

STYLE IS NOT A FOUR LETTER WORD

Mr. Keedy

Today, the emphasis on style over content in much of what is alleged to be graphic design and communication is, at best, puzzling.

—Paul Rand, *Design, Form and Chaos*

The work arises as a methodological consequence—not from streaming projects through some stylistic posture.

—Bruce Mau, *Life Style*

Looking at other magazines from all fields it seems that “serious” content-driven publications don’t care how they look, whilst “superficial” content-free ones resort to visual pyrotechnics.

—Editors, *DotDotDot*, issue no. 1

Good design means as little design as possible.

—Dieter Rams, *Omit the Unimportant*

Style = Fart

—Stefan Sagmeister

There has been a long and continuing feud in design between style and content, form and function, and even pleasure and utility, to which Charles Eames answered, “Who would say that pleasure is not useful?”¹ Maybe we should call a truce, since it doesn’t seem like anyone is winning. Animosity towards style is pretty much a given in the design rhetoric of the twentieth century. But where did this antagonistic relationship between design and style come from? And more importantly, what has it done for us?

At the end of the stylistic excess and confusion of the Victorian era, the architect Adolf Loos led the way to a simpler, progressive, and more profitable future. In 1908 he proclaimed, “I have discovered the following truth and presented it to the world: cultural evolution is synonymous with the removal of ornament from articles in daily use.”² In his polemical and now famous essay “Ornament and Crime,” Adolf Loos established what would be the prevalent attitude towards ornament, pattern, decoration, and style in the twentieth century. He explained, “Shall

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every age have a style of its own and our age alone be denied one? By style they meant decoration. But I said, don't weep! See, what makes our culture grand is its inability to produce a new form of decoration. We have overcome the ornament, we have won through the lack of ornamentation." Far from being a period without style, or new ornament, the end of the nineteenth century was inundated with ornament and style. The Jugendstil, Vienna Secession, Wiener Werkstätte, Art Nouveau, and Arts and Crafts were all in various stages of development. Loos was frustrated because a consensus on style no longer seemed possible, and he believed that "those who measure everything by the past impede the cultural development of nations and of humanity itself." Sounding like an early example of "compassionate conservatism," he explains, "I suffer the ornament of the Kafir, that of the Persian, that of the Slovak farmer's wife, the ornaments of my cobbler, because they all have no other means of expressing their full potential." Loos's condescending conceit became "received wisdom" in modernist design, in which "the lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power."

In "Ornament and Crime," we see the modernist project as fundamentalist, puritanical, elitism being promoted as progressive enlightenment. Probably very few designers have actually read it, yet they all know that ornament and style are, if not criminal, at least suspect. As Loos points out, "The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons where eighty percent of the inmates bear tattoos. Those who are tattooed but are not imprisoned are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder." And, "The man who daubs the walls with erotic symbols to satisfy an inner urge is a criminal or a degenerate. It is obvious that his urge overcomes such a man: such symptoms of degeneration most forcefully express themselves in public conveniences." The idea that ornament, style, and pleasure are "degenerate" is reinforced today by the fact that pop culture literally wallows in them. The easiest way to differentiate yourself from the all-pervasive "nobrow"³ monoculture we inhabit is to reject its excesses. Just say "no"—to ornament and style. But for Loos, the fact that ornament was a symptom of "degenerate" sensibilities was not its worst offence. The biggest problem he had with ornament was that it was not economical. As he explained, "Decorated plates are expensive, while white crockery, which is pleasing to the modern individual, is cheap. Whilst one person saves money, the other becomes insolvent," since "the lack of ornament results in reduced working hours and an increased wage. The Chinese carver works sixteen hours, the American laborer works eight hours."⁴ For Loos the modern American way, without ornament (or style and history), was not only the most progressive; it was the most cost-effective. Not surprisingly, Loos's style of boxy masses of marble, glass, and wood became the style of corporate America.

