Eleven Bullets: A Counter Assault on Subjectivity and the Creation of Meaning

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ELEVEN BULLETS: A COUNTER ASSAULT ON SUBJECTIVITY AND THE CREATION OF MEANING.

by

JASON WALKER

(Under the Direction of Santanu Majumdar)

ABSTRACT

Eleven Bullets: A Counter Assault on Subjectivity and the Creation of Visual Meaning explores the sources of visual meaning as a combination of shared personal experience among the mass audience and the perpetuation of this meaning via popular cultural applications. It proposes that the analysis of an artist’s personal experience with sensory perception is the foundation for his or her ability to instill meaning within a design. By understanding how we make associations with experiences that are pleasurable, painful, safe, dangerous, passive, aggressive etc., we organize our world according to visual stereotypes. These stereotypes help us navigate the world efficiently and safely. They also directly influence our instinctual responses to visual stimuli.

The artworks in this thesis are designed to use the same inherent meanings within the visual elements to communicate with two polar audiences: liberal and conservative. This is accomplished, not by changing the inherent meaning of the element, but by positioning it in different ratios and contexts to appeal to the unique sensibilities of the targeted audience. This thesis argues against changing or denying the presence of meaning, a practice that is detrimental to all aspects of communication, and instead advocates for teaching competency and responsibility in the manipulation of these elements to communicate.

The works utilizes gun control propaganda for the purpose of content only. It is not the goal of this thesis to advocate for any particular stance or policy but rather to demonstrate that a singular visual lexicon can be effective in creating meaning across a variety of audiences, even those fundamentally opposed to one another.

INDEX WORDS: Subjectivity, Meaning, Visual Meaning, Sensory Perception
ELEVEN BULLETS: A COUNTER ASSAULT ON SUBJECTIVITY AND THE CREATION OF MEANING

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IV
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Jerry, Debbie, and Jimmy, and to my grandmother Carolyn, for their love and support of my dreams and aspirations. Thank you for being candid with me about life and for letting me dare to dream anyway. It is also dedicated to my best friend Garry W. McKee II for his friendship and guidance over the last 15 years. You set a remarkable example that I desperately needed to find my way to this point in my life. Thanks for reaching out to me all those years ago. Most importantly, it is dedicated to my amazing wife Crystal, whose unconditional love, grace, patience, understanding, encouragement, and beauty has sustained me through this process. We made it, Babe!

I love you all!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Purpose

In the wake of Post-Modernism, as a philosophical, literary, and artistic movement, meaning has become non-existent or, at the very least, a constantly indefinable and very often elusive pursuit for the visual artist. The awareness and respect for the multitude of cultures and subcultures that currently vie for influence and recognition have shattered the mass culture, fragmenting it into a collection of fundamentally opposed self-absorbed factions. This presents a major problem for the field of mass communication as it suggests that there is no baseline, no foundational group, no standard, and no majority. There is no right and wrong answer and no grounds for judgment, no moral baseline. We celebrate this ambiguity as a new kind of enlightenment and revel in our ability to find contradictions in absolutes.

This pursuit is not without its costs. Our population has never been more factionalized, never more divided. Amicable discourse between fundamentally opposed groups is a lost art. Compromise for the good of the majority cannot happen because there appears to be no majority. We see these consequences reflected in our government, our media, and our schools. We see this ambiguity crippling our students and tying the hands of our educators. For students and practitioners of visual communication, it presents a fundamental problem.

This new sensitivity, cripples, degrades, and even eliminates the foundational understandings of visual communication for the young design student, equipping them
instead with selective skills and techniques that have no grounding in human experience. These rules and best practices, while accurate, lack a foundation in humanity that makes them meaningful. They become harder to internalize and leave the design student with no measurable rubric upon which to base his or her design decisions. Relying on rules rather than understanding, he or she will become technicians rather than thinking, reasoning, articulating creators of visual meaning. Emphasis on style and technique replace competence and understanding of the audience in visual communication. This is a poor substitute and reduces the discipline to a matter of being clever. The visual lexicon is no longer a foundation upon which designers and artists can expound upon, or even challenge, because we no longer possess it. Instead, a new language must be developed and learned for each audience and it must constantly be redefined and relearned, as meaning becomes more and more subjective and based on personal rather than shared experience. In our hubris, we require the audience to learn our visual language as well. With regard to mass communication, I reject this approach, and propose instead, a return to experienced-based applications of meaning grounded in shared experience across culture that are further perpetuated by the influence of art and world history as well as popular culture.

The works in this thesis utilize a visual language that I have spent 10 years developing an understanding of. It is not a new language, but perhaps a forgotten one that existed before the arrival of post-modernism. It is based on an analysis of the visual characteristics of experiences that are universal among humanity. It is reinforced by continuous application throughout world and art history. It is further informed by the
analysis of various art forms within the American popular culture context, which I believe to be the primary means of consumption of visual communication among the mass audience. It asserts that the inherent meanings (semantics) of color, line, shape, texture, value and space are the result of the brain’s natural tendency to process and analyze through sensory perception the various aspects of an experience and assign common values to those experiences in the interest of safety and efficient navigation of our environment. It contends that this very experience is the key to visual communication between the designer and the audience. It utilizes the principles of design as a visual structure (syntax) for the organization and communication of meaning. It relies on shared personal experience (pragmatics) among the mass audience to inform their understanding of visual meaning. It understands that the anomalies within the audience will impose their own meaning and it accepts this risk. It places emphasis on the importance of speaking to the majority through shared experience, rather than diluting meaning to avoid conflict.

The works in this thesis are arranged into a visual continuum and designed to communicate to two polar audiences utilizing the same visual language and conventional understandings. The works demonstrate that visual meaning does not have to be subjectively altered to communicate across the various aspects of a culture. Instead, mastering the visual language gives us the versatility and competence we need to communicate effectively without having to redefine our visual lexicon for each new audience. I believe that using a visual lexicon based in shared experiences provides a baseline for visual communicators to begin designing and facilitates a faster
internalization of the inherent meanings of the formal elements that can be augmented by research into the unique aspects of the target audience to further enhance meaning. It is a broad-stroke approach to creating a foundation of visual meaning for the designer upon which he or she can then expound through research, without having to define a new visual lexicon from project to project.

The work utilizes the political issue of Gun Control to provide content, but it should be noted that the purpose of this thesis is not to advance a political issue. I am not interested in having a political discussion about guns. Instead, the thesis attempts to prove that visual language, as it exists, is effective and efficient for any audience and that subjectively altering the language to fit a personal agenda only makes communication more difficult.

Finally, the work itself creates an experience for the viewer that forces him/her to encounter dissenting arguments in an environment where he cannot avoid them. Unlike the living room where the viewer can tailor his or her visual consumption to agreeable content, the gallery presents various arguments from both sides of the selected issue of gun control and contrasts them against each other in an effort to illustrate that both sides of the issue are filled with legitimate concerns and motivations that should be taken seriously by the opponent rather than being written off as an inferior ideology.

In the following sections, this paper will explain a variety of concepts including the creating of objective and subjective meaning, semantics, syntax and pragmatics as three necessary components of visual and verbal communication, stereotypes and tropes as a foundational aspects of visual literacy, and the presence of visual equity as the
counteractive force to subjectivity that perpetuates the audience’s understanding of a visual lexicon grounded in personal experience and pop culture applications.

The Necessities of Visual and Verbal Communication

Based on my teaching experiences and my interactions with people in general, I believe that the average American citizen is not visually articulate, but they do possess an instinctual level of visual literacy that allows them to react to and apply meaning to visual images. I believe this ability comes from the shared personal experiences that we have in common from being raised, educated, and socialized within a common cultural context. Consider the following illustration.

As a child, I injured myself on a pointed object such as a knife, a piece of glass, or the thorns on a rose bush. This experience created a variety of sensory data for me. Instinctively, my brain processed this experience through sensory input identifying physical characteristics of the object that injured me. The thorn, the knife, and the glass have similar shapes. Each object has an acute point that when touched causes a painful sensation. As a result, my brain learned to associate sharp angles with potential sources of pain and danger. Because most individuals have had a similar experience, they also share an association of pain and danger with sharp angles. This shared experience becomes of utmost importance when the designer is attempting to communicate some aspect of pain or danger via a two-dimensional visual message. It provides pragmatics, one of three necessary criteria for successful verbal and visual communication.

Verbal and written language is a combination of abstract elements (letterforms and sounds) and the principles that govern their organization into a form of clear
communication (semantics plus syntax). Visual language functions in much the same way. Myers says that for any language, in its written, spoken, or visual form, clarity is dependent upon the presence of at least three conditions:

1) Semantics, that is, the recognition of the meaning of a word or image; 2) Syntax, or structure, the way the words, phrases, sentences, or images are put together—their relative agreement and position; and, 3) Pragmatics, the interconnection, or inter–relationship with the reader, listener, or viewer—the existence of shared knowledge. (Myers 4)

All languages require the presence of these three conditions, and when we fail to include one or more of the three, communication is inhibited.

Because visual communication is an attempt at communication, it is a language. Understanding it requires Semantics (recognition of the meaning of an image), Syntax (structure in the way the image is put together), and Pragmatics (an interconnectedness, interrelationship, with viewer, and the existence of shared knowledge related to life experience with similar images or elemental characteristics). It follows to reason that if all three criteria are critical factors toward the creation of verbal and visual meaning, then the absence or distortion of any one part would disrupt or degrade meaning. If we look at each of the three parts of his argument, it seems that for the visual communicator, pragmatics must never take a back seat to semantics or syntax.

Visual imagery is a combination of the elements in different proportions to create a recognizable symbol or other visual representation. Line, shape, color, texture, value and space are all organized by the designer using his or her chosen medium to produce an image based upon style, approach, choice and technical expertise. In design, the elements are equivalent to the letters of an alphabet. In the correct arrangement, letters
create words; words create sentences, which in turn, create paragraphs, and so on. The
elements function in a similar way. Separately, the elements do have inherent meanings,
but these are instinctually assigned, based on our physical experiences with the
environment. Arranged within the structure of the principles, the elements begin to
create more meaning. When they are combined to create symbols or imagery, the
elements create an even deeper level of meaning. With each additional level of syntax, a
clearer meaning is established. Photo-realistic images have a higher degree of syntax and
pragmatics than do abstract expressionistic images because they incorporate a higher
degree of pragmatics and multiple levels of meaning. The element by itself has meaning.
The symbol or image has meaning. When the elements that make up the symbol are
altered to elicit a prescribed emotional or physiological response, they imbue the symbol
with an even greater sense of pragmatics. Both elements and images have meaning, but
the number of people who can decode the meaning increases with the complexity of the
syntax and the pragmatics instilled in the image. This is in my opinion the real value of a
visual communicator. Our ability to organize a visual design to communicate by
assembling elements (semantics), principles (syntax), and experience (pragmatics) makes
our visual communication effective. Therefore, why should we try to change our visual
lexicon, when it is, ultimately, versatile enough to communicate with anyone about
anything? That is, of course, provided we are willing to invest into the work, the time it
takes to understand our audience so that we can communicate efficiently. Consider the
following illustration. When a writer sits down to write a book about World War II, he or
she uses the standard alphabet as the basic elements of writing. If the writer then chooses
to author a book about peace, he or she would merely have to rearrange the alphabet into different words, not change the meaning of the letters themselves. It stands to reason then that a line with its inherent meaning can be used the same way from one design to the next, but may be arranged in a different context to communicate a different meaning.

