DESIGNING IMAGES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN
QUESTIONS OF MEANING

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Respecting the interdisciplinary and collective nature of the journal, this article proposes a reflection on the value of the image. The reflection is focused on the area of graphic design in relation to two significant commercial and technological contexts, and on the theoretical foundations that participate in the construction of the image. The assumption, which is supported here, is the ethical role of the image, viewed with an eye to the past and a projection towards the future, considered within the academic area for a manifesto aimed at the construction of meaningful images.

INTRODUCTION

Respecting the interdisciplinary and collective nature of the journal, this article is an open reflection on the focus it has chosen to pursue, which is to consider, from a multiplicity of points of view, "images for what they are, their conception, their production, their perception". In particular, the context this reflection addresses is graphic design, in relation to two significant commercial and technological contexts, and to the theoretical foundations that participate in the construction of the image. The assumption, which is supported here, is the ethical role of the image, viewed with an eye to the past and a projection towards the future. A future that, within the limits of this contribution, is considered within the academic area, and the outcome of which will appear as a manifesto aimed at the construction of meaningful images.

"THE SPIRIT IS STIMULATED MORE SLOWLY BY THE EAR THAN BY THE EYE"

In 1982 Ernst Gombrich published his acclaimed book *The image and the eye*, which includes an interesting article titled "The visual image as a form of communication", published some years earlier in a special issue of *Scientific American*. This article is particularly significant for the considerations that will be developed here and for the conclusions towards which this article will aim. We would therefore like to begin with an ample excerpt, which we believe will serve as a proper "incipit": "Ours is a visual age. We are bombarded with pictures from morning till night. Opening our newspaper at breakfast, we see photographs of men and women in the news, and raising our eyes from the paper, we encounter the picture on the cereal package. The mail arrives and one envelope after the other discloses glossy folders with pictures of alluring landscapes and sunbathing girls to entice us to take a holiday cruise, or of elegant menswear to tempt us to

have a suit made to measure. Leaving our house, we pass billboards along the road that try to catch our eye and play on our desire to smoke, drink or eat. At work it is more than likely that we have to deal with some kind of pictorial information: photographs, sketches, catalogues, blueprints, maps or at least graphs. Relaxing in the evening, we sit in front of the television set, the new window on the world, and watch moving images of pleasures and horrors flit by. Even the images created in times gone by or in distant lands are more easily accessible to us than they ever were to the public for which they were created. Picture books, picture postcards and color slides accumulate in our homes as souvenirs of travel, as do the private mementos of our family snapshots. No wonder it has been asserted that we are entering a new historical epoch in which the image will take over from the written word" (Gombrich, 1985, p. 155).

Although about forty years have passed (a span of time that is significant today in terms of technological innovation and marketing strategies), the power of this piece remains highly relevant. The television set, the "new window on the world", has been replaced by the screens on our personal "devices", the "new windows" that browse information through global online networks where, on the contrary, it would be rather surprising to find the image replaced by the written word. In this sense, the future of which Gombrich spoke has come true, making the image even more powerful and seductive to our eyes. The "Internet" today represents a true "new window on the world", producing a non-stop temporal and spatial bombardment of images (no longer on paper or television), which accumulates in the intangible homes of smartphones and social networks.

The reason for which communication has been oriented towards a "medium" represented by visual images finds scientific support in several studies and a paradigmatic example in the plaque applied to the Pioneer F space probe, which NASA sent into space in 1972, trusting that alien species might also have a better understanding of a visual code (Figure 1).

Already in *Ars poetica*, Horace compared the impact of oral and visual storytelling, affirming that "the spirit is stimulated more slowly by the ear than by the eye" (Gombrich, 1985, p. 158) while scientific studies on animal behavior, including those of ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1961, 1971) have shown that, in order to survive, animals (including the human species) are genetically programmed to react better to visual signals, and in fact Rudolf Arnheim, in his studies on visual perception, affirms that "motion is the strongest visual appeal to attention" (Arnheim, 1981, p. 303), in that motion is equivalent to a change in environmental conditions, with the approach of a danger or a desirable prey. On this basis, according to WJ Mitchell (1996, 1997) and, more recently, Raffaele Simone (2012), technology has intimately modified the "modus vivendi" of society, public and private spaces, so much so that living has taken on a new meaning today: no longer taking shelter in an architectural space but, through graphic interfaces and video-screens, connecting our nervous system to nearby electronic systems.