Loos was successful at discrediting style and elevating function and economics as the primary goals in design as opposed to older ideas like "truth, beauty, and power."⁵ But he did not achieve his main goal of eliminating ornament. As James Trilling points out in his book, *Ornament, A Modern Perspective*, "He did something much more

original. He reinvented it, with a completely new character and direction for the twentieth century.”⁶ He did this by carefully choosing natural substances like marble and wood for their decorative surface effects, which were natural and therefore “authentic.” Loos invented “an ornament without images, patterns, motifs, or history. Even this was not enough. Cloaking his achievement in a diatribe against ornament itself, he gave us the only ornament we could pretend was no ornament at all. We went after the decoy and swallowed it whole, a feat of self-deception that shapes our visual culture to this day.”⁷ We can see evidence of this in the lack of sophistication in the use of pattern and ornamentation in contemporary graphic design. Or as Trilling puts it, “Historically, the abolition of recognizable form in ornament is not just a response to similar developments in painting. It is a final stage in the progressive weakening and dissolution that afflicted ornament throughout the nineteenth century. If we do not recognize the forms of modernist ornament as weak, it is because there are so few forms left to recognize.”

That Loos’s ideas continue to resonate today is unquestionable. But that an elitist, deceptive, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, money-grubbing rant would inspire such allegiance is troubling, to say the least. Once ornament was supposedly done away with, or at least “rehabilitated” into modernist dogma, one could have expected that it was only a matter of time before design itself would be recast as a crime against culture. And Hal Foster’s diatribe “Design and Crime” does exactly that. Loos condemned ornament for “damaging national economy and therefore its cultural development.” Conversely, Foster claims today’s design is “a primary agent that folds us back into the near-total system of contemporary consumerism.”⁸ Foster claims that Art Nouveau designers of the past “resisted the effects of industry” but “there is no such resistance in contemporary design: it delights in postindustrial technologies, and it is happy to sacrifice the semi-autonomy of architecture and art to the manipulations of design.” And that “today you don’t have to be filthy rich to be projected not only as designer but as designed—whether the product in question is your home or your business, your sagging face (designer surgery), or your lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museums) or your DNA future (designer children). Might this ‘designed subject’ be the unintended offspring of the ‘constructed subject’ so vaunted in postmodern culture? One thing seems clear: just when you thought the consumerist loop could get no tighter in its narcissistic logic, it did: design abets a near-perfect circuit of production and consumption, without much ‘running room’ for anything else.”

The paucity of context or specificity in Foster’s critique of design is only surpassed by its stunning lack of originality. Once again, design as “scapegoat” is seen as so vacuously amoral and apolitical that capitalism, mass media, and globalization (etc.) have harnessed its mesmerizing emptiness to dupe an unsuspecting, uncritical (innocent?) public into duplicitous submission. And design offers no “resistance”! I wish Foster would explain how the art world manages to offer “resistance” and “semi-autonomy” when you do have to be “filthy rich” to be a serious player in it. Talk about no running room! Will designers ever outrun this type of cornball caricature? At the

end of the twentieth century, designers find themselves in a world in which ornament, decoration, and style are reduced to meaningless superficial effects; form is only to be derived from function⁹; and design itself is little more than a commercial construct. What a load of crap.

Foster, like most art/culture critics of the twentieth century, seems to be unaware of the fact that culture was developed through design, and that the art culture industry that he is hermetically sealed in is a fairly recent development. Such critics are incapable of imagining that design could have what he calls “political situatedness of both autonomy and its transgression,” or “a sense of the historical dialect of disciplinarity and its contestation.” If only critics like Foster could allow themselves to see designers as actually possessing some autonomy and self-awareness, instead of reducing us all to commercial hacks, they might realize that design is a cultural practice worthy of their speculative interest. Unfortunately, typical of twentieth-century critics, he is still prattling on about Art, so we’ll have to wait for the cultural critics of the twenty-first century for design to be of serious interest. Foster only sees design as a barrier to “resistance” (fight the power, right on!) and a threat to the “distinctions between practices” (art is special!). Design is often erroneously conflated with marketing and consumerism to serve as a whipping boy, to enforce “disciplinarity,” and to keep us in our place. He is “attacking the messenger,”¹⁰ because he doesn’t like the message. Design is just the messenger. The idea that art doesn’t matter is the message.