For the visual designer, the principles of design are the equivalent of syntax. They are the strategies, methods, and results that we pursue to create structure and evaluate formal compositional correctness. The compositional elements of a design can be arranged in an infinite variety of ways, all of which can be evaluated and judged by how well they create principle concepts such as unity, variety, and balance. To some extent, within certain types of art, this is where the artist stops in their effort to communicate, as is the case in figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1: Jackson Pollock “August Rhythm #30,” Enamel on canvas, 1950.

(Image Courtesy of metmuseum.org)
As a designer educated in visual language, I fully appreciate the works of Jackson Pollock. However, among the population as a whole, I am among a small minority. I am a member of the Art World equipped with a set of knowledge, skills, motivations and experiences that are not universal among the mass population. I have been trained or trained myself to understand concepts such as unity, rhythm, and balance. I can find all of these in the painting and appreciate it on a purely formal level, even if I cannot derive Pollock’s intended meaning from the work. Given the context of a title or an artist’s statement, I can further derive additional meaning from the work. For the mass audience, I believe the experience of an encounter with a Pollock painting is very different.

The mass audience has never had formal training. They have never been taught to describe, analyze, interpret or judge a work of art, using the vocabulary and conventional understandings that members of the “art world” have. Without this training, what should be second nature, for the artist, becomes gibberish to the untrained viewer. Perhaps this is why, when untrained people encounter a “Pollock” or a “Mondrian,” they see it as random, meaningless, and easily reproduced.

Conversely, when the audience encounters a still life, they can assign meaning to the elements within. They are familiar with the cow skull and the apple, the fabric and bottle. The elements have been integrated into more complex arrangements that yield clearer meaning. The meaning may not be nearly as complex as that which Pollock attempted to express with his drips and splashes, but it is clearer. Even if the artist chooses to use expressive color to communicate mood, the audience can still understand the work to a greater level of clarity. Though they cannot articulate why everything is
painted in cool colors, instinctively, they may assign a degree of sadness to the work; their metabolism might slow, and so on. Myers goes on to discuss the necessity for meaning in visual fields.

Perceptually, all visual fields must have meaning for human beings. Whatever we see, our brain interprets, desperately seeking recognizable forms, objects, or evidence of humanity. The process is autonomic (subconscious) and uncontrollable, one that goes on all the time in spite of anything we may try to do to stop it. It is a survival characteristic that we could call the perceptual imperative. When our brain is unable to decipher meaning from the visual field, we turn off, tune out, ignore, or disregard it because we cannot deal with such a situation emotionally. (Myers 4)

From earlier in the text, Myers discusses the audience’s tendency to reject visual fields without meaning. In this line of thinking, he states the following:

If we cannot figure out such a puzzle quickly, we usually become frustrated and give up, concluding that it probably isn’t worth the effort anyhow. This kind of reaction to a circumstance is what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. When a belief and a behavior are in conflict, either the belief or the behavior must change to conform. Such conflict or dissonance cannot be tolerated by anyone for very long. (Myers 4)

Cognitive dissonance is the ultimate enemy of the visual communicator. It represents complete failure, regardless of how beautiful the achieved form is. Visual communicators cannot afford to disregard the audience or write them off as not being smart enough to discern what was intended. Artist statements and titles are not available tools for the visual communicator. There is no additional means with which to communicate the artistic intent of a design artifact on the grocery aisle or the freeway. The visual communication must function efficiently and accurately. Failure to do so results in confusion and catastrophe.
Objective and Subjective Creations of Meaning.

The consequences of miscommunication range from simply offending or confusing someone to utter cataclysmic catastrophe. As designers communicating with the mass audience, we must be wary of the messages we generate. We must be sure that the visual language we are using is one that is relevant and meaningful to the majority of people. Because the population within western culture is so diverse, we must rely on the shared experiences that are universal and time tested to communicate with the audience. Jack Fredrick Myers warns the designer to be wary of projecting his or her unique experiences onto a design as these experiences can skew our understanding of meaning and our ability to communicate. He defines two emotional modes in art: the subjective and the objective. For artists working in the subjective mode, the expression of personal feelings and experiences is the main goal, even if achieving it comes at the expense of successful visual communication to the mass audience. According to Myers, “The artist is primarily concerned with what is taking place in his or her own mind unaffected by the external world—‘a kind of baring of the soul, filled with personal metaphors and symbols, and expressed in gestural form.’” According to him, these works “can still be appreciated on an intellectual level, but often hold little interest to the untutored viewer who lacks professional guidance. (Myers, 162)

Much of the subjective approach to assigning meaning comes from localized personal experiences and traumas that can skew our understanding of the conventional meanings associated with the elements and the images and symbols they comprise. Consider the following illustration.
Suppose someone says that green is the color most associated with danger, torture and captivity. Suppose they say that no matter what everyone else thinks, he or she believes that green is the color best suited to symbolically communicate these concepts. He or she would be applying subjective meaning to his or her understanding of color and asking that everyone accept it. This would be difficult as the majority of people’s experience with the color green is not nearly so severe. Furthermore, for this person to encounter green in its typical application, the meaning it is meant to communicate would be lost and largely negative associations with the product or service that uses green would be made. If this person were an artist, using green to symbolize danger would drastically impact his or her ability to use color to communicate.

Now evaluate these associations of green with danger, within the context of the following circumstances. As a child, the person was locked in a small room with green walls. Everyday, a person dressed in green came into the room and beat the person with a green stick. For food, the person was served a bitter green soup, and at the end of the week, he or she was released. Would this additional knowledge help to explain his or her association with the color green as dangerous? Would it be enough to change the symbolic associations of the color green from concepts like fresh, organic, cool, and eco-friendly, to torture, captivity and danger? Even if shared with the entire audience, would it be enough to counteract the millions of other visual applications of green within the culture? Would it be enough to subvert the empirical understanding that the audience has from its experiences with green grass, cool green salads and vegetables, logos and brands associated with the above descriptors that utilize the color green? It is unlikely.
Furthermore, what if the audience were never given the contextual circumstances of the artist’s trauma? The meaning of the artist’s symbolic use of green in an artifact would be difficult, if not impossible to decode. The impact of the artist’s work would be lessened, if not destroyed. For the visual communicator, artist statements are not an option. Myers says that “we must always be cognizant of the fact that our own responses to specific situations may not be generic—that is, the same as those of the majority of viewers.” Simply having had some traumatic or life changing experience, or encountering and investing myself into some neophyte philosophy that alters or impacts my perception of something like an element or a letter in the alphabet does not empower me to expect everyone else to learn and adopt my visual lexicon as their own. Instead, as a designer, I have to accept the responsibility that comes with being an agent of mass communication and resist my personal prejudices. If I choose not to, and instead proceed to imbue a design with my own personal experiences that are counter-intuitive to the mass visual lexicon, my work ceases to be mass communication and instead becomes a work of self-expression.

This approach severely cripples the designer’s ability to communicate to a mass audience. By choosing to redefine meaning according to personal isolated experience independent of influences from the external physical world and mass cultural context within which the viewer exists, the designer makes the analysis of a work of art completely dependant upon understanding his or her individual visual lexicon as it was informed by isolated, unique and highly personal experience. Furthermore, it makes the accurate interpretation of a work completely dependent upon having intimate knowledge
of the designer’s experience. This in turn makes judgment impossible, as meaning rests solely in the designer’s hands, to which he can arbitrarily redefine meaning to suit his goals and defend his position. This bodes poorly for visual communication, and for any other type of communication as it allows for meaning to become distorted, conflicting or utterly absent.

If we refuse to accept that within visual language, there is no shared meaning, that individualized experiences are equal to shared experience, or that views conflicting with the majority are equally important, then efficient communication cannot occur. It would be the equivalent of randomly arranging letters into clusters and expecting them to be interpretable and meaningful. Without shared knowledge and experience between the designer and the audience, informing our visual and verbal choices, no communication is possible. However, if we base our understanding of the inherent meaning on the shared experiences that come from being born and raised within a culture, we can begin to communicate much more efficiently and effectively.

Pragmatism and Objectivity

Pragmatist theory, as put forth by educator and philosopher John Dewey, grounds our ability to interpret “aesthetic” experiences through our interactions with our everyday environment. Typically, our interactions with the environment are similar to those of others who exist within the same environment. Dewey drew this connection in his book *Art as Experience*. Dewey concluded that there was no fundamental difference between ordinary and aesthetic experience. For him, they could differ in degree but not in kind.
In *Varieties of Visual Experience*, Professor Edmund Burke Feldman paraphrases Dewey’s philosophy as follows:

What accounts for this virtually universal and continuous possibility of the aesthetic? According to Dewey, it emerges from the interactions of every human organism with its environment. Those interactions create conditions for our awareness of needs, our determination of purposes, our encounter with resistance, and our focusing of effort, followed by the disappointment or fulfillment of our expectations. Thus living itself contains the seeds of art, that is, the seeds of artistic action and aesthetic response.

It is important to realize that Dewey makes no fundamental distinction between the processes involved in making art and experiencing art. This is because “the artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.” As for the perceiver, “his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent.” Thus aesthetic perception entails the viewer’s reenactment of the artist’s creative decision-making and perhaps his or her personal experience. Psychologically, at least, the viewer confronts similar problems to those the artist confronted in endeavoring to create form out of the materials presented by life and the technical challenges of a particular medium or artistic tradition.” (Feldman 252)

According to this passage, Feldman contends that Dewey’s perception of the artist/viewer relationship is interdependent, symbiotic, and grounded in shared experience. The artist draws on personal experiences with the environment to instill meaning in the work and the viewer measures the work against personal experience with the same environment to assign meaning. In layman’s terms, the designer uses the audience’s experience-based assumptions to clarify meaning.

For designers, the opportunity to do work that aims primarily for self-expression is a rarity. Much of our work is client based, with content that is dictated by the client. Our skills are valuable in that they allow us to anticipate the aesthetic responses of the client’s audience, even if we are not among that audience. Myers refers to this approach as working in the objective mode.
In the objective mode, self-expression is allied with purposeful communication. That includes all art for advertising; sales of products, services, or ideas for public relations; corporate identity; for any sort or promotion; and for information or instruction, that is for dissemination of information. Obviously, it also includes most of fine art and design. Communication has been the primary function of art from the beginning of time. (Myers 162)

Within a pragmatic approach to design, correct interpretation of the intended message is the ultimate goal of the visual communicator. Objectively creating meaning relies on shared knowledge and experience to facilitate communication between the designer and his or her audience. Designers are obligated to communicate to an audience within that audience’s visual and verbal lexicon. If the designer is not familiar with this lexicon, then he or she must research to better understand it. Failure to do so results in the creation of aesthetically pleasing decoration and visual gibberish.

