

Paradigm Shift: The Challenge to Graphic Design Education and Professional Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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“...within our borders the material and symbolic conditions for open exchange between black and white are effectively absent. We still know little about each other beyond the narrow roles history has cast for us.”¹

Although this statement was written more than a decade ago by South African art historian Colin Richards, it might be said that, in spite of many changes, South Africans still are struggling with the “narrow roles that history has cast for [them].” Consequently, this paper seeks to explore some of the issues that have informed the way in which South African visual communications design and designers have attempted to meet the challenges of a country in transformation.

Since Nelson Mandela’s “long walk to freedom” in 1990, much has been said about the failure of apartheid. It would be foolish, to underestimate the impact of this divisive policy on the lives and experiences of all who live in the country. On a physical level, apartheid created (designed) cities that were racially divided under the Group Areas Act, and on an intellectual level, separate education systems for the different races were introduced that created very “narrow roles” for the majority of learners. Culture was used as a tool to divide, hence, on a material and a symbolic level, multiple realities meant that individual South Africans experienced the country and its culture in profoundly different ways. For any paper that hopes to address design education and professional design practice issues in South Africa, this is especially important because it provides the context in which these activities take place. This is particularly true of marketing and advertising which, of necessity, have to deal with reality issues, either as a mirror or as an aspiration model.

Many of the above-mentioned issues have come to the fore since the end of 2001, when the South African Government’s “Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communication” convened hearings in Cape Town to explore the need for transformation in the marketing and advertising industry. Subsequently, the Government Communications and Information Service (GCIS) has been tasked to

1 C. Richards, “About Face” in *Third Text—3rd World Perspectives on Contemporary Arts and Culture* Autumn/Winter, (1991, London): 104.

explore some of the issues raised at the hearings in order to report back to Parliament before the end of 2002. This investigation has been wide-ranging and includes issues such as advertising content, government or self-regulation of the industry, media and advertising agency ownership, nondiscriminatory research methodologies, employment practice, and education and training issues. Underlying all of this is the importance of marketing in any economy, and a specific recognition of the role that advertising and advertising design play in framing and changing attitudes. In this sense, the GCIS investigation provides a firm indication that the South African government has recognized the importance of design-related issues in national life.

An earlier indicator of government recognition of the importance of design occurred during February 2000 when various stakeholders in design education (Design Education Forum of Southern Africa), the profession (Design South Africa), and the Design Institute met with the government in Cape Town to develop a common understanding of how important design is in developing countries such as South Africa. This initial "South Africa by Design" meeting was followed by a commitment from the Department of Art, Culture, Science, and Technology (DACST) to support a three year design awareness campaign.

As South African society has moved towards normalization since the first democratic elections in 1994, it has almost become a cliché to refer to what has been popularly called the South African "miracle." This is the miracle that ensured that South Africa pulled itself back from the brink of tearing itself apart. As one witnesses the depressingly predictable consequences of the decline in the situation in Palestine and Israel, or in Zimbabwe, one is reminded of the fact that the momentous shifts experienced in South Africa should not be taken for granted.

If one accepts Kuhn's definition of a paradigm as being a "set of beliefs, theories, or a world view that is unquestionably accepted,"² then what we have experienced in South Africa with the dismantling of apartheid deserves serious consideration. It represents a paradigm shift in which a separatist and isolationist view has been overthrown in favor of a policy that espouses an integrated and expansive worldview. The fact that this attempt to change occurs at a time of an international shift towards globalization is significant for both South Africa and the African continent. For some, the shift provides an opportunity to develop a new worldview in which Africa is central. Hence the reference to this millennium as the "African Millennium" at the launch of the African Union in Durban earlier during 2002. Significantly, South Africa's second democratic president, Tabo Mbeki, was the first president of AU. It is he who has conceptualized the notion of an African Renaissance as a prerequisite for the rebirth of the continent.