The massive and global representation of reality using visual images has inspired recent artistic installations, stimulating critical awareness. *Mémoires* by Roberto Pellegrinuzzi

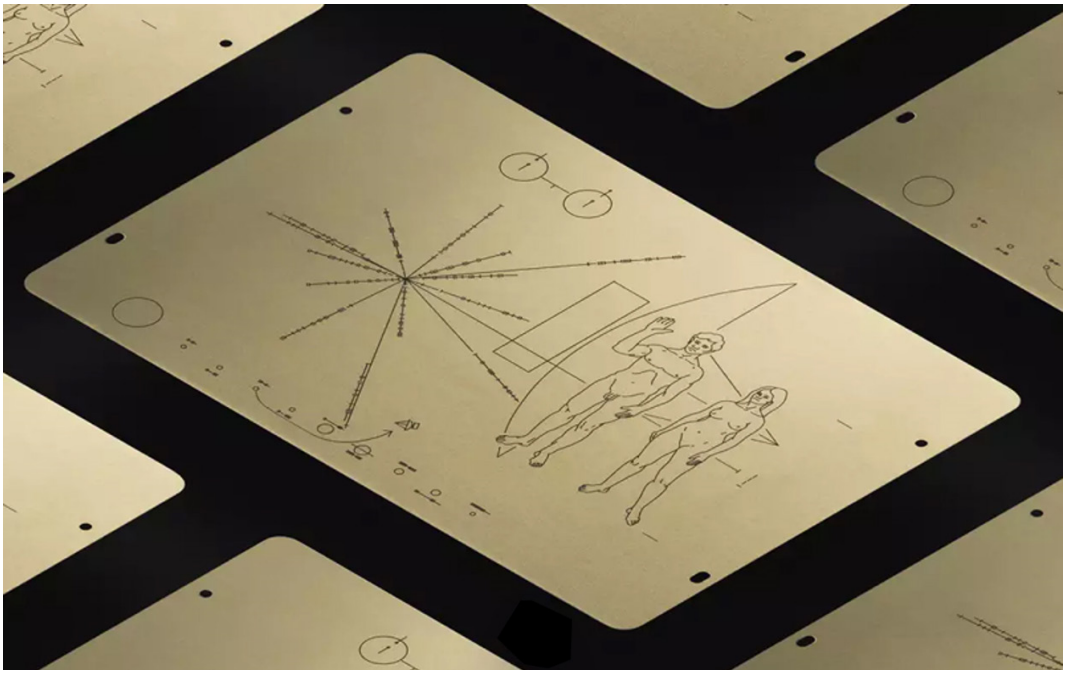

Fig. 1 Plaque applied to the Pioneer F space probe and sent into space, 1972.

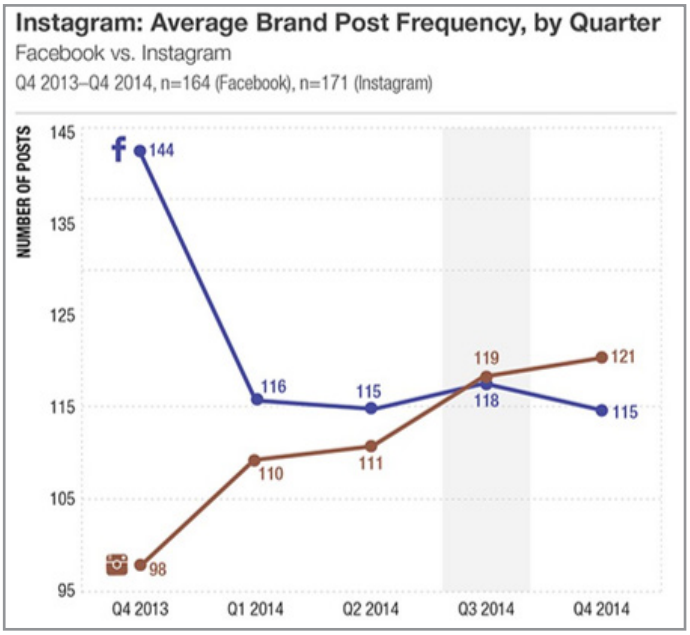

Fig. 2 Histogram showing Instagram surpassing Facebook, 2014.