It would be the equivalent of using an Arabic calligraphic alphabet to communicate to people who have never learned that alphabet. Instinctively, we can appreciate the letterforms for their grace and beauty. However, understanding these symbols as a verbal language will be very difficult. There is no shared knowledge of these letterforms among the target population. The shared knowledge and experience (pragmatics) necessary to decode the symbols is not present rendering the artifact meaningless.

When shared knowledge is present however, the result is clear, concise, and compelling visual communication that affects some kind of change in the target audience’s behavior. Designers can come to understand this shared knowledge by analyzing personal experience and understanding how it relates a nearly universal system
of inherent symbolic, associative and emotional responses derived directly from the way in which our brain processes sensory data. According to Myers, these responses coincide with the most viewers’ expectations.

“The brain organizes these responses into a system of stereotypes, which are then exploited by artists to communicate to audiences through various applications of visual communication within a culture.” (Myers 165)

Stereotypes, Tropes and Visual Equity

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are widely held, but fixed and oversimplified images; they are ideas of a particular type of person or thing. They are for the most part, valuable and positive, but the connotations attached to the term itself are largely negative. Whether positive or negative, it cannot be denied that they inform our understanding of the physical world and symbolic meanings within culture.

They also serve a primal, utilitarian purpose. Stereotypes help us to organize a complicated world by reducing the need to examine everything individually on a first hand basis. They allow us to move through life without having to experience everything again and again as if it were the first time. It would be exhausting and dangerous to try to function without them. It would also be impossible to communicate both verbally and visually. Consider the following example.
Seeing, smelling, and touching a rose provides a variety of sensory stimuli and a plethora of information related to the physical and cultural world as it relates to the rose. Over the course of our lives as we experience a rose in various situations, we formulate understandings about the physicality of that rose and make conventional associations based on sensory perception.

One of these experiences is that of pricking a finger on the thorn or a rose bush. Through this experience we understand the thorn visually and physically. Consider the thorn (figure 1.2). Through sensory perception, we see it as a shape with visual characteristics like a point (acute angle) and we feel it as a sharp object. Even from our first interactions with the sharp point/acute angle, we begin to make associations with it through the various sensory data that we derive from the experience. These associations
are reinforced through additional interaction with objects that share similar characteristics. Knives, spear points, arrowheads, and broken glass typically share the presence of the acute angle with the thorn. Interaction with this angle, resulting in injury or pain, creates an awareness of potential danger. As such, our associative response to the visual manifestation of an acute angle becomes a sense of tension, danger, aggression or pain. Experiencing pain as a result of the interaction with a sharp point is almost, if not, a universal experience that transcends cultural boundaries. Just like it, there are millions of other experiences that come from interacting with rounded objects and obtuse angles that communicate safety or a lack of aggression. A natural and universal aspect of being a young child is the practice of chewing on objects such as toys. Young children just learning to walk are innately clumsy and prone to falling. In an effort to make the environment safer for the child, designers have made it a standard practice to round off the corners of toys designed for children of a certain age. Thus when the inevitable happens, and the child falls or puts the object in his or her mouth, sharp corners are not present to cut or puncture the child. Damage is minimized.

The associations we make from interactions with the physical environment are not limited to the element of shape. Every visual component possesses its own set of associations and affective responses that can be directly related to sensory perception and personal experience that is shared universally across cultures.

In the hands of a trained designer who has internalized the vocabulary and abstract concepts of two-dimensional design, this becomes a valuable reservoir of knowledge and empathy upon which to draw from in the effort to communicate meaning.
The designer creates meaning by analyzing the physical forms of the identified experience, and manipulating the elements to mimic the physical characteristics of the form within the experience. Essentially, the artist or designer internalizes this knowledge by becoming familiar with stereotypical associations and effective aesthetic responses to a treatment of an element and utilizes those stereotypes to elicit a desired aesthetic response from the majority of the target audience.

As designers, we should not fear the term stereotype, but rather embrace it. Stereotypes can without a doubt be corrupted to disparage a group of people, but I have found them to be much more useful and positive than they are negative.

Applying the idea of a positive stereotype to people, consider that our perceptions directly influence whether we choose to interact with someone or not. Employers use stereotyping to sort potential candidates for a position. They make assumptions based on factors such as experience, education, and recommendations. During interviews, issues relating to appearance, communication, and interpersonal skills are examined.

How exhausting and time-consuming would it be if we could not use stereotypes to speed up this process? What if every application that arrived had to be vigorously examined and tested? Within this practice, there is an acceptable level of risk that the best candidate will be overlooked. It is quite possible that the person with the least professional experience and a perceived lower quality of work will have superior insight and revolutionize the work associated with the job he or she applied for. It is not likely, but it is possible. In our effort to be efficient, we risk missing that person. We accept the risk.
Our entire belief system is founded on stereotypes, and rejecting them throws everything into question. We grant people holding a PhD or an M.F.A. a certain degree of validity and expertise that we do not grant to those without them. We assume that if a person has earned a PhD, then he or she has done a sufficient amount of research and studying, and met a certain level of academic performance to be awarded the degree. We stereotype these people as being smarter than the undergraduate, the high school student, and the dropout. If we reject that stereotype, then we call into question this validity of the PhD and equate him to the dropout. Now, despite having earned a terminal degree, he must prove himself an expert every time. Without this proof, his views and assertions are as valid as those of the dropout. We claim to reject the use of stereotypes because the word is so negative, but they are vital to our very existence and our ability to efficiently navigate the world.

Utilizing the stereotype, artists have developed a sort of visual shorthand for communicating elements and aspects of a narrative quickly and efficiently to the audience. We call these kinds of stereotypes, tropes.
Tropes

Tropes are commonly recurring literary and rhetorical devices, motifs or clichés in creative works. These clichés are utilized by narrative mediums such as literature, sequential art, illustration, and animation to quickly communicate aspects of a character personality and place within a narrative. One of the most prolific and beloved conveyors of the visual narrative in the 20th century is Disney.

Figure 1.3: “Angelina Jolie/Maleficent Comparison”

(Image Courtesy of blogs.tribune.com.pk)
When we exam common characteristics of Disney protagonists and antagonists, we find similar uses of elemental approaches among the character designs. (Figures 1.3 thru 4.10.)

Figure 1.4: “Maleficent Shape Analysis”

(Image Courtesy of blogs.tribune.com.pk)
Consider the two versions of Maleficent from Disney’s animated feature Sleeping Beauty and its live action reimagining “Maleficent.” In the original design (Figure 1.3), the character is designed with a series of very angular shapes. For the live action version from 2014, a variety of make up techniques and prosthetics were applied to enhance the angularity of Angelina Jolie’s face. In figure 1.4, I have provided a comparison and breakdown of the shapes used to create the animated version of Maleficent. She is a combination of angular shapes like broken shards of glass combined to communicate her personality.

In contrast, the protagonist Aurora, in the animated version is composed of much more graceful curves and flowing lines in the hair and face. The softening of the features

Figure 1.5: “Aurora from Disney’s ‘Sleeping Beauty’”
(Image Courtesy of deadline.com)
provides sharp contrast to the angularity of Maleficent and provides hierarchy and structure for the audience to quickly assign values of good and evil at the beginning of the movie (Figure 1.32). In terms of the trope being used here, Disney villains are commonly composed on a mix of round and curvy shapes. The female villains such as Maleficent are made more angular while the male villains are designed with more curves. One of the most common criticisms of this practice is that androgyny is equated with evil in the visual lexicon of Disney, which plays a huge role in popular culture and perpetuates these stereotypes. To some extent, these stereotypes and tropes are grounded in the reality of our perceived environment and heavily perpetuated by the media and other aspects of popular culture from which the mass audience’s visual vocabulary is heavily informed. I do not contend that it is right or that it is not hurtful to select subgroups, but I do see value in the efficiency with which it allows artists and designers to communicate to the mass audience.

Something else to consider with these stereotypes is that they have been used throughout art history and are still being used in all aspects of popular culture. With each use, the associated meaning and effective emotional response is reinforced. Like Pavlov’s dog, which salivates at the sound of a bell, we have been conditioned to respond to them in a certain way. These conventions, stereotypes, and tropes have what I refer to as a high degree of visual equity instilled in them, and changing them will be extremely difficult as long as they are being used by the mass culture.
Visual Equity

In visual communication and branding we use the term “Brand Equity” to describe the familiarity and emotional investment that a population has with a brand and all of its supporting trademarks, logotypes, points of purchase materials, advertising, etc. To say that a brand has “strong” or “high” brand equity is to say that the audience is heavily familiar with it. Coca Cola has strong brand equity. Consumers know what it is and have specific expectations with regard to it as a product and a brand. It also has strong visual equity in terms of the shapes and colors that it employs in its marketing and product design materials. First and foremost is the Coca Cola Script (Figure 1.6), the main logo found on Coca Cola classic labels, boxes, cans, t-shirts, billboards, etc. To see these flowing letterforms is to instantly recognize and associate the positive feelings we have with the soft drink.

Figure 1.6: “Coke Bottle Logo”

(Image Courtesy of blakedesignsolutions.com)
The particular hue of red as seen in figure 1.6 is also a signature element in Coca-Cola’s branding. To deviate from this hue would be to cause confusion and suspicion of the product. Because the logo has been around for so long, the company can now experiment with additional marks that are associated with the brand as long as it continues to use consistent elements from the original logo.

Visual Equity functions in much the same way that brand equity does. It refers to continuous use and perpetuation of stereotypical design traits and associated meanings over time. In other words, the more often we use a convention, stereotype, or trope, the more difficult it will be to deviate from it, even if there is a perceived moral or cultural need to do so. Taking the example of the Disney villain again, imagine if the character designer were to give Maleficent the same graceful curves and flowing lines that were used to portray Aurora. The contrast between the two characters would be dramatically reduced and the assigning of roles to the characters would be hindered. Visual communication that was once very efficient has now become more complicated and possibly even destroyed.

Caveat

At this point, I’d like to offer a final consideration with regard to the use of stereotypes and tropes to inform visual language. The inherent meanings of the elements and principles are emphasized or deemphasized, depending upon the context within which they are portrayed. Visual communication is not an exact science with irrefutable laws but a social science. It is composed of a flexible, malleable set of elements and
principles that exist in a symbiotic relationship with one another and with the symbols and iconography that they compose and interact with.