2 T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2nd ed. (1970), 43.

A historical study of the European Renaissance shows that no one person or specific event caused the Renaissance. Rather it was a continuing process. The fact that important technological changes also contributed to change should not be overlooked. In these terms, it is not only South Africa that experienced a paradigm shift during the closing decade of the twentieth century. The practice of graphic design also has been radically transformed, if not redefined, by technological developments. Without denying the heroic contributions of individuals and the importance of specific events in South Africa's recent history, it is important for us to consider the nature of the change if one is to be able understand the past and chart a course into the twenty-first century.

As a professional practice, graphic design in South Africa was shaped by its colonial history. The advent of modern advertising and graphic design was an integral part of the development of the printed media during the nineteenth century. As the colonial power, Britain exported goods that were to be sold to the troops and in the settler market, and it was common practice to have advertisements and design work prepared in Britain for publication. Hence, in the case of the advertisement "How Lord Roberts Wrote BOVRIL" both the British imperial vision and the brand were promoted and imprinted upon the South African landscape. Given the importance of the London-based studios, the status of the local "commercial artist" was not particularly high during the first half of the century. As an article entitled "Our Long-Haired Friends" published in the *South African Advertising* journal explains, "Artists as a class seldom give the income tax authorities much overtime or many sleepless nights."³

It could be argued that the political and cultural dominance of Britain was paramount until after the Second World War, when the influence of the United States became a powerful economic and cultural force in South Africa. Given the importance of Madison Avenue in advertising and modern marketing techniques, perhaps this was inevitable. Within the colonial paradigm, musicians, artists, and designers were forced to look "overseas" for inspiration, and also sought affirmation and recognition in terms of European or American models. Thus originality in the arts and design in South Africa was circumscribed. Consequently, within this colonial paradigm, indigenous art and culture was denigrated if not ignored.

The Nationalist Party that assumed power in 1948 soon thereafter introduced the policy of apartheid that, as mentioned earlier, used culture as a divisive tool and selectively discouraged creativity and originality. Consequently, art education was (and continues to be) considered a "luxury" not to be made available to the majority. On a broader scale, all communications came to be strictly controlled to the point that the government even refused to introduce television until 1976. For graphic designers, this meant that print remained the dominant media during the 1950s and 1960s. Inevitably, the growth

3 H. Henderson, "Our Long-Haired Friends," published in *South African Advertising* (October 1931, Cape Town): 7.

in the local market, and the demands of the print industry, led to the need for more locally trained artists, and this encouraged the introduction of “commercial art” courses in Art and Crafts schools during the 1950s. Furthermore the term “graphic design” was only used when the National Diploma in Graphic Design was offered in colleges for advanced technical education in 1966.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the practice of “importing” designers from “overseas” slowed as graduates from local colleges began to assert themselves. Similarly, political events such as the Soweto uprisings in 1976 led to the international isolation of the country. Many international agencies divested themselves of a direct interest in South Africa, and immigration from Europe declined rapidly. Ironically, although it could be argued that the education of local designers remained essentially Eurocentric, during this period it was almost inevitable that, as the commercial and political environment changed, a different sense of identity emerged. In a segregated South Africa, even this identity was molded by colonial history and the interests of the politically and economically dominant group. Hence the U.S. motor company Chrysler promoted its vehicles by asking what the South Africa market loved, to be answered by the jingle, “We love Braaivleis, Rugby, Sunny Skies, and Chevrolet!”

Since the 1930s the advertising trade press has encouraged the advertiser to realize the potential of the “black” consumer, hence the trade advertisement—“4 out of every 5 are non-Europeans.” Under apartheid, this potential was never fully realized because of the restricted earning capacity of the majority. Consequently, only the two official languages were used in South African advertising, namely, Afrikaans and English. Even here there was a cultural dominance in that often the Afrikaans version was merely a direct translation of the English advertisement, and thus lost impact due to its nonidiomatic quality. In the meantime, the potential of what was then referred to as “the black market” was eroded until the rise in black consumer power grew too important to ignore by the late 1970s. So the market (audience) in South Africa before 1990 was viewed by advertisers as primarily a white one. As Green and Lascaris put it:

You marketed to whites because they had the money, and you tacked blacks on at the end of your marketing plan (if you bothered at all) because they were secondary to your company’s main marketing thrust. They just did not have the spending power to push their way forward up the agenda ... By the end of the 60s, that was shortsighted. By the end of the 70s, it was short on logic too.⁴

However, Green and Lascaris add that it was not until “the 1980s [that] the wage gap [between black and white] began to close and the trade union and the anti-apartheid movements were quick to recognize the potential of using black consumer boycotts to prove

4 N. Green and R. Lascaris, 1990. *Communicating with the Third World: Seizing Advertising Opportunities in the 1990s* (Cape Town: Tafelberg Human & Rousseau, 1990), 35–36.

the point. Clearly the market was signaling things must change.”⁵ History has shown that this fact was quickly recognized by advertisers and politicians alike. Activists successfully used it as a powerful political tool in the form of consumer boycotts to force political and commercial change.

The resulting paradigm shift required of the design establishment during the 1980s as apartheid began to crumble was enormous, and many designers were not particularly well equipped to cope with it. What it meant to be a South African meant different things to different people. The distinction as to whether the “new” South Africa was a multicultural or a multiculturalist society was not clear, and it could be argued that the nation still remains unclear—if not uncomfortable—with these issues. To be a designer in this type of environment is not for the fainthearted! However, the fact that design is a culturally sensitive industry cannot be ignored and, sadly, the demographics within the advertising industry were not (and still remain) unrepresentative of the majority market.

The GCIS hearings bear witness to this fact, and there is now a call for transformation to go beyond the “narrow roles that history has cast” in design. In many instances, the causes are structural. There is not only ignorance about the career opportunities in design on the part of previously marginalized groups, but also access to graphic design education remains limited for educational and economic reasons. Post-apartheid design education in South Africa demonstrates that once access has been created, there also is the challenge of making the education relevant and accessible. In this regard, the contribution of industry and the current lack of suitable role models needs to be addressed. Interestingly, Victor Margolin’s research of the marginalization of African American designers in Chicago indicates that this is not purely a South African problem.⁶ In view of the Parliamentary investigation into the state of transformation in the South African advertising industry, this is an issue that needs to be addressed on a priority basis.

Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes in education which, of necessity, is a slow process. In 1981 and 1982, respectively, Peninsula Technikon and my own department at the ML Sultan Technikon introduced the first graphic design programs for what has been euphemistically referred to as “historically disadvantaged” students. As historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) our task was made even more difficult in that, unlike the “other” technikons in our respective regions, we were underfunded. The majority of students applying for entry were truly disadvantaged in that they had been denied access to art or design education at school. Added to this were the limited financial resources available in the community to pay the fees, and the high equipment and material costs that graphic design demands. Thus, our admission criteria had to assess a student’s potential rather than proven skill and talent. On the basis of this acceptance, many families took loans against meager pensions to

5 Ibid.

6 V. Margolin, *African American Designers in Chicago* (Video) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001).

pay the enrollment fees. Many students were discouraged since the stakes were high and there were no guarantees of employment upon graduation. Even within the new paradigm, the low skills base of prospective students, the expense of graphic design education, and the extraordinary high expectations of industry remains a problem that needs to be addressed by all of the stakeholders.

Our experience at the ML Sultan Technikon⁷ is instructive in that we were the first graphic design program in South Africa to attract significant numbers of students from each of the three racial groups in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) region during the late 1980s. Significantly this demographic shift occurred in advance of legislation that enabled official integration of higher education during the early 1990s. Hence we were the first to experience the challenge of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multireligious sensitivities that characterize post-apartheid society. In spite of the best will in the world, we experienced an unacceptably high failure rate among students who were under-prepared. We had three very short years in which to teach basic skills and to train graphic designers for one of the few industries in South Africa that can be described as globally competitive. Added to this is the digital revolution in graphic design that demanded a much broader approach to visual communications. Financially, we had to cope with the expense of the design computers and relevant software because many of the entry-level jobs that our students were counting on were wiped out overnight due to the digital revolution.