Foster acknowledges that Loos’s “anti-decorative dictate is a modernist mantra if ever there was one, and it is for the puritanical propriety inscribed in such words that postmodernists have condemned modernists like Loos in turn. But maybe times have changed again; maybe we are in a moment when distinctions between practices might be reclaimed or remade—without the ideological baggage of purity and propriety attached.” Now that the early modernist dream of “art into life”¹¹ has succeeded, Foster (like Loos before him) would like to take it back out, and into the protective custody of the art world. Maybe instead of going back to the bad old days of art with a capital *A*, Foster should realize that we are entering an era of design with a capital *D*. Is it actually possible that people are looking at the museum’s architecture, and browsing its gift shop instead of the galleries, because the design is not only more fun, but more meaningful to them? Or are they just stupefied by the spectacle of commodification? In “The Age of Aesthetics,” isn’t it design and style that will matter most? And does that mean that ideas and meaning are out? Not according to Virginia Postrel, who says in her book *The Substance of Style* that you can be “smart and pretty.”¹²

Postrel is an economics columnist for the *New York Times*, and a past editor of *Reason* magazine. She has spoken at a number of design venues, including TED 2004. Far from being an “old school” economic critic like Thorstein Veblen, she puts a positive spin on “conspicuous consumption,”¹³ and admits, “In a sense my book is a defense of the consumer society.”¹⁴ Thus, conservatives tend to be predisposed to listen to her, and liberals of the Adbusters type do not. Her reception by designers has

been lukewarm at best. It is ironic that designers were more supportive of Naomi Klein's *No Logo*¹⁵ book, in which the best advice she could muster for them was that they should quit. Postrel has a much better grasp of design in context, and is an advocate for design, if not designers. And as an economist and libertarian, she starts from the assumption that free markets and free choice are, as Martha Stewart would say, "good things." Postrel explains, "Globalization has brought a wide assortment of formerly exotic-seeming styles and products into the mainstream. The challenge is to learn to accept that aesthetic pleasure is an autonomous good, not the highest or the best but one of many plural, sometimes conflicting, and frequently unconnected sources of value."

Postrel breaks up the old bipolar debates between style and substance, or as designers say it, form and function, by recognizing that pleasure is an equally important part of the equation. Artists have been talking about the value of pleasure since day one, but to have an economist say that pleasure is an important value in design—well, it's a lot more than most designers have been willing to say. She takes it even further by warning us against "falling into the puritanical mind-set that denies the value of aesthetic pleasure and seeks always to link it with evil." She believes designers should be asking themselves "How can I provide pleasure and meaning?" Pleasure is not exactly a hot topic among designers. I don't think today's information architects and media directors are ready to admit to such sybaritic impulses. Problem solving, communicating, informing, identifying, or branding: yes. Pleasure? No. But as Postrel points out, "Everyone else is also solving problems and contributing to strategy. The question is what problems can you uniquely solve? Where's your value-added? If you try to sell yourselves as another sort of engineer, the engineers will just scoff at you—and rightly so."¹⁶ It is as if she pointed out that not only does the design "emperor have no clothes," but he is pleasuring himself as well.

Instead of pleasure, perhaps Postrel should have used the more genteel Victorian idea of "repose"¹⁷ as the emotional response one hopes for from design. But Postrel speaks boldly. She even dares to refute the modernist idea of authenticity, described in its various forms as purity, tradition, and the "aura" or "patina" of history. She explains that they are defined "based on rules that have little to do with the desires or purposes of those who create, use, or inhabit the subjects of the critique" and that "'authenticity' becomes little more than a rhetorical club to enforce the critic's taste." Speaking as the voice of the people, she goes on to say, "We can decide for ourselves what is authentic for our purposes, what matches surface with substance, form with identity. We can define authenticity from the inside out. This approach to authenticity challenges the ideal of impersonal authority, replacing it with personal, local knowledge." She believes "what's truly authentic is change and cultural evolution." I applaud her ability to deflate the "gas bags" of authenticity and the puritanical scolds of pleasure and consumerism. But she goes on to say, "Aesthetics have become too important to be left to the aesthetes." I question the faith that she puts in the "we," as in "we the people," with bad taste and no sense of style, to make the best choices. She is careful not to completely discount expertise, as she explains:

“There’s a difference between expertise and gatekeeping. Expertise tells you how to achieve what you find aesthetically pleasing. Gatekeeping tells you what you should find aesthetically pleasing. It’s the gatekeepers who are upset—people who want to dictate the one true style, whether they’re arbiters of fashions in clothing or in architecture.”