The inherent, symbolic, associative, and emotional meanings cannot be changed but they can be directed, depending on the ratio of the elemental treatments, imagery, proximity, culture, and grouping within a larger body of work. Directing it should be the visual communicator’s primary goal, realized in the creation of meaningful visual communication.

As a designer and a human being, I am aware of the inconsistencies between stereotypes and the actuality of the real world. As such, I acknowledge that they are only stereotypes and not absolutes. However, I am also aware of their value to the designer and the design student. Understanding and mastering these stereotypes provides a baseline for beginning the construction of visual meaning. This baseline can be used to evaluate the effectiveness and clarity of our work. Outside of a standardized visual lexicon, we are left guessing how to best communicate with our audience.

I would never take on or participate in a project that deliberately attacks a minority group within the population. That being said, I cannot deny the value of the stereotype and the trope to visual communication. As a responsible designer, I cannot alter my work or deviate from mass visual language when mass communication is my goal. I am obligated to communicate using the visual lexicon of the masses; failure to do so results in degraded communication and confusion among the audience. It costs time and money for the client, the designer, and the audience, which I believe to be counterproductive to the discipline of design, as I understand it.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND VISUAL INFLUENCES.

The work I developed for this show has three primary influential forces that played a part in its creation. These forces include an immense appreciation for the poster designs associated with the movement of Pictorial Modernism, the philosophical influences of John Dewey and Carl Jung, and the visual influences of my indirect and direct visual precursors and predecessors. In the following pages, I will briefly discuss each of these sets of influences.

Pictorial Modernism

If there is a visual movement or time period that my work was most influenced by it would have to be Pictorial Modernism, a period of graphic design that draws heavily on a combination of illustration and the influence of modern art and its penchant for abstraction and expression. Many of the artists I discuss as my direct and indirect influences were key figures during this period. They are often also the influences that my direct influences cite when they discuss their own work.

According to Phillip Meggs, “poster designers —influenced by cubism and constructivism, yet cognizant of the need to maintain a pictorial reference if their posters were to communicate persuasively with the general public—walked a tightrope between the creation of expressive and symbolic images on the one hand, and concern for the total visual organization of the picture plane on the other.” (2012, p.276)

In making this work, I feel as if I too have walked a similar tightrope, choosing to use a somewhat realistic approach to the illustration, while still abstracting them to
various degrees, depending upon their place in the continuum. I drew a correlation between the level of abstraction and distance of the image from the center. Images at the extreme ends of the continuum, while still closer to realism than abstraction, do have a significantly higher degree of abstraction. Those closer to the center appear to utilize color and shape in a more realistic way. In the posters that are positioned near the extreme, the edges of the various shapes and color fields have a higher degree of contrast, flattening them out and making them feel much more simplified, while the images that are closer to the center have blurred and blended edges, creating a higher degree of volume in the forms, rather than two dimensionality in the shapes. Color is used much more expressively in the extremes with a higher degree of saturation, while the colors at the center are more tonal, and neutralized.

As graphic designers, we never really left pictorial modernism behind. We still see it today in the field of illustration and advertising. However, the increased dependence upon photography to quickly get the images we need for a significant portion of graphic design, has made illustration somewhat of a rarity. Still, when illustration is utilized in a logo or a label, it evokes a sense of quality and the handmade that people seem to appreciate in a post digital-revolution world.

Philosophical Influences

In retrospect, it makes sense to me that I would gravitate to a philosophy like Pragmatism in light of the life I’ve led. For me, life has always had to be about practicality. Neither of my parents was educated and their incomes reflected so. They
worked hard and sacrificed as much as possible for my siblings and me to have opportunities that they did not. They preached education and I listened. They promoted our interests as much as possible and encouraged my drawing talent. That being said, the word “no” is one that I know well. My parents did their best to avoid telling me no, but ultimately, they had to and often. As I matured, I came to embrace a phrase commonly used in my home: *life is not fair.*

I grew up with the awareness that my goals were not easily accomplished. In fact, majoring in an art-related field is probably the least practical thing I have ever done, but when I did, instead of focusing on a discipline like drawing, to which I am probably much more naturally inclined, I did the practical thing and pursued graphic design, as I saw the most financial viability in that path. In trying to better understand myself, it occurs to me that my life to this point has liberated me of the idealism that seems to blind others. I am well aware that the world is not fair and that some people get to taste of everything, while others do not. I know first-hand that there is a natural order, Mother Nature is brutal, and that when all safety nets have been removed and we are exposed to the harshness of the world, those with practical skills will be more valuable than any academic degree.

Perhaps it is why I can take a position like I have and not feel as if I am oppressing anyone. I simply do not have, nor have I ever had the power. Conversely, I do have the insight into how it feels. I believe in the best thing for the majority and realize that resources in this world are limited. I know, first-hand, that we cannot have our cake and eat it too. I can easily disregard those marginalized by society because I am
or have been one of them. And I say to those who consider themselves among the marginalized to “cowboy up” and make the best life for themselves that they can. Post-modernism celebrates the victim as the hero. I am not interested in being that kind of hero.

Mine is a philosophy bought and paid for with sweat and hard work. I have stood within inches of spinning saw blades, four feet in diameter, while 200-pound posts, carved from fully grown trees rained down on a conveyor belt above my head. I have given thousands of hours of my life to menial tasks like sorting scissor blades in a tool factory to finance my survival and my education. These experiences are valuable to me. In many ways, they are more valuable than the time I spent in class during graduate school. They gave me clarity and drive and purpose. Because of them, I refused to settle for the life I was born into and I have drawn from them strength to carve my way through every obstacle toward my goals. These experiences have grounded me in the harshness of reality, shown me the value of practicality, and led me to embrace a philosophy like Pragmatism.

John Dewey

The term pragmatism is one that I have only recently begun to apply to my design philosophy, though I began thinking this way approximately seven years ago, while I was working on my first Master’s degree and developing a curriculum unit on propaganda, in an effort to make the teaching of elements and principles more relevant to my students.

While not the original proposer of Pragmatism as a philosophical theory, John Dewey does rank among the top thinkers related to this philosophy. Dewey was a
philosopher, teacher and education reformer in the early part of the 20th century. In 1934, Dewey turned his attention towards understanding the relationship between meaning and art and wrote *Art as Experience*. This book came at the height of the Bauhaus’s influence on design, in the wake of the industrial revolution, during the rise of the Nazi party, and in the midst of The Great Depression.

According to Dewey, aesthetic response is dependent on the human’s interaction with his or her environment. Edmund Burke Feldman paraphrases this in his book *Varieties of Visual Experience*.

What accounts for this virtually universal and continuous possibility of the aesthetic? According to Dewey, it emerges from the interactions of every human organism with its environment. Those interactions create conditions for our awareness of needs, our determination of purposes, our encounter with resistance, and our focusing of effort, followed by the disappointment or fulfillment of our expectations. Thus living itself contains the seeds of art, that is, the seeds of artistic action and aesthetic response.” (Feldman 252)

I have only recently begun to look into Dewey’s ideas, and admittedly, my understanding of his philosophy is shallow, at best. He warrants further study as I continue through my career.

**Carl Jung**

As I said, I only recently began to look into Dewey as I was gathering defense for this thesis. However, the ideas that I have about how we understand our world, and how art and design affect culture, began to develop in 2007 while I was working on my first Master’s degree in Art Education. While developing a curriculum unit on propaganda, I discovered Carl Jung and his theory of the collective unconscious and the personal
unconscious. Both theories interested me and planted the seed for the idea that common experiences inform our understanding of the physical characteristics of the elements of design. Through his ideas, I saw a direct correlation with how we use experience to inform our understanding of the physical world.

Among Jung’s most revered contributions to the field of psychology are the “collective unconscious” and the “personal unconscious.” To some extent, this material is over my head at this point, as I have not fully immersed myself into the goal of understanding it. My surface-level understanding of it did, however, plant the seeds that visual communicators exploit two psychological aspects of the audience: personal experience and shared experience.

Personal experience revolves around the individual experiences we have as we learn and grow through life. Some of these occur through sensory input while others are the result of reflection on circumstances and outcomes. When these personal experiences are shared among a culture, they become capable of being exploited for mass communication. Within a culture, certain images, and objects take on cultural significance. In the United States, a common association with the red rose is love, romance, and passion. Because I have lived in this culture and experienced cultural conventions like giving roses to a love interest on Valentine’s Day, I am familiar with this convention. The majority of people who have been socialized in the same culture share this common experience with me and as a result, I can now use the rose to symbolize the day, the emotion, the consumer aspects, etc. I can also distort the symbol
to communicate the opposite, but turning the red rose black or personifying it with characteristics commonly thought to be dangerous.

Indirect Influences

Michelangelo

I have always considered Michelangelo an artistic influence, though I have rarely studied his work when I am making art. So much of my work is illustrative in nature and heavily informed by the figure. I have always enjoyed the proportions that Michelangelo employed in his work, particularly with regard to the enlarged hands that he drew and painted. This is a technique that I also employ and teach to my students as hands tend to appear smaller when they are drawn. Michelangelo also tended to make his male figures slightly more angular, particularly in the way that he interpreted faces.
Figure 2.1: Michelangelo “Ezekiel Detail,” Fresco

(Image Courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org)
Figure 2.2: Michelangelo “Pieta,” Marble

(Image Courtesy of en.wikipedia.org)
The Baroque: Bernini, Caravaggio, and Gentileschi

The Baroque movement, as a whole, has been a huge indirect influence for me. So much of my work is heavily influenced by comic books, and the dynamics of comic book illustration can be traced back to the movements and poses of the Baroque period.

Chief among the baroque artist is Gian Lorenzo Bernini. I particularly enjoy the twisted poses, camera angles and facial expressions that Bernini employs.

Figure 2.3: Gian Lorenzo Bernini “David,” Marble, 1624

(Image Courtesy of composingyourself.wordpress.com)

It comes as a surprise to me that Bernini is not a direct influence, particularly when I compare the way he renders facial construction, anatomy, and hair (figure 5.5). I can only assume that he is a direct influence to one of my direct influences from the comic’s industry. I only recently discovered him after he was recommended to me by one of my direct influences, Garry W. McKee II.
When I taught high school, I always began the year with a critical analysis of “Judith and the Maid Servant with the Head of Holofernes” by Artemisia Gentileschi. I found it a rich image from which to walk my students through the process of analyzing, interpreting and judging a work of art. I admire Gentileschi for her use of symbolism and context.
clues in her work to indicate situation, mood, status, time, etc. My students were always amazed when I would deconstruct the process of creating meaning and help them to understand their own processes when they looked at a work of art. While I don’t often refer to her as a primary influence, I cannot deny that her work is reflected in the way that I build symbolism into my visual communication.

