Visions of the Past: The Graphic Design Student as Historian

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This paper discusses our pedagogical approach to developing graphic design students' historical consciousness, and our experiences implementing it at the University of Portsmouth, UK and Merz Akademie, Germany. Applying models of experiential learning (Moon, 2004, p. 114) in our planning and delivery, we developed a series of workshops in which students were encouraged to explore historical themes and, ultimately, to “[learn] by doing” (Race, 2010, p. 20) history. This research-informed teaching project emerged from a realization that, while much academic literature has considered the potential of illustration, film, photography and architecture as innovative conduits for historical narratives, little has been said with regard to graphic design’s possibilities in this area. We wanted to instill within graphic designers a desire to go beyond a simple appropriation (or “quoting”) of historical images and to foster an awareness of how their work can make meaningful contributions to wider debates on the past. From the poster to the website, from the communication campaign to the infographic, the graphic designer can have a significant role in shaping our understanding of history at a time when the past is subject to so much contestation.

The paper introduces the conceptual model upon which we based our teaching. Informed by the ideas of “postmodern” historians and thinkers (Linda Hutcheon, Hayden White, etc.), we discuss our term “Vistoriography” and how it enabled us to focus on three key issues: an alignment of theory and practice in the studio space; a focus on the role
of the graphic designer as communicator of historical narratives; and the physical process of “designing” history. We then reflect on the successes and obstacles encountered thus far. Here, we discuss the differences – in terms of historical subjects, self-perception and political awareness – between UK and Germany students, and conclude by posing some questions for future development.

• Author(s) Biography:
Olly Gruner is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Culture at the University of Portsmouth. His research explores historical representation across a range of visual media. He is the author of Screening the Sixties: Hollywood Cinema and the Politics of Memory (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), co-editor (with Peter Krämer) of Grease Is the Word: Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon (Anthem, 2019), and has published work on history-telling and memory in various journals and edited collections. Recently, he has been involved in a series of theory-practice collaborations with illustrators and graphic designers, which probe the potential of images as an innovative form of historiography. This has led to published “graphic research papers” in the journals Rethinking History and The Poster, as well as talks, lectures and workshops.

Dan McCabe is a Senior Lecturer and Level 6 coordinator on the BA(Hons) Graphic Design course at the University of Portsmouth. As a practitioner, he has over 20 years of experience in both a full-time and freelance capacity, working predominantly within the fields of packaging and branding. Dan regularly publishes visual research and self-initiated projects to a personal online platform www.graphicamusing.co.uk, which he also uses as a pedagogical resource within the various professional practice modules that he coordinates. His research interests are focused on exploring the existence of heraldic language within 21st Century British society. This includes looking at how heraldic language is used in corporate and cultural branding, and the parallels between the ancient practice of heraldry and the contemporary practice of brand identity design. More recently, Dan has collaborated on two Interreg funded projects, and has also co-authored a “graphic research paper” that has subsequently been published in The Poster.