No doubt that is true, but the idea that it is the expert’s job to tell you how to achieve what you have already decided is aesthetically pleasing is even worse. Yes, I could ask Julia Child to help me make a chili cheese dog, or Luciano Pavarotti to sing “Happy Birthday,” but that would just be stupid. And it is the expert’s job to tell us when we are being stupid. We don’t have to agree, or take his or her advice, but we should know what those who have more experience, knowledge, and talent think. Experts should be posted at the “gates” of culture, because the idea that someone has the ability to lock them is absurd. Unfortunately for us, today’s “gatekeepers” are not like Ruskin and Morris, or any of the self-proclaimed tastemakers of the past, whose advice was sought, if not always heeded. Today’s arbiters of style seem to be people with individually cultivated tastes and opinions, but they are in fact corporate brands like Martha Stuart (Omnimedia), Michael Graves, and Tommy Hilfiger, whose “opinions” are really just products. And today’s design academics, critics, and journalists wouldn’t presume to be “expert” in anything as potentially contestable, embarrassing, and unimportant as taste. The only real experts and connoisseurs you are likely to run into today are on “make-over” TV shows and eBay. Taste used to be something you developed and learned with the guidance of experts over time; now it’s just something you buy. After all, “nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.”¹⁸

The idea of taste is problematic and widely contested today. Many people have come to resent high standards of taste as the ability to transform our wardrobes, living rooms, and bodies increasingly becomes an obligation to do so. Where does it all end? How do we keep from being completely consumed by the demands for more style and better taste? Postrel doesn’t think that will happen. She believes “most of us won’t make that cost/benefit calculation,” and in the end people’s good sense will prevail. She says, “My own aesthetic preference is to let people do whatever they want.” “We live in a momentary—often delightful—chaos that shall inevitably morph into better practices through trial and error. Eventually, aesthetic harmony shall prevail.” But why would it? She should know that markets don’t always correct themselves by themselves. Sometimes they crash. The “powers that be,” the “stakeholders,” the ones with the most to lose, are constantly monitoring and regulating the market to keep it going. Yet, in the “age of aesthetics,” it is the “gatekeepers” that Postrel would throw out. When pressed for some criteria of judgment, she says, “Quantifying aesthetic value is very difficult. It’s not like there is one thing you can measure.” Yes Virginia, it is difficult, that’s why you ask an expert—you know, someone who actually knows what she is talking about.

Good taste is learned, but no one is teaching it anymore. High culture is supposed to be a reflection of us at our best, while pop culture is a reflection of us

at our happiest. The pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of excellence are not the same thing. Style may be coming back in style, but taste is not. What we have now is not so much a “democratization of taste” as a disavowal of any standards. A democratic culture does not mean mob rule. A democratic approach to style would include excellence. But the Darwinian free-market commercial populism Postrel imagines puts too much faith in the market’s ability to make the best cost/benefit choices in terms of style. Postrel says, “In the technocratic era of the one best way, correct taste was a matter of rational expertise ‘this is good design’ not personal pleasure ‘I like this.’” However, since she is so keen to point out that style has meaning, I wonder if it has occurred to her that very often the style that says “I like this” has a meaning that says “I’m an idiot.” Or is that just the price you pay for pleasure? Not necessarily, because as she points out, “The values of design itself—function, meaning, and pleasure—can exist independently of each other.” No doubt this is where all the confusion comes in, and where experience is needed to establish criteria and evaluation. The fact is, as the popularity of TV “design” shows and all those shelter/lifestyle magazines and books prove, people want to be educated about style. But designers are not even debating issues of style and taste among themselves, much less instructing the *hoi polloi*. They seem to be operating on the assumption that it doesn’t matter any more; they are no longer in the business of dictating taste, because there are no rules any more.

In his book on postmodernism in graphic design, Rick Poynor explains that “*No More Rules*’s central argument is that one of the most significant developments in graphic design, during the last two decades, has been designers’ overt challenges to the conventions or rules that were once widely regarded as constituting good practice.”¹⁹