Hokusai, Ukiyo-e and Art Nouveau

The impact that Japanese art had on western civilization when trade was reestablished in the nineteenth century had a profound impact on graphic design and illustration. Some of my primary influences come from the Art Nouveau movement which most likely never would have happened, had not artists like Alphonse Mucha, Jules Cheret and Aubrey Beardsley not encountered the works of Japanese artists like Hishikawa Moronobu, Kitagawa Utamaro, and Katsushika Hokusai. According to Phillip Meggs in *The History of Graphic Design*,

Ukiyo-e blended the realistic narratives of *emaki* (traditional picture scrolls) with influences from decorative design arts […]. The Shogun of Japan had adopted a policy of seclusion in the 1600’s, isolating Japan from the influences of western culture. When trade was reestablished, the resulting culture swap had a profound impact on aesthetics. The flat decorative spaces, use of isometric perspective heavily influenced the design of leading Art Nouveau artists like Mucha, Cheret and Beardsley. (Meggs 196)
In my research, I discovered that it is actually Jules Cheret who is credited with bridging the gap between the typographic letterpress posters of the 1800’s arts and crafts movement and the heavily illustrated posters that would define the art nouveau and subsequent movements throughout the 20th century. According to Meggs,

Cheret was convinced that pictorial lithographic posters would replace the typographic letterpress posters that filled the urban environment, but he could not convince advertisers of this. At age 22, he produced a blue and brown poster for Offenbach’s operetta Orphee aux enfers, (Orpheus in Hades). When further commissions were not forthcoming, he returned to London, where he soon
mastered the more advanced English color lithography. A poster commission for a family of clowns he had befriended was the turning point, leading to label commissions from the philanthropist and perfume manufacturer Eugene Rimmel. (Meggs 200)

Figure 2.6: Jules Cheret “Pippermint Poster,” Lithograph, 1900

(Image Courtesy of yaneff.com)
Maxfield Parrish was a 20th century golden age illustrator whose work was commissioned by magazines like Colliers. He stands separate from other artists of his time because the look of his work is so strikingly different from his most famous peers, J.C. Leyendecker and Norman Rockwell.

Parrish used a technique called glazing that allowed him to separate and layer colors on top of each other to achieve brilliantly luminous colors. He accomplished this by creating a monochromatic under painting using blue and white. He would then layer clear varnish and bright oil colors on top of each other. The result was striking depth and brilliance. Many of my influences and I have adopted Parrish’s use of color scheme and techniques of layering in our work.

Figure 2.7: Maxfield Parrish “Daybreak,” Oil on canvas, 1922
(Image Courtesy of en.wikipedia.org)
Patrick Nagle

I am not a huge fan of Patrick Nagle, but I am a fan of the artists that are influenced by him. Nagle’s slick lines and ambiguous use of positive and negative space and figure ground reversal have had a profound impact on my primary influence Brian Stelfreeze. Nagle’s works look dated and tied to a particularly cheesy period of the 1980’s, but Stelfreeze has taken his slick, linear style and transformed it into a brilliantly jagged and aggressive type of lineart.

Figure 2.8: Patrick Nagle “Print 15,” Serigraph, 1976

(Image Courtesy of rubylane.com)
As a young design student, I was enthralled with David Carson’s work. It pervaded the visual culture of the 1990’s and heavily influenced my early design.

Figure 2.9: David Carson “Trek,” Bookcover, 2004

(Image Courtesy of amazon.com)
aesthetic. I was first exposed to his aesthetic through the graphics that MTV used in the early to mid 90’s. He was still a relatively hot designer when I arrived in my first design class. I studied his work, pouring over it, desperately trying to apply method to his madness. Much like the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Willem DeKooning, his work, at first, looks simple and easily reproduced. It is anything but. In my first year of graduate school, I revisited Carson’s work and again spent considerable time trying to understand it. I recognized it as beautiful, but I couldn’t really bring myself to love it as much as I had five years earlier. My understanding of form had increased considerably and I realized that some of his work just didn’t appeal to me anymore. It communicated very little, if anything, and looks more like he’s simply pushing shapes and colors around until he settled on something that he liked. I began to wonder if Carson wasn’t the luckiest fraud in the history of graphic design. I can still appreciate Carson’s work, particularly his eye for photography and ephemeral typography, but I have included him here as a counterinfluence because ultimately, his work and a good portion of the work that tried to mimic his have come to represent everything I reject about post-modern graphic design.
Direct Influences

Alphonse Mucha

My work is clearly influenced by comic books and illustration. My first career choice was to work in the comic industry and sequential art is probably the thing I know the most about and the kind of art that I do best. In an effort to open up as many options to myself as possible, with regard to the kind of work that I can do as a graphic designer, I have come to define graphic design simply as an integration of type and image for the purposes of visual communication.

In graphic design, there are three primary ways that the image to be integrated can be created. These consist of a purely typographic approach, where the type is manipulated to serve as type and image, the use of photography to make the image, or the
use of illustration. As my skill-set includes the ability to illustrate, I have always relied on it to strengthen my design.

There are many pre-cursors to the comic industry, some discussed as my indirect influences like Hokusai, and Jules Cheret. It is worth mentioning other poster artists like Henri Toulouse Lautrec and Gustave Klimt. Perhaps no other poster artist has had as much of an impact on contemporary comic illustration as Alphonse Mucha.

Mucha’s sensuous line and deadweight contours helped to create an aesthetic that celebrated flat imagery with fields of color very similar to the contemporary comic book. His women are curvy and beautiful, his colors toned and warm. His style allows contours to mingle together, creating interesting patterns of negative space. Mucha had a profound impact on the style of contemporary master illustrator Adam Hughes, who has become the most sought after contemporary illustrator in comics today.

J.C. Leyendecker

I have always been a fan of 20th century propaganda posters. When I began to study the subject of propaganda in the summer of 2007, I discovered J.C. Leyendecker. Leyendecker was primarily an illustrator for magazine covers like “Colliers” and “The Saturday Evening Post,” but he also created some of the most memorable and iconic propaganda posters of his time. His handsome men and elegant women defined a sense of style, grace, and class for the everyman. Conventions of his style like the way he
approaches the rendering of eyes and his use of angular highlights has heavily influenced the work in this show.

Figure 2.11: J.C. Leyendecker “Weapons for Liberty,” Oil on canvas, 1918

(Image Courtesy of popmatters.com)
Norman Rockwell

One of J.C. Leyendecker’s contemporaries and perhaps the most famous illustrator in the 20th century is Norman Rockwell. Rockwell is best known for his 332 plus magazine covers for magazines such as “Colliers” and “The Saturday Evening Post.” His humorous illustrations depicted every aspect of Americana. Rockwell had a knack for finding the exact right moment to illustrate. I like his work, not only for the technical excellence and the stylized way that he rendered faces, but also the storytelling that he

Figure 2.12: Norman Rockwell “Save Freedom of Speech,” Lithograph, 1942

(Image Courtesy of en.wikipedia.org)
employs. Rockwell’s use of context clues helps to inform his story and makes his work accessible for anyone who encounters it. This is something I’ve tried to adapt to my work.

Ludwig Holbein

Figure 2.13: Ludwig Holbein “Und Du,” Lithography, 1929
(Image Courtesy of moma.org)

Ludwig Holbein was Germany’s answer to J.C. Leyendecker. He was Germany’s premier poster artist for the first half of the 20th century and produced some of their most
inspired fashion and propaganda posters. Holwein was more experimental with his work and drew inspiration from the flat decorative spaces of Art Nouveau. He used color expressively and often would simply paint a flat pattern into the contours of his figures, rather than model them out.

Roy Lichtenstein

Roy Lichtenstein was a leading figure in the Pop Art movement and drew influence from the comic strip medium. He used conventions from the medium in his work, including the rhythmic repetition of the Ben Day Dot, and bright but unified combinations of primary colors. His work was particularly inspiring when I was working on “…a Job for Superman” (below right).

Figure 2.14: Roy Lichtenstein “In the Car,” Oil on canvas, 1963 (left)

(Image Courtesy of en.wikipedia.org)
Garry W. McKee II

To say that Garry W. McKee II is an influence is an understatement. He is the most important influence, mentor, and friend that I have ever had. Garry is the reason that I returned to school, and the reason that I chose to pursue an M.F.A. Garry taught me the importance of design as it relates to any discipline. After we became friends in 1999, we entered into a profound period of professional growth and learning that continues to this day. McKee introduced me to the artists that follow and showed me the importance of design as it relates to illustration, storytelling, and graphic design. He was also heavily influential in my adoption of Vector software as my primary choice of medium.

Figure 2.15: Garry McKee “Clark and Kal,” Digital, 2009
(Image Courtesy of deviantart.com)
Gaijin Studios

Gaijin Studios is a group of highly respected and Georgia-based comic book professionals. They are credited unofficially with the development of the East Coast style of comic book illustration characterized by its strong use of design to communicate and advance the art of storytelling. While I have been influenced by all of the artists associated with this studio at one point or another, a few of them should be mentioned, as they have had and continue to have a profound impact, not only on my design philosophy but also visual aspects within my work.

Adam Hughes

Hughes is perhaps the most sought after artist in the comics industry and possibly in illustration as a whole. Alphonse Mucha, Norman Rockwell, Gil Elvgren, Charles McGuiness, Brian Stelfreeze, as well as a host of other artists from fine arts to graphic
design heavily inform his work. Adam’s popularity lies in his ability to create “good
girl” images, drawings, and paintings that depict the heroines of comics and movies. His
style is versatile, but heavily grounded in two-dimensional design, particularly with the
way that he uses color theory. His supple, dead-weight contour containment lines
contrasted against the thin cross contours that he uses to define anatomy have been a
huge influence for me and almost every other artist currently working in illustration.

Jason Pearson

Jason Pearson produces some of the most exciting and entertaining illustration
that I have ever encountered. His work has more kinetic energy than most of the other
Gaijin artists I am influenced by. I attribute this to his unification of both East Coast
(Gaijin) and West Coast (Homage, Extreme Studios) aesthetics. Jason is not afraid to
distort shapes, play with anatomy or completely break the rules and yet his work never
reads as anything but competent and well designed and incredibly fun. Jason’s ethnicity
is a mixture, and perhaps this frees him to explore and exploit stereotypes in his work.
He often distills and exaggerates the ethnicity in his characters, and uses it to advance his
story. He draws upon common conventions of fashion and clothing associated with
different types of characters and uses them as motifs to advance and clarify his story. To
some extent, his work is sequential propaganda. In working so closely with the
stereotypes in this body of work, I drew upon his conventions such as the hoody, the
baseball cap, facial characteristics, etc., to create the various characters in my work.
Figure 2.17: Jason Pearson “Sketchbook Cover,” Digital, 2007

(Image Courtesy of core.collectors.com)
Brian Stelfreeze

Brian Stelfreeze is the ultimate designer/illustrator in my opinion, as well as the most gifted teacher I have ever encountered. He is accomplished in every aspect of design and illustration as well as being a master educator. His ability to distill

Figure 2.18: BrianStelfreeze“7 Days in Hell Cover,” Digital, 2013

(Image Courtesy of graphicpolicy.com)
information down into instantly understandable chunks that young artists can internalize is rare and many design and illustration students have benefited from his scathingly honest critiques.