For those who ask today—"Where are the black designers?"—the above were, and continue to be, the problems that confront all design educators who seek to contribute to the peaceful transformation of our society. As an attempt to address some of the problems, we introduced the Positive Response in Design Education (PRIDE) program in 1990. This affirmative action course acted as a one-year bridging program for students primarily from the townships and informal settlements around Durban. Initially funded by the De Beers Anglo American Chairman's Fund, it also was funded at one stage by the advertising agency Ogilvy, Mather, Rightford, Searle-Tripp and Makin.⁸

1990 also was the year of Nelson Mandela's release, and the uncertain negotiations and the civil unrest that preceded the elections in 1994 created a very volatile academic environment in which one was challenged not only to create access, but also to become culturally inclusive. Appropriate teaching methodologies were introduced to encourage teamwork and to redefine the notions of advantage and disadvantage so that students could learn from each other as equals. Individuals were encouraged to celebrate their own cultural background, while recognizing that culture is dynamic and forever changing. In the interim, the introduction of computer technology in the graphic design courses presented another challenge. Suffice it to say that technology is not culturally neutral, and in South Africa's

7 During 2002, the ML Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal merged to form the Durban Institute of Technology (DIT).

8 PRIDE was funded by the De Beers Anglo American Chairman's Fund (1990-1993), the Bartel Arts Trust (1994-1995), Ogilvy, Mather, Rightford, Searle Tripp, and Makin (1996-1997); and USAID (1998-2000). Department of Art and Culture, Science and Technology, (2000-2002).

quest to create a new identity, students were encouraged to celebrate our unique culture and to explore their own sense of identity in order that their own signatures are carried onto the globalized software. This is not only an educational issue: the profession is equally challenged by the call for cultural inclusion.

As the political negotiations progressed in the early 1990s, there was a need to create a new identity for what then was popularly referred to as the “New South Africa,” inhabited by a “Rainbow Nation.” During this period, the notion of “nation building” became a theme adopted by politicians and advertisers.⁹ While symbols of the “old” South Africa such as the flag and sporting emblems such as the Springbok were reviewed, so elements of culture from South Africa’s former marginalized cultures provided a treasure trove for designers to create a new sense of a identity. Within this practice lay many dangers, not least of which was the issue of appropriation. However, in a postmodern world, this is not just a South African problem, but one that needs to be addressed on a global scale if professional practice is to retain its integrity and contribute to creating a new sense of balance in the world.

As part of the democratic process and, in an effort to create a notion of inclusion, the early 1990s were characterized by invitations to the general public to make submissions for projects ranging from the design of the “new” flag to the livery of the national airline (SAA). Although professionals ultimately were responsible for the finished design, there was an apparent popular consensus about the need to create an alternative that was distinctly “African.” What constitutes traditionally African, however, presents a problem. According to Pieterse, during the nineteenth century in popular novels, songs, and images, the “Zulu” frequently was used to represent Africa or black people to British and other audiences. He explains that the British admired the Zulus as a “martial race.”¹⁰ However, in a society in which ethnicity had been used by the apartheid state to divide and rule the majority, such stereotypical images were not acceptable. This was particularly so in a violent political environment in which the opposition Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) projected itself as a traditional Zulu cultural and political movement.

Consequently, according to Barbara Buntman, the notion of Zulu ethnicity on a symbolic level was more likely to inspire emotion and strong opinion than be an easily manipulated signifier available for the advertising agency’s uses as it had been in the past.¹¹ Buntman maintains that much of the above explains why Bushman/San images proved to be so attractive. The myth of the Bushman/San as harmless hunter gatherers allowed consumers to embrace the idea of being part of black Africa and multiracial South Africa without making the audience and consumer identify with other socio-political groups. Thus she maintains that the Bushman/San “became available for nation (or company) building.”¹² An

9 “Nation building” had been proposed in the late 1980s by the editor of the *Sowetan*, Aggrey Klaaste, as a non-governmental, self-help exercise. Green and Lascaris, *Communicating with the Third World*, 187.