(2015) and *24 Hours in Photos* by Eric Kessels (2013) denounce this visual accumulation with magmatic contours. In the first performance, 275,000 photographs of every-day life (taken compulsively by the author until the digital camera became obsolete) were assembled in the form of a cloud to be immersed in. The photos represent a metaphor for the enormous quantity of images accumulated in our brain like in a cloud storage system. In the second, thousands of 10x15 cm prints of images uploaded to the "Flickr" social network in 24 hours filled a room up to the ceiling, making the intangible tangible (digital photos of emotions and memories) and showing that in contemporary society the intangible sharing of lived experiences on a social network is more important than the experiences themselves. This is confirmed by the rise of "Instagram" after 2014, to the detriment of "Facebook" (Figure 2): a social trend that increasingly prefers photos and videos to posts (i.e. the visual image to writing), immediately exploited in terms of new "social branding" strategies to achieve high levels of "engagement" among social network users ("followers") and justified by the increasingly widespread awareness that "the image captures more attention than words" (M&CS Agency, 2019) or that "telling a story through a single photo is a strong

point" (Makia, 2017). According to Sara Trovato, a media expert and founder of Found, "The Instagramer represents the last frontier of the Influencer, whose great power lies in her ability to convey messages with a strong viral content through the use of the most common of media that everyone can understand: a photo" (Makia, 2017). A significant consequence of this trend, which favors the "social media of images", is influencer marketing, the latest form of marketing based on the ability of some subjects (once defined as testimonials) to affect the purchasing power of others, using the social network and the visual image as communication channels.

"I WILL PRODUCE ART ON PAPER AND WOOD ACCORDING TO MY HEART, REGARDLESS OF ANY MARKET"

In the field of visual culture, the relationship between design and the reliance on market strategies, which affect creativity, has often been critically evaluated by graphic designers themselves. In particular, the issue was addressed for the first time in America where, after the second industrial revolution, graphic design was identified with advertising aimed at commercial sales. The designers, defined as commercial artists, were responsible for composing persuasive images to promote the company's offer to the public. In this context, William Addison Dwinggins (1880-1956) supported free creative thinking, stating as follows: "My back is turned on the more banal kind of advertising [...]. I will produce art on paper and wood after my own heart with no heed to any market" (Heller, 2014, pp. 207-210). To construct the theoretical foundations of the discipline and redeem its autonomy, in the article "New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design" (1922) Dwinggins launched the term graphic design, which was taken up in 1927 by WG Raffe in the title of his book. Only after the Second World War was the term finally established internationally.

However, at present the connection between graphic design and induced culture is still an area of critical reflection

from an ethical point of view. In *Graphic Design for the 21st Century*, 45 contemporary designers were invited by Charlotte and Peter Fiell to express themselves on the relationships between graphic design, the business world and digital technologies. The most common response opposed the need for an ethical dimension to the proliferation of the commercial culture, which attributes forms of subconscious memorization to visual communication: "Today's graphic designers must recognize that they have the responsibility and the ability to respond not only to the needs of customers, but also to those of the company. The persuasive power of graphic design could radically alter the point of view of people with respect to the themes of the future. Although not all graphic creations fall within the field of ethics, professionals in the sector must however tip the balance in favor of social rather than commercial commitment if they still want to represent an important and vital cultural force" (Fiell, 2005, pp. 10-11).