Figure 2.19: Brian Stelfreeze “Batman Commission,” Pen and Ink, 2007
(Image Courtesy of yahoo.fansofbrianstelfreeze.com)
In my own teaching, I have shared knowledge gleaned from interactions with
Stelfreeze. For him, everything the artist does either helps or hurts the communication. Everything from the kind of line the artist uses to the choice of color scheme. Everything is a potential symbol to be exploited and manipulated in the name of narrative storytelling. Throughout my career, I’ve followed many artists, and tried to incorporate aspects of their style. Most have come and gone, but Stelfreeze endures. I am influenced by his use of the elements and principles, the way he conveys anatomy, storytelling, layout, and lighting. Stelfreeze is heavily influenced by Maxfield Parrish with regard to color and Patrick Nagle with regard to line and shape.

Dave Johnson

Dave Johnson is one of the first artists to make a style out of incorporating graphic design approach and typography into his work. I’ve studied his work extensively, as I have produced the images for this show and still have not been able to measure up. Dave is heavily influenced by typography and illustrators like J.C. Leyendecker and Alphonse Mucha. His covers are heavily organized around flat shapes, but he is skilled at creating textures and a variety of approaches to line art and drawing. He experiments with every cover and has pioneered some of the digital processes that I use in my own work. He is not afraid to let a shape of negative space tell the story instead of a fully rendered figure. His work employs economy. He is as much a graphic designer as he is an illustrator and I’ve drawn heavily from his influence over the last few years.
Figure 2.20: Dave Johnson “Punisher Max Cover,” Digital, 2011

(Image Courtesy of deviantart.com)
Raphael Albuquerque

Raphael Albuquerque is another artist, like Dave Johnson with a very versatile style, who also pursues an appearance of graphic design in his work, similar to Johnson. Albuquerque plays much more with traditional and digital brushes to create textures in his lineart. He is bold in his use of color and breaks the rules constantly with amazing results. Stylistically and experimentally, I am inspired by his work. He is fearless in his application of design and a master draftsman.
Figure 2.22: Raphael Albequerque “Tune 8 Promo,” Digital, 2013

(Image Courtesy of deviantart.com)
Mike Mignola

It is ironic that I would end up being so influenced by Mike Mignola, as he was my definition of terrible illustration when I was a teenager. I remember, specifically, being appalled when he filled in for my favorite artist Rob Liefeld on an issue of “X-force” in 1991. The book had the first page and a cover drawn by Liefeld and then every page after it drawn by Mignola. When I purchased the comic, I had made the assumption that Liefeld had done the interiors as well. When I discovered the change, I threw the book away in disgust. Twenty-three years later, I cannot get enough of Mignola’s work.

Figure 2.23: Mike Mignola “Hellboy Illo,” Digital, 2004

(Image Courtesy of mikemignola.com)

Mignola’s pages are bloated with excellent composition, mood, and storytelling. Shape plays a major role in his work, which approaches the limits of acceptable
abstraction for a storytelling medium. Mignola is not concerned with the process, only the final image. He will often use any medium handy to fill in his pages, which use considerable amounts of black to frame his focal points while also enhancing mood. I looked at his work extensively while I was drawing the first two posters in the continuum and used him as my polar value on the aggressive end of the continuum. His use of shapes, jagged edges, and black can be seen particularly well in “A Mother’s Boogieman.”

Figure 2.24: Mike Mignola “Corpse Illo,” Pen and Ink, 2008

(Image Courtesy of mikemignola.com)
CHAPTER 3

PRESENTATION OF WORKS BY THE ARTIST

The Continuum

The artworks in this series are designed to reflect both liberal and conservative points of view related to fears and concerns that I gleaned from “fly-on-the-wall” observation and readings of message boards attached to the end of articles dealing with a variety of topics and fears from both sides of the gun control argument. Works that reflect a Pro-Gun Control argument are stereotypically associated with liberal points of view and were assigned to the left side of the continuum, while points of view that reflect an Anti-Gun Control argument are stereotypically associated with Conservative views and as such were assigned to the right side of the continuum. The assignment of the two opposing views to one side or the other of the continuum is also reflective of the conventional association of liberal views with the “Left” and conservative views with the “Right.”

Figure 3.1: Jason Walker “Continuum Layout,” Digital, 2014
Prior to beginning the actual design and illustration of the posters, two pantone colors, Pantone 2748 C (Democratic Blue) and Pantone 485 C (Republican Red) were identified. Although they may not be the official colors used by both parties, these colors were compared to various designs associated with both parties and seemed to match closely enough to the colors used in propaganda materials for the purpose of this thesis.

The colors were then taken into illustrator and divided into increment tints of 100%, 80%, 60%, 40%, 20%, and 0 (or pure white) for both the blue and the red. These tints were then assigned to the continuum blocks in the same way that a value scale is created using black (Figure 4.1).

The level of saturation for each 100% value decreases by 20% with each poster/step in the continuum toward the center. The extreme left and right posters have a background color of 100%, respective to the hue assigned to each side of the continuum. The continuum is actually not a single continuum, but two continuums placed next to each other and mirrored symmetrically across a bilateral line of symmetry that runs through the center of the middle poster (Figure 4.2)

Figure 3.2: Jason Walker “Continuum Poster Layout,” Digital, 2014
The Liberal/Democrat/Blue blocks progress from extreme liberal (far left) to moderate, in the middle of the continuum on the wall. The center block contains an illustration of Uncle Sam, divided bilaterally with his left side colored in monochromatic blue color scheme, while his right side is colored in a monochromatic red scheme. From the center, the posters on the right side of the continuum begin with the lightest tint of red in the first block and progressively get more saturated as they move to the extreme right of the continuum. Within each poster’s background, a subtle gradient composed of the designated percentage of the poster as it fits on the continuum and the tint of the poster that follows in the continuum is used to further enhance the unity between the posters and the visibility of the gradient. As such, the right sides of the blue posters should appear slightly lighter in value, as the left sides of the red posters should do the same.

The posters (Figure 3.2) are designed to reflect a gradual reduction in the intensity of message as they progress toward the center of the continuum. From the extremes to the center, the works should appear to become less aggressive. This is accomplished in a few ways. Color intensity and saturation were considered for both the background and the colors used within the figures and environments depicted in the illustrations. To accomplish this, I converted each tint of the original spot color into a process color and used its color index number to identify it on the website ColorSchemeDesigner.com. This website allows a designer to build one of seven color schemes: Tetrad, Triad, Split-Complementary, Complementary, Analogous, Monochromatic, and Accented Analogic. By utilizing this website, I was able to reduce the intensity of each color proportionate to the background it would be interacting with. This reduces the intensity
of each color along with the background color and allows a greater degree of unity among the color schemes.

The intensity of the color is reduced across all of the colors used in the image. As the background color decreases by 20% in intensity, so do the other colors in the color scheme. As such, the extreme left and right posters feel heavily saturated while those toward the center feel less so. The treatment of the elements and principles is manipulated to reflect this intensity by utilizing principle strategies and elemental characteristics to enhance the mood and atmosphere of each poster and each step toward the center of the design. Angular shapes, tight spaces, lower degrees of repetition, rougher textures, etc. characterize the extreme posters. Higher degrees of abstraction and contrast between the edges of color fields also help to enhance the levels of aggression and tension in the posters that fall toward the opposite ends of the continuum. Conversely, the contrast between colors and edges in the images as they approach the center of the continuum has been reduced to enhance the unity of the pieces.

To accomplish this gradual change, each element and principle was analyzed and polar values related to characteristics were developed. Gradients of these two extreme characteristics were created for each element and stacked into continuums creating a loose matrix with vertical columns. Per each poster, I isolated a color scheme, and approach to the elements’ characteristics and principle strategies to utilize in each design. Doing this allowed me to create works that manifested into an approximate intensity of visual characteristics designed to enhance the visual mood of the design.
The term *aggressive*, used here as an adjective to describe the visual characteristics of each element, was assigned to the extreme ends of the continuum, while *passive* was assigned to the middle. These adjectives are polar opposites and, as such, are grouped accordingly with other polar values. In the case of this continuum, aggression is grouped with variety, while passivity is grouped with unity. I associate the amount of unity with the artwork’s capacity to soothe the viewer and variety with the artwork’s capacity to agitate the viewer.

The terms *liberal* and *democratic* are also assigned to the left side of the continuum, while the terms *conservative* and *republican* are assigned to the right. *Moderate, centrist, undecided, and compromising* are assigned to the middle of the continuum.

All of the artworks in this thesis were created using a combination of Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Photoshop. Rough sketches were developed during the thumbnail stage, scanned and enlarged, pasted into illustrator, and used as guides for the drawing. The images were drawn as lineart on one layer, filled with base colors that fit the color scheme on a second layer, and then modeled out on additional layers in varying percentages of gray. A warm and cool value scale divided into ten-percent increments was then created and added to each color scheme to use in creating uniform shadows and highlights across varying hues. Shadows in flat values of gray were drawn on top of the base colors and a blending mode of multiply was used to combine the shadows with the base colors. Working this way allows the grays to mix with the colors, creating uniform tonal values across all of the hues the gray interacts with. Highlights were created using
the lightest values of the grayscale, and a blending mode of soft-light or overlay was used depending on the desired level of contrast needed for the design.

The figures were then moved into Photoshop layer by layer, and additional effects were applied. Because vector illustration tends to create a plastic appearance, I used textures, pasted into the contour shape of the figures to soften the edges and allow them to integrate better with the background. The application of texture is new to my work and one of the most valuable things I learned from this experience.

Text was either composed directly in Photoshop, or constructed in Illustrator and imported into Photoshop. The works were built at 24” x 36” at 300 dpi to avoid resolution issues when printed. A small drawback of working at this scale and using the textures was that the textures blurred when they were scaled up to the 24”x36” proportions. Typically, I build my work to be viewed at smaller proportions. It is difficult to find textures that scale up to the resolution required for illustrations this size. That being said, steps were taken to reduce pixilization, but blur was unavoidable. These illustrations, when reduced in scale, function quite well.

A MOTHER’S BOOGIEMAN

The first illustration, “A Mother’s Boogieman,” was designed to be the most intense image on the liberal side. A considerable amount of the contemporary pro-gun-control propaganda is aimed directly at parents of small children, particularly mothers. Former Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, who was effective in getting strict gun control policies passed at the city and state level, has financially backed “Moms-Demand-Action,” a pro-gun control group primarily made up of mothers. In the wake of
the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy, mothers rallied together to take up the cause. The emotional impact of losing a child inspires the two most powerful emotions for propaganda to be effective: fear and anger. With many mass murderers choosing to end their own lives, there is no one to blame or punish. For the proponent of Gun Control, this vacuum creates an excellent opportunity for the propagandist to exploit these emotions and focus them on the gun. By and large, the biggest fear among gun control advocates is the fear that their children and loved ones will become victims of events like Sandy Hook. As such, I chose to make it the most extreme poster in the continuum.

