists in much more than the visual, and to introduce prominent theories, ideas, figures and practitioners in the world of graphic design.

Written by Jonathan Baldwin and Lucienne Roberts, the book is divided into three sections – Communication, Culture and Conflict. Each section is then broken into a theory component written by Baldwin followed by a practice component written by Roberts. The theory components introduce and contextualise the section’s theme, define the terminology involved, and place the theme into a larger social, historical, political and academic context. With the practice component, Roberts then uses the theory section to create a forum for the theme by discussing and debating the topics with design practitioners, giving an overview of their work and allowing them to respond to the pieces.

The central tenet of this book is unique in that it focuses on the interplay between the theory and practice, and between philosophers and designers. Traditionally, most graphic design books take one of three forms: collections of design work; “how to design” books; or a compilation of essays and writings pooled together to discuss specific subjects or work. Instead, this book attempts to weave the theoretical and practical together. Prominent designers are allowed an opportunity to not only present work but to engage with the presented critical theory; while most students will be familiar with the work of Neville Brody or Erik Spiekermann, fewer will be familiar with their thoughts on the state of design, design education or moral obligations of designers.

On the whole, the theory components are well structured and informative, presenting the reader with a rich context to further their understanding of how the process of communication works. The ground covered is impressive, bringing in theorists and writers like Peirce, Eco, Barthes, Marx and Adorno. Each section begins with a clear and concise definition of the topic, setting the ground to be covered, which is then expanded upon through the remainder of the chapter. For instance, in the first section we start with Shannon and Weaver’s straightforward model of communication. By the end of the section we have a model that incorporates audiences, social classes, media planners, and entropy amongst other things.

While the theoretical concepts and sources presented are not new or revolutionary, even in relation to design, what is innovative is the intertwining of the theory and practice, and packaging it in a book for design students.

The practice sections pull together work from a variety of design professions including graphic, fashion and industrial design. In addition a range of designers are featured, some are highly experienced and prominent names in the design community working on large-scale projects, like Erik Spiekermann, while others are young designers, working on smaller projects with a more socially direct purpose, like Emmi Salonen.

The idea that design is inherently political links all three sections, and the practice and theory components together. It builds this claim by establishing that “design is an agent of ideology in that it communicates (good or bad) the political intentions of the person or organisation that commissions it.” Achieving recognition of design as political activity is relevant, especially in relation to the student audience. By broadening understanding of what design is, it is moved from the purely visual and the superficial. It becomes impossible to separate design from the context in which it is created and the context that it then creates. Importantly, it empowers designers, making clear the role that design can play in society and the effect that it can have. It is difficult to imagine a more exciting message to deliver to future designers.

Although effective in the communication of this important idea, there are two minor problems with the book.

First, some of the ideas and theories need to be further expanded. In an introductory text there is always a trade off between breadth and depth and although this book generally hits the balance there are a few occasions when it misses. For instance, the section dealing with semiotics comes across as light; the practical examples work well but the theoretical model presented needs further explanation. In addition the inclusion of Saussure’s work could have served as a balance to Peirce’s model, furthering discussion.

The second issue concerns the terminology and examples used throughout the book. Although the book talks about using a “graphic design perspective” it uses a variety of terms to describe the profession, some of which are acceptable: graphic design and visual communication can share much the same territory, but the term commercial art is problematic and an awkward choice. Examples from industrial and fashion designers are also used to illustrate points made, and although they may work they pull the focus away from the “graphic design perspective”, which is problematic. Could pertinent examples from the world of graphic design not have been used?

Because the book functions well as an overview text, providing breadth rather than depth, where it works best is as a textbook for undergraduate design students. It is well designed, allowing the reader to work through the whole book or to dip in and out of it as needed. The conclusion of each section closes with questions for

further contemplation and discussion, allowing students or classes to follow through on areas pertinent to their studies. The theories and ideas presented are supported well with marginalia for those wishing to follow up on specific areas. As with any introductory text, it is meant to begin the journey, and to establish groundwork for the reader to carry on further.

Overall *Visual Communication: From Theory to Practice* is a welcome addition to the expanding library of work that looks at graphic design in a broader and more contextual manner. Design programs would do well to look at incorporating this book into their curriculum. Pulling together theory and practice, and placing design at the heart of communication, this book is important for graphic design education.

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Review by

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