In Italy, graphic design for the purposes of information was theorized by Albe Steiner (1913-1974). A graphic designer, after 1963 Steiner linked his teaching profession to his Communist militancy at the "Advanced Course in Graphic Art" (CSAG) in Urbino (later ISIA), advancing an ideological position which held that the "graphic design trade" should make itself "useful" in seeking a common good to improve society. The term "grafica di pubblica utilità", public service graphic design, was conceived in this sense, attracting designers in the 1970s and 80s towards visual communication at the service of public and/or political institutions, interested in involving citizens in the decisions regarding social, cultural, urban and health policies. An exemplary experience was the twenty-year collaboration between the municipal administration of Pesaro and graphic designer Massimo Dolcini (1945-2005), a student of Steiner's between 1967 and 1969, who established a real "ethical dialogue" [Piazza 2009, p. 164]. This led in 1989 to the drafting of the Charter for the Graphic Design Project which in article 2 stated: "inasmuch as it can focus attention and operate perceptible distinctions, as well as confer a form and identity to the communications process, graphic design is helping to give substance to the structures of society" (AIAP, 1989).

With regard to visual language, the elements that characterized public service campaigns were aesthetic quality, clarity of communication, the absence of formalisms and social involvement. Albe Steiner, for example, looked to the work of El Lissitzky, the theoretical principles of Soviet and Bauhaus Constructivism as well as Italian geometric abstraction. The use of drawing was not a mere instrumental application but a structural and structuring value with its own theoretical foundations, which made it possible to act creatively in the of design thought process for the construction of meaning, and to graphically render the most appropriate visual configuration for communication. An understanding of the theoretical principles of drawing and of its geometrical-perceptive implications was a prerequisite for a conscious approach to a graphic design project. To achieve a correct correspondence between form and content, the development of the graphic design project required the use of visual concepts that indicated the most appropriate basic elements of the "grammar of seeing" to compose in syntax. The drawing classes at the Bauhaus and at the Ulm School ("Grund Kurs" and "Basic Design") constituted a conceptual training preparatory to the Industrial design and Visual design courses, based on the premise that the success of a campaign did not depend on the idea alone but also on how the message was drawn.

The knowledge of drawing theories therefore became of fundamental importance to the development of the creative idea and the success of the visual message underlying the graphic design project. Mastery in the definition and relationship between point, line and surface; the innumerable perceptive and persuasive dimensions that relied on the use of color or black and white; the use of symmetrical or asymmetrical configurations (not only spatial but chromatic as well); the ability to allude to movement in the absence of animated technological innovation through static or dynamic perceptual effects; the relations of position and context between all these elements (both geometric and perceptual) constituted the theoretical foundations of the design process in the field of graphic design, to the extent that in the contemporary age Philippe Apeloing stated: "Our work is based mainly on ideas

Fig. 3 Andrey Logvin, poster for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2004.

and drawing has an important influence because it is capable of giving shape to cultural concepts and communicating them" (Fiell, 2005, p. 20). In this sense, an emblem of this position is the *NUL* ("Nessuno") poster by Andrey Logvin, winner in 2004 of both the Special Prize at the IX International Triennial of Political Posters in Mons (Belgium) and the Golden Bee Award at the International Biennial of Graphic Design in Moscow. Designed at the request of the Ministry of Education in France, the poster graphically illustrates Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "No one can be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (Figure 3).

"WE HAVE ALL THE POSSIBILITIES, BUT WE HAVE NO PLANS"

Just over forty years ago when digital graphics were still in their infancy, in the first chapter of a book dedicated to drawing applied to the graphic arts, the author Amedeo Grütter, recalling the work of the first typographers and printers, reviewed the professional identity of the graphic designer, highlighting how the latter, like painters and architects, relied on the laws of composition to arrange type and illustrations. Not coincidentally, the author noted the increasingly frequent use in Italy of the term "progettista grafico", a translation of the English term graphic designer, introduced "to discourage the use of the unduly vague term "disegnatore" (n.d.t.: from "disegnare" - "to draw") which, moreover, is unclear about whether it refers to design ideation, i.e. creative work, or to simple practical applications, i.e. mere mechanical action. The dualism of the English verbs to design, design-creation, and to draw, drawing-execution, makes the different meanings clear in this language, leaving [Italians] to search for a satisfactory terminology" (Grütter, 1979, p. 9).