Every element and principle used in this composition was strategically manipulated to create tension and discomfort in the viewer. As mentioned earlier, I see a correlation between the amount of unity/variety in a work and its capacity to agitate or soothe a viewer. Every compositional choice in this design was made to pursue the maximum amount of variety possible within the limits of what I, as a designer, was comfortable working with. That is to say, at some point as I experimented with variety, I found a threshold that I wasn’t comfortable exceeding. To achieve complete variety would be to contain complete chaos within the borders of the space. My tolerance for variety stopped well short of that.

A tetrad color scheme consisting of blue, orange, green and red was used because it offered four hues and all of their tints and shades. The background color is the 100% value of pantone 2748 and it functions as the key color throughout the liberal side. All other hues used on any poster on the left side of the continuum are chosen for their
relationship and position on the color wheel in concert with this blue. The use of red for the gunman’s skin has a plethora of symbolic and cultural associations, including danger, rage, passion, blood, evil, and Satan. The hue used is heavily saturated to provide emphasis and contrast from the background. The hoody worn by the gunman is green and has an equal intensity to the blue background it is positioned against. This was done because the green hoody takes up most of the visual space and needs to be subdued to place emphasis on more important elements in the composition. The cool-on-cool color placement allows it to recede into space and push the smaller areas of red and orange forward. This places more emphasis on the figure’s face, the target, and the boy’s silhouette.

Shape plays an important role in this image, as angular shapes are contrasted against more rounded shapes. The gunman is almost exclusively rendered in angular shapes. This augments his already dangerous appearance, especially when he is contrasted against the dulled, rounded shape of the boy’s silhouette. The use of black pointed shapes within the figure is meant to communicate this dangerous, aggressive aspect of the character. They are also meant to subtly communicate the inner turmoil that a mass murderer, capable of murdering children, must have. Sharp tapers point in conflicting directions, attempting to communicate a push-and-pull kind of stress.
Figure 3.3: “A Mother’s Boogieman,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Implied rough texture is used throughout the image to integrate surfaces and add to the visual noise. A corroded white and yellow-orange line envelopes the figure providing the necessary contrast to make him pop away from the background. The deterioration of the line is supposed to imply a degradation of the figure’s structural and mental integrity. It indicates that he is “frayed around the edges,” “coming apart at the seams,” or any number of other clichés. Line is also used to draw the viewer’s eye through the movement of the golden spiral that was used to proportionately divide the space and designate a focal point where the boy’s silhouette is positioned. The spiral starts where the figure’s head touches the top of the frame and spirals to the left, following the drawstrings of the hoody down to the area where the gunman’s left hand cups the barrel of the assault rifle he is holding. From there, it roughly follows the gun barrel to the bottom of the canvas where the text is positioned, before rotating upwards and around the bullseye to terminate in the blue bullseye that is on the boy’s t-shirt. The golden spiral was used for the proportional strategy because it provides for a series of focal points, offering more variety than the rule of thirds or the golden mean.

Thirty skull bubbles were positioned in the background to indicate the thirty lives that the gunman could take with a fully loaded clip. They were applied in a random rhythm to create a loose unity through repetition. Unity through repetition of the colors is also used to help unify the chaotic image. Colors are repeated in various areas of the frame. Finally, the figure crowds the space, touching the edges on three of four sides and filling up the middle. This creates a tight, claustrophobic feeling in the composition.
THE ENFORCER

“The Enforcer” is the continuum’s counterpart for “A Mother’s Boogieman,” and represents the worst fears of extreme proponents of gun control. Those who resort to defending the right to own guns and in particular, assault rifles and high capacity clips, often argue that the Second Amendment was included in the bill of rights to counteract an oppressive fascist government. The belief is that if the population is disarmed or left with only low capacity clips and rifles, they will not be equipped to fight should the need for a revolution ever occur. The enforcer is my vision of these peoples’ worst nightmare. He is a fully armored, well-armed fascist juggernaut.

“The Enforcer” shares the exact same treatments of the elements and principles that “A Mother’s Boogieman” does. The color scheme is, again, a tetrad consisting of red, green, orange, and blue. This time, the cool colors are consolidated in the lower right corner of the image and contrasted against the warm background. A series of flames constructed from strategically carving geometric circles out of angular shapes is positioned behind the figure. A flat chain link fence separates the foreground from the background, indicating possible imprisonment or separation of some sort. A skull made from a pattern of concentric circles rises from the flames. The repetition of the circle helps to unify the chaotic background, while the presence of the angular flames and the angles in the figure help to tie the foreground and background together, despite the fence. In contemporary warfare, the gas mask has become a symbol for chemical and biological weapons. It has taken on a menacing connotation. It makes the figure both anonymous and dangerous.
Figure 3.4: “The Enforcer,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Again, the golden spiral was used to designate a focal point, this time in the vicinity of the figure’s glowing red eyes, which are further emphasized by their isolation within the cool colors of the figure’s skin and clothing. The use of multiple pockets and pouches is used to further indicate how well armed and oppressive this figure is. The “V” in the barbwire is used to support the wire between posts. In this design, I have also used it to draw a correlation between tyranny and the figure. It functions as a downward pointing arrow toward the figure’s face. The text is set on a diagonal and integrated into the fence indicating motion, as if the arrival of tyranny might be sooner rather than later. The sharp points around the text also help to create a subtle tension, as the viewer must navigate the sharp wire to read the words.

PUMPED UP KICKS

“Pumped Up Kicks” is an illustration of what I imagine the moments prior to a mass shooting at a school must look and feel like to the gunman. Assuming that he or she has committed to the act, the sheer randomness of some of the attacks since Columbine indicated to me that the victims lose their identity in the moments leading up to the first shot. I wanted to convey this while also exploring stereotypes that I discovered while teaching high school. This issue is very similar to the issues dealt with in “A Mother’s Boogieman,” except the age of the victims has been raised. To a large extent, the majority of motivations that I discovered while researching the liberal side of the argument revolved around emotional reactions to the loss of life. “Pumped Up Kicks” is named after a song that was written about similar events performed by the band
Foster the People. Gus Van Sant made a short film using the song for background music and some dialogue.

The image is the second from extreme left liberal side of the continuum. Again, the blue background is used, but this time the intensity of the blue has been reduced to an 80% saturation. This is most apparent at the top of the image where the lightest value of the tint exists. Early on in the creation of the work, it became impractical for the entire background of the works to be the same color from top to bottom, and still create a realistic atmosphere. As such, I made the decision to preserve the integrity of the image outside the continuum rather than force it to communicate the color gradient at the expense of the overall image. That being said, I made the tops of the images somewhat lighter by gradually reducing the opacity of my background textures and images as they came nearer to the top of the image. The color scheme used in this image is a primary triad. Unlike the split complementary scheme used in the next poster, the use of the primary colors, I believe, creates the most variety of all triadic schemes because the three hues don’t share a common hue. This creates a maximum degree of contrast. Again, angular shapes and lines are employed to communicate danger, primarily in the figure in the foreground. The darkest values are also concentrated in the foreground. The silhouettes decrease in darkness by 20% as they move toward the background. An implied exclamation point is created, using the lights on the ceiling. The lights were also used to provide contrast for the text from the background. The text was distressed to
indicate a connection between the figure in the foreground and the thoughts being expressed.

Figure 3.5: “Pumped Up Kicks,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Figure 3.6: “Soft Target,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
SOFT TARGET

“Soft Target” is the conservative counterpart for “Pumped Up Kicks” and focuses on the fear that criminals will not surrender their guns even if the government makes owning a gun illegal. For this image, I wanted to experiment with sequential storytelling and break the picture plane into a series of panels that show a couple encountering a mugger, then being robbed and murdered. As an image, this is one that I feel is most successful in communicating mood and story; I am particularly happy with the typographic treatment in this image and its integration into the graphics. A series of strong diagonals starting at the natural entry point where the gun is placed in the picture plane leads the viewer’s eye to the angry face of the mugger, who is primarily composed of a series of angular shapes converging into various points on his body. The mugger is set in cool colors that provide nice contrast against the hot background. The gradient of the background transitions from the warm orange of the key color to an intense red-violet during the gunshots, and then to a slightly less intense red-violet at the bottom of the image after the murder has occurred. The mugger’s foot rests against the bottom phrase, providing extra emphasis to keep it from getting lost in an otherwise chaotic design. Like “Pumped up Kicks,” this image uses a loose triad that is almost made up of the primary colors. Using color within the limitations that I set for myself with this show, I often found myself at the mercy of the color wheel, having to make do with the colors that I could use, rather than the colors that I preferred to use.
Figure 3.7: “Afterschool .38 Special,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
AFTERSCHOOL .38 SPECIAL

“Afterschool .38 Special” deals with the fear that having a gun in the home is more dangerous to the family than not having one and risking being defenseless if an intruder were to break in. Of all eleven images, this is one of my least favorite. The skewed perspective was meant to heighten the drama of the moment but as a finished image, it just looks distorted. It also fails to stand up to the success of its counterpart, “A Job for Superman.” This image incorporates a split-complementary color scheme composed of blue, red-orange and yellow-orange. The split-complementary scheme provides for a higher degree of unity than the primary triad because two of the colors share a common hue, allowing that common hue to be present in more areas of the image even if different hues are used. There is a lower degree of contrast between two of the three hues. With this image, I began to soften shapes more and include more rounded forms. This is the midpoint of the continuum on the liberal side so I attempted to use an equal balance of angular and curvy shapes. The intensity of the color is decreased proportionately, creating youthful colors that complement the subject matter. The piece is successful, but not excellent. It is the result of my beginning to get burnt out and forcing myself to work when I was not motivated.
Figure 3.8: “A Job for Superman,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
A JOB FOR SUPERMAN

In direct contrast to “Afterschool .38 Special,” “A Job for Superman” ended up being one of my favorite images of the series. There was originally another version of this image that showed the couple encountering a group of muggers, and getting the upper hand; however, after completing the poster, I felt that it was too chaotic for its position in the continuum and I scrapped it to draw this version. I was particularly happy with the use of color in this mage. The skin tones and the gradient I used to blend from the warm flesh to the cool shadow on the neck and hands was an experiment that I tried. It ended up being a technique that I used throughout the rest of the images as I colored them. Like its counterpart, this one used a combination of angular and round shapes to balance the atmosphere out in the middle of the continuum. The concept of the poster is meant to empower men to embrace the concealed carry privilege. It pays homage to some of the ads that I saw Don Draper develop on the show “Mad Men.” Like its counterpart, this poster utilizes the split-complementary scheme and begins to open up the negative space a bit more. Though a brick texture is used in the background, the lack of contrast that results from orange lines on an orange background makes the negative space feel slightly more open. The text is positioned approximately along the horizontal line where the golden mean would exist. The image is rich with symbolism and references to popular culture. The reference to the Superman logo on the man’s chest draws a correlation between the carrying of a gun and being a “superman,” capable of protecting the hero’s love interest. The woman’s shirt was colored yellow to reinforce the idea that she is fearful in this situation while the man is meant to appear confident.
The diagonal shadow indicates movement coming toward the couple and counteracts the stability of the two figures standing vertically.