10 J. N. Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 104.

11 B. Buntman, “Selling with the San: Representations of Bushman People and Artefacts in South African Print Advertisements” in *Visual Anthropology* 8 (Amsterdam, Holland: OPA [Overseas Publishers Association], 1996): 3354.

12 *Ibid.*

example of this is the logo for the South African Olympic bid in 1995. The superimposition convention used by the San to depict a number of hunters running together was copied by designers at Ogilvy & Mather from Patricia Vinnecombe's *Site B4* in the southern Drakensburg. In the logo design, the figures have been reversed to create a sense of forward movement, and the monochromatic figures have been rendered in the colors of the rainbow.¹³ The San rock art theme has provided official sponsors of the team, such as Vodacom, with a number of related ideas to create a variety of mainstream advertisements to promote their own products.

When the emphasis of South Africa's Olympic bid was broadened to be promoted as an "African" bid during 1995, the logo was changed to a map of Africa in which the "rainbow" was transformed into the striations of a zebra pelt. In the process, a well-used signifier of Africa—the zebra skin—became the symbol of the rainbow nation and Africa as a whole. This logo was, in fact, based on one developed by Iaan Bekker at Lindsay-Smithers-FCB for the Johannesburg City Council's unsuccessful civil bid in 1993. According to Bekker, the image of the continent and the colors were chosen to reflect:

... all associations that I considered good ones as opposed to the idea of darkest Africa—which I think is a completely colonial and imperial throwback to previous centuries. I tried to depolitize the whole approach, and to concentrate on a purely physical reference to the continent.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the dangers of advertisers using "ethnic" imagery it is significant to note that the mural painting and beadwork of a minority group, the Ndebele, also came to be widely used in South African design during this period. Once again, it could be argued that the influence of the dominant consumer group was the deciding factor in this choice in that the refined colors and strict geometry of Ndebele design has parallels in European modernism. Hence, commenting upon the popularity of the "Ndebele style," Ivor Powell makes the point that "one is far more likely to see Ndebele designs in the suburbs of traditionally white cities than in the traditionally black townships."¹⁵ In this way, the "ethnic" has become a commodity largely devoid of its original meaning that has been used by others for either political or commercial purposes. Hence "Ndebele-like" paintings are used to "decorate" litter bins in Durban in the heart of KwaZulu-Natal and *Coca-Cola*, a global product with a strong American identity, attempted to create a local identity by using a visual and verbal pun with their "Afri-can" by using similar motifs (c. 1996).

This type of adornment has not only been limited to products and their promotion, but also has been placed on buildings. Significantly, in an attempt at "Africanization," the neo-classical buildings of the South African National Gallery (SANG) in Cape Town have been decorated by Ndebele women. The logo for the

13 The term "rainbow nation," suggesting unity in diversity, was coined during the struggle by Archbishop Desmond Tutu after protesters had been sprayed by the police with purple dye. During the transitional period, he used the term to symbolize unity in the "new" nation. By the time of the Olympic bid, the term had gained widespread usage throughout South Africa.

14 I. Bekker, "FOR AFRICA: The Visual Identity for the Johannesburg Olympic Bid" in *Image and Text, A Journal for Design* (3) April 1994, (Pretoria: University of Pretoria): 7.

A full interview with Bekker and a comprehensive display of the application of the Johannesburg bid identity is featured in the April 1994 edition of *Image and Text*.

15 I. Powell, *Ndebele—A People and their Art* (Cape Town: Struik Publishers, 1995).

SANG is a clear indication of how this, in turn, provides a series of postcolonialist, post-modernist opportunities for the graphic designer to merge the neo-classical architectural form with an African identity. By 1997, this convention had been exhausted and in a *Mail and Guardian* article titled "Struggling to Relate to Africa," Nkwenkwe Nkomo a, judge at the Loerie Awards, described the entries which featured appropriated Ndebele design or a Basotho blanket as "bongo-bongo ads ... lack[ing] a South African identity."¹⁶

Another signifier of an African identity that was widely used was neither an ethnic motif nor an intrinsically African technique. It was the relief printing technique—the linocut. The Indian academic Uday Athavanker has noted that, although certain materials and techniques may not be specific to a region, it is how they are used within a culture that creates the sense of identity.¹⁷ Thus, relief printing may be a global medium but the lino prints by artists trained at the Rorkes Drift Mission school such as John Muafangejo (1943–1987) and Azaria Mbatha (b. 1941) differ from those of the European modernists such as Picasso (1881–1973).