In synthesis, the graphic design culture of the time claimed to assert the personality of the graphic designer as distinct from that of a simple executor of drawings, linking it to design, just as towards the end of the 1960s, in his book *Arte come mestiere*, Bruno Munari had discussed the term "Industrial Designer", sustaining that the designer is "the artist of our age [...] because he addresses with humility and competence whatever the society he lives in demands of him" (Munari, 2005, p. 28). Whereas in the late 1970s, in his fundamental book *Il mestiere di grafico*, Albe Steiner clarified the professional identity of the graphic designer which, given his tendency to "dedicate his work to serial production", was distinct from that of the printer and above all of the artist-painter (Steiner, 1978, pp. 128-129).

Twenty years later, in the aftermath of the widespread and increasingly accessible advent of digital graphics, the question of the identity of the graphic designer came back to the fore: at *Digital Culture* in Bellaria (2001), the interna-

tional graphic design, visual and multimedia communication magazine *LineaGrafica*, promoted a research campus to reflect on the new professional figures in visual communication in relation to the proliferation of increasingly powerful and seductive computer technologies for constructing images. The campus featured a discussion of the innovations brought by the rapid rise of computer technology in the field of graphic design as well as the mutation of the professional profile of the "graphic designer" into that of the "digital graphic designer" (Brunelli, 2001).

Over time, the digital dimension of graphic design has, without a shadow of a doubt, established new and different ways of representing graphic design, deeply involving every phase in the design development process: ideation, elaboration, visualization. The essence of digital graphic design has changed the logical-temporal process component, which has long accompanied the development of the traditional graphic design project. In fact, while the tools and techniques typical of traditional design have been replaced by the mouse, keyboard, video and, in general, computer drawing tools variously expressed in specialized software programmes, at the same time, the adoption of digital technologies has modified the traditional production process for the graphic design project in which the realization phase followed the concept phase. The digital speed which makes it possible to test and modify different hypotheses for the realization of the same idea in real time, has led to a greater integration between the phases of conception and realization of the project, so that the project is realized virtually while it is being developed. And while on the one hand this is the result of technological innovation, on the other it confirms the conceptual significance of drawing which uses codes, methods and techniques of representation to make the idea visible, and directly available for subsequent processing (Cervellini, 2016). Moreover, at the same time, the potential of computers to work with telematic networks makes it possible to design the graphic project "ex-novo", but also to take advantage of a wealth of images and multimedia resources from which to draw inspiration.

Nevertheless, the very meaning of graphic design has

been further extended and with it, its areas of application. If, on the one hand, technological innovation has strengthened the technical-design capacity of graphic design, on the other it has introduced new fields of experimentation. Animation, multimedia, interactivity, immersiveness, "digital media" (both as tools to develop products and as means of mass communication), have contributed significantly to making the digital support an essential element in the process of developing the graphic design project starting with its most basic aspects, so that we might well agree with the following statement by Pier Pietro Brunelli: "if the digital language did not take the form of an effective visual representation, it would remain a field accessible to computer scientists and mathematicians alone" (Brunelli, 2001, p. 54).

The possibilities offered by technological innovation, however, lead to careful considerations on the need for a critical use of the digital tool to achieve the most appropriate configuration and implementation of the project. In fact, in light of the position that considers digital innovation to be the key to the quality of graphic design and image construction, many other voices have risen to state that it takes more than knowing how to use the most sophisticated digital visual image technologies to design and produce significant graphic design products because, if "good work is the product of creative intellect supported by sophisticated digital tools, it goes without saying that it takes more than technology to make a graphic designer" (Gordon, B. & M., 2002, p. 10).

In this sense, the cultural centrality of design confirms its decisive role. Moreover, the history of graphic design is marked by significant phases that, on several occasions, have confirmed the importance of the cultural value underlying graphic design thinking with respect to the evolution of the technical-technological factor alone. The advent of movable type printing, the introduction of photography, the creation of more modern reproduction and printing systems have led to an expansion of the meaning and roles of graphic design, which has stretched beyond the boundaries of publishing to spread into the fields of industrial production and mass visual communication. These phases

have always been accompanied by a fervid critical debate, focused on the subtle relationship between the technical product and the artistic product: just think of the contribution to graphic design by the Art Nouveau movement, by the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century or the Bauhaus, whose experiments remain milestones in the history of graphic design for the attention they dedicate to the themes of balance between function, technique and aesthetic quality as well as the relationship between seriality and innovation.