ADDITIONAL ARTWORKS

The additional artworks in the thesis continue to use a decrease in color intensity, a reduction in angular shapes and a blending of edges to make them less aggressive. These posters deal with issues such as gun culture, empowerment of women, and gang violence.

ONE LAST LOOK

Figure 3.9: “One Last Look,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
NOT A VICTIM

Figure 3.10: “Initiation”, Digital, 2014 Jason Walker

Figure 3.11: “Initiation”, Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Figure 3.11: “Initiation” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Figure 3.12: “Legacy” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Figure 3.13: “Bi-Polar” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
Figure 3.14: “Liberal Uncle Sam,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker
CONSERVATIVE UNCLE SAM

Figure 3.15: “Conservative Uncle Sam,” Digital, 2014 Jason Walker

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In the earliest incarnation of the thesis, the Uncle Sam stand ups were meant to function as traffic directors for viewers entering the gallery. As the viewer entered the room, he or she would encounter the stand up and be directed toward one side of the continuum or the other depending on which political leaning he or she most closely identified with. The experience was supposed to accomplish two things. One would be to force the audience member to define themselves according to one of two political leanings. The other was to point out to the audience member that they did, in fact, identify with one particular side and perhaps in the wake of the experience, examine why he or she chooses to identify with a party or ideology, as opposed to examining an issue on a case by case basis. As the thesis evolved, the educational aspect was removed and the continuum became an illustration of the complexity of the argument, rather than a tool to teach about propaganda. Now the stand ups function to direct traffic to one end of the continuum or the other, depending on the audiences political leanings. In a crowded gallery, this would create a situation where liberals and conservatives would be moving counteractively toward one another, creating opportunities for discourse about whatever issue or aspect of the argument they happen to meet in front of. Whether it happens or not remains to be seen.

As I designed these figures, I considered conventional understandings of liberal and conservative voters and ideologies. So much of the Gun Control argument revolves around the issue of self-defense. For the conservative, self-defense is a matter of owning a gun, while the liberal chooses to pursue laws that limit or eliminate the ownership of guns. For the liberal, I chose to portray a more youthful, academic, hipster version of
Uncle Sam, holding a gavel to symbolize his or her reliance on law to solve the problem. The conservative version is my take on the classic Uncle Sam design. It was drawn to look much older, in an attempt to position conservative values in a separate classic period of American history. At first thought, this would appear to be an attempt to depict conservative values as out-of-date or antique. This is far from the case, as I believe that old knowledge is not always bad knowledge. Conservatives stereotypically look toward the way things have always been done and the way things were at perceived high points in American History, while Liberals stereotypically see change as good, particularly in the case of civil rights and fairness among the population. This often means rejecting conventional norms and mores of the past and embracing controversial change that is founded on a different set of moral principles.

The figures were colored using a monochromatic color scheme to emphasize and designate them as part of one side of the continuum. For those not familiar with the conventional use of red or blue to identify the political philosophy, these stand ups help to make the connection and point them in the right direction to encounter the continuum.
CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

Communication is a product of three criteria: Semantics, Syntax, and Pragmatics. For the visual communicator, these must be present if he or she hopes to be successful. Learning to understand the inherent meaning of an element as a product of personal and shared experience can give the designer a level of insight into meaning within and across cultures that is available when the textbook is not. It also equips the designer to research beyond his or her culture by paying attention to the user rather than a theory. We have organized these meanings as stereotypes, and if they are taught as such, and taught along with the concept of the designer’s responsibility to the audience, then we equip the next generation of designers to communicate more efficiently, and we give them a foundation that they can experiment with and expound upon. Giving them a real understanding of visual language, rather than the idea that there is no inherent meaning in an element, leaves them lost and confused and inefficient.

I earnestly believe the works I created within this thesis are valuable in many ways beyond the scope of the problem I discussed in this paper. The continuum as an instrument for organizing our world with regard to experience, safety, navigation, and professional elements and principles is a concept that I will continue to explore. It has value as an educational instrument for young designers and as a methodology for the professional practitioner. I see possibilities for this method as a learning strategy or a possible textbook. I believe it can be used to simplify the complexities of two-dimensional design and allow for faster internalization of the content that is so necessary for the contemporary visual communicator to master.
As with any body of work that is created under the varying stresses that surround a thesis exhibition, this show is not without flaws and shortcomings. In a perfect situation, I would have had at least three semesters to solidify my ideas and refine my work. As it was, I was left with a summer and half of a fall semester. This only allowed time for a first draft of the majority of the works. As individual illustrations, I believe them to be of professional quality, and I fully expect them to garner me additional work among the art directors and editors I know from my professional exploits. Within the context of the continuum, I’m afraid they don’t flow as well as I had envisioned. The gradients and transitions from image to image are not as obvious. If I had it to do over again, I would be more meticulous about how I created these incremental transitions from one poster to the next. Unfortunately, this was not possible within the time that I had.

That being said, I believe these works demonstrate the versatility of a visual lexicon informed by shared experience and observations from culture. They illustrate the value of speaking the visual language in the native tongue of the target audience. In these works, I have created a range of emotions, atmosphere, and intensity using the same visual language. I have accomplished this without having to fundamentally change the meaning of any element characteristic within my visual lexicon, and I have demonstrated how using the same visual vocabulary can build effective, efficient visual communication between two fundamentally opposed audiences.

The works represent a tremendous amount of growth for me as an illustrator. Through this process, I have begun to incorporate additional elements such as texture and more complex applications of value into my work. I have come to understand the
principles of design and their relationships to one another more fully. I have discovered a
relationship between each principle and its ability to create unity and variety, and I will
use this knowledge in future design and illustration applications. I have taken everything
that I learned from the various textbooks presented to me throughout my education and
expounded upon this in a useful and practical way. For this, I am most proud.

As I have prepared to defend my ideas and compositional choices, I have learned
much more about contemporary art theory and the motivations of philosophies that I
typically don’t embrace. While I reject them as a philosophy through which my work
should be judged, I do understand the nature and origin of the ideas behind them much
better. To some extent, I sympathize and even empathize. I see room in the art world for
their views, just as I hope they see room for mine.

This work could have easily been defended as a metaphor for the various
to an idea or philosophy and that it might lead to more amicable
discourse between the faculty and the students as they work toward strengthening all of
the programs within the art department at Georgia Southern.

Moving forward, I intend to pursue more exploration and understanding of visual
language. I want to see how my discoveries and insights gleaned from this work can

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inform other art forms that I am interested in. This work has sparked a renewed interest in semiotics, and I want to better understand how meaning is communicated.

My next project will be to apply this knowledge to a graphic novel and utilize the various discoveries that I have made with this work to enhance visual storytelling across a multipage document. I also intend to begin blogging about composition as it applies to graphic design and illustration. Perhaps, at some point, I will have enough material for a textbook geared toward the graphic design student.

My time in graduate school has taught me that Graphic Design is more than an art form. It is also a social science and its practitioners must accept responsibility for how they use it. Graphic Design is only loosely rooted in fine art. It has responsibilities beyond the personal, physical, and social functions of art. Design should improve the human condition. To some degree, it should be instrumental in effecting change. It should educate and enlighten, provide new solutions and technologies. It should fight against destructive tyrannical philosophies like Post-Modernism to save us from ourselves. In his book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbons writes of five attributes that marked Rome at its end:

> A mounting love of show and luxury (that is affluence); second, a widening gap between the very rich and the very poor (this could be among countries in the family of nations as well as in a single nation); third, an obsession with sex; fourth, freakishness in the arts, masquerading as originality, and enthusiasms pretending to be creativity; fifth, an increased desire to live off the state. (Gibbons, 2009)

I believe we are living in similar times, as I can see all of these attributes present in our current culture. The rise of post modernism and the rejection of objective truths for
arbitrary assignments of meaning is the catalyst for this. According to Dr. Francis Schaefer, in How Should We Then Live, his extensive catalogue, comparison and contrasting of every art, literary, and philosophical movement from Ancient Rome to Post-Modernism, there are two effects or consequences of our loss of meaning and values:

The first is degeneracy. Think of New York City’s Times Square—Forty Second and Broadway, if one goes to what used to be the lovely Kalverstraat in Amsterdam, one finds it too, has become equally squalid. The same is true of lovely old streets in Copenhagen. Pompeii has returned! The marks of ancient Rome scar us: degeneracy, decadence, depravity, a love of violence for violence’s sake. The situation is plain. If we look, we see it. If we see it, we are concerned. But we must notice that there is a second result of modern man’s loss of meaning and values which is more ominous, and which many people do not see. This second result is that the elite will exist. Society cannot stand chaos. Some group or some person will fill the vacuum. An elite will offer us arbitrary absolutes, and who will stand in its way? (Schaefer 226)

Design cannot embrace such a movement and hope to hold true to the ideal that it should improve the human condition. It must reject such a philosophy where absolutes are arbitrarily manipulated to serve the needs of the few, the “elite.” What is at stake is no less than our freedom and our value as human beings. I hope, perhaps in vain, that the ideas expressed in this thesis might contribute toward that goal.

“Eleven Bullets: A Counter Assault on Subjectivity” is my best effort to put forth an opposing view on various philosophies and agendas that I have encountered as a graduate student. The title is related to the ten bullet laws enforced in New York State currently being used as a model for gun control legislation in other parts of the country. In New York, these laws have limited the number of bullets, which can be loaded into high capacity clips, to ten. Loading the eleventh bullet is grounds for confiscation of the weapon, severe fines and even jail time.
To some extent, metaphorically speaking, I felt like there was a ten-bullet law being enforced upon me while I was a graduate student. It often felt as if I could not be honest or express my opinions to the faculty without consequence while I was here. Amicable discourse about competing philosophies was rare and when debate did arise, it often resulted in shouting matches and insults. This thesis is my way of symbolically loading the eleventh bullet into the clip. It is my risking the consequences of breaking the established rules and codes to express my views and assert my authority and autonomy. It is my acceptance of the responsibility that comes with being a designer and using my work to visually communicate to the masses. It is my declaration that I am worthy of holding an M.F.A. and being on equal grounds with my professors. It is my proclamation that I am not afraid to say what I think because I have earned the right to make my own artistic decisions.
BOOM!
WORKS CITED