An early example of using this technique to reposition corporate interests with the notion of nation building and a new sense of identity was Riccardo Cappeci's work for the Chamber of Mines—"Mining. The Foundation of Our Nation" (1989). A close analysis of the images of workers and managers with their bold distortions and perspective emphasizing hands and machines is reminiscent of the socialist spirit of the Mexican revolution in murals of Diego Rivera (1886–1957) and, significantly, the posters and murals that Ben Shahn (1898–1969) produced for the U.S. Federal Arts project. The idea that the art and crafts of a specific region carries a strong sense of identity is not unique to South Africa. However, it is significant that after the 1994 elections, designers increasingly took to the streets in search of a vernacular language that carried an equally strong sense of identity.

One of the curious characteristics of globalization is the almost inevitable desire for local and regional cultures to assert themselves in the face of global homogenization. It is in this context that the Durban designer Garth Walker's *i-jusi* functions. *i-jusi* is a special publication which is produced by Walker's agency, Orange Juice Design (OJD), to stimulate debate about the nature of national, regional, and local identity in graphic design in South Africa (Walker 2001 "*i-jusi*" 3 Durban: OJD). In the commercial sphere, OJD's design for the Durban's Metropolitan Tourism Authority initiative "Durban Africa" which is based on the design of a traditional Zulu earplug, provides one of the most graphic indications of the paradigm shift that has taken place in on a regional basis.

Before the 1950s the traditional Zulu earplug was worn in a hole pierced in the lobe of the ear as part of a ceremony marking a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.¹⁸ By the 1950s, the ear-

16 *Mail and Guardian*, June 6 to 12, 1997.

17 U. A. Athavanker, "Objects and Cultural Notions: Design Challenges in the Developing World," paper presented at 3rd International Design Education Forum of Southern Africa, "Design for Developing Countries" conference, CSIR, Pretoria, 24-27 March 1997, Pretoria RSA: Pretoria Technikon: 2.

18 F. Jolles, "Zulu Earplugs—A Study in Transformation" in *African Arts* Spring 1997 (Los Angeles: University of California): 49.

piercing ceremony had lost its ritual significance and had become cosmetic among a specific group of rural men who had migrated into Durban, for whom it was of a particular significance. These were the men who were employed to clean the floors of the hotels and flats in the city. This subcultural group identified themselves by wearing earplugs that were decorated with motifs derived from the logo of the Sunbeam wax polish can.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, these earplugs came to be highly sought after by collectors as attitudes towards the indigenous arts and crafts shifted. Significantly, Walker had used the starburst motif of the Zulu earplug for a mandala as a signifier of regional identity for the Durban Art Gallery (DAG). This poster design was intended to express the cultural shift that the DAG had made from a Victorian collection as its centerpiece to one which reflected the multicultural nature of the city. Therefore, in both of these works, we see the transformation of a specific identity for a traditional rite of passage ceremony, to rural migrant worker adornment during the 1950s, to a celebration of the post-apartheid city as a global tourist destination in the twenty-first century. This transformation reveals just how great the shift in South Africa has been, and how graphic design in South Africa bears witness to it.

Given that the government now has requested that the marketing and advertising industries account for themselves, one can only assume that the period I have just described is merely the first phase of the real paradigm shift that is to take place in South Africa. The final nature of this shift in South African design is still subject to speculation. However, given the increasingly rapid transformation of the education system at all levels, it is inevitable that professional practice soon will be enriched by growing numbers of practitioners who already possess a different world view. This is the view that will eventually enhance and inform the development of a new South African design philosophy and aesthetic. While this process may already have begun as a natural consequence of change in the country, there is the hope that it is an indication that “within our borders, the material and symbolic conditions for open exchange” finally will have been established.

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