In observance of these considerations and by virtue of the greater power and versatility of IT supports, the assumption remains that these resources actually do represent a resource of unquestionable technological value for the work of the graphic designer but, at the same time, they would be useless were they not supported by training and by design research into the ideational aspects founded on integrated cognitive horizons: "one thing I do - says Bob Gill - and that the computer doesn't, is think. The "layout" is no longer the imperative. We must think and do what the computer cannot do" (Newark, 2003, p. 116).

In this regard, the reflection by Lucio D'Amelia (2005) is significant: "It is no coincidence that we talk about foundational topics in a surreptitious but perceptible polemic against "do-it-yourself graphics" (with the new technologies we are all "amateur graphic designers"). The main intent is to bring graphic design back to its dimension as both an academic and professional discipline at the same time: academic (obviously not to be understood in a derogatory sense), because it delves its roots into an illustrious tradition that ranges from philosophy (visual thinking and ethics) to literature, poetry and figurative art (painting and drawing); professional, because it is related to a sector the products of which require rigorous technical application (for example, in industrial artefacts, printed works or hypermedia)". In this sense, while basing his skills on digital input and from the point of view of someone who elaborates instances of design ideation, the graphic designer must be capable of consciously managing his role in compliance with a more general ob-

jective that views the graphic design project as an expressive synthesis between the latest image and media technologies, and research and knowledge. The "existential" aspect of the project remains fundamental. Referring to a quote by J.-P. Sartre, "we may have every possibility available to us, but we have no project" (Chia, 2008) if, as Philippe Starck also claimed, "matter, if not combined with the idea that gives everything meaning, is a phenomenon empty of content [...] Subversive, ethical, ecological, political, fun ... that's how I see my duty as a designer" (Starck, 2018).

The cultural foundation underlying the education of a graphic designer must therefore promote a visual image design culture based on a trans-disciplinary education that firmly merges the graphic design skills from various interacting fields of knowledge, such as those belonging to the traditional "graphic design trade", with semiotics, visual perception, the psychology of images and forms, the criteria of media and communication sciences, and has the capacity to work in a team with more specialized skills, including marketing.

The debate surrounding the role of graphic design, and the value of the image within it, is focused on these aspects, constantly assessing them against the needs of the business world and those of ethical consciousness. In this regard, it is useful to consider the positions of some graphic designers, published in the aforementioned *Graphic Design for the 21st Century* by Charlotte and Peter Fiell (2005), which represent the most advanced expression of this profession around the world and which, read one after the other, seem to arise from a single voice that in unison formulates a single critical thought: to make sense of the graphic image.

"The increasing use of graphic design as a purely commercial tool is devaluing its currency. The big design groups and big clients talk about "difference", but in fact they mean sameness: everything looks the same. Design has been supplanted by marketing strategies, but no one ever says: "Look at that marketing strategy!" This means therefore that design is becoming visual "garbage", and the result is monotony, uniformity and timidity. And paradoxically at a time when interest in visual culture is stronger than ever" Intro (Fiell, 2005, p. 104).

"There was a time when it was thought that design had an important role in society. It could tell people meaningful information or try to improve our ways of living. Today we seem to have forgotten that design has this possibility. The kind of work that designers seek are the ones for the coolest sports companies, not the ones that will have the most effect on society or add most to culture. It is time for designers to realize that design is not just something "cool" and that design is also not just about money. We need to take our profession seriously and engage in cultural and critical discussion about what we are doing and aiming for the modernist idea that designers are transparent messengers with no opinions of their own is no longer valid. We cannot just do our design and say issues such as unethical work practices are not our problem. We cannot say that a lack of meaningful content is not a problem. If we want the respect and attention we think we deserve, then we need to think about what happens to our work when it is seen in society and about the kind of work we want to participate in", Jonathan Barnbrook (Fiell, 2005, p. 28).

"When I reflect on the themes and patterns inherent to the graphic design sector over the past ten years, the aggressiveness of the information superhighway, the blind enthusiasm for hardware and software, the propensity towards grandeur, the death of the avant-garde movements, the hunt for something new, the advent of Helvetica Neo-Modernism, the battle between vectors and bitmaps, the importance given to the brand, the complacent identity crisis of graphic design, I believe that my vision of the future of graphic design is rather paradoxical and romantic: I see a return to the classical virtues of the profession, to original ideas, creative imagination, craft techniques, individual aesthetics, historical compromise, social responsibility and critical attitudes", Andrea Tinnes (Fiell, 2005, p. 176).

"Having come of age at a time when the computer was introduced and subsequently embraced as a radical new design tool and solution, I and other designers of my generation are seeing it now dominate almost every aspect of design. Design is fundamentally idea-oriented, and designers

carry profound influence in their power to shape and communicate cultural concepts. The future of design lies as much in this active and critical role within society as it does in the further development of technology. Graphic design is the art of visualizing ideas, activating space, intuiting proportion. It is the result of meticulous attention to detail. Good graphic design prompts the viewer to meditate, often unconsciously, on potent word/image combinations. Good graphic design is always memorable", Philippe Apeloig (Fiell, 2005, p. 20).

"The design that interests me most is what reaches the heart of the viewer. We are surrounded by professional and masterfully executed graphic creations, beautifully illustrated with exceptional photographs, yet almost all of them seem to me (to me and I believe to many other people too) cold. They are simply floppy: well produced, frivolous, absolutely limp. There is no emotion or reflection, some information yes, but always limp. I think this is mainly due to the fact that most designers don't believe in anything. We are not interested in politics or religion, we do not take sides in important matters. If you have such a weak conscience, how can you produce a strong creation? There are films that moved me, books that changed my way of seeing things and music that made me change my mood. Our goal for the future will be to reach people's hearts through design", Stefan Sagmeister (Fiell, 2005, p. 156).

"My long-term goal is to achieve a healthy balance between a strategically designed design, which does not pollute the environment, and a creative design that seeks to broaden traditional patterns, be they aesthetic or concern the choice of means. I would like to use the tools I have as a draftsman to assume social responsibilities, because I am aware of the fact that the designers of my generation have filled the streets with omnipotent and meaningless creations", Aboud Sodano (Fiell, 2005, p. 12).

"Graphic design can control language and also shape our visual urban environment. It is for this reason that I believe we should not allow it to be thrown together in its conceptual creation", Peter Anderson (Fiell, 2005, p. 16).

CONCLUSIONS

If on the one hand one cannot but agree on the proliferation of an increasingly persuasive use of the visual image as a means of direct and immediate communication, on the other it is true that there is an awareness and a critical resilience towards this phenomenon on the part of an influential professional and academic world of graphic designers. It therefore becomes important in educational curricula to offer our young people a wide cultural panorama, based on the history of graphic design and on the theoretical foundations of graphic design for the construction of images, drawing attention in particular to the danger posed by the persuasive power of the image when it finds widespread dissemination through strongly mass-oriented communication contexts, such as the current channels of the web and social networks (Zerlenga, 2007; Falcidieno, 2008; Cicalò, 2019, p. 29; Unali, p. 175).

Obviously, it is important to state that the persuasive use of the image concerns and, above all, has concerned various fields of communication, sometimes through multiple channels, as demonstrated in several contributions to the recent international and interdisciplinary conference on images and the imagination held in Alghero (2019): from political propaganda (Vattano, 2019, p. 143) to terrorism (Oppedisano, 2019, p. 157). The challenge must therefore be addressed within the field of education and belongs, as Sergio Polano states, to this era of "excess and dispersion, acceleration of time and contraction of space, loss of "frames" we once used to encase knowledge and practices" (Polano, 2002, p. 48). To resort to questions of meaning when designing images will mean looking towards a different future, in which intellectual and ethical honesty might have blurred contours at the moment because, as Bob and Maggie Gordon state in the introduction to their publication entitled *Digital Graphics*, an ancient proverb says: "if we can see into the future it means that we are not looking far enough" (Gordon, 2002, p. 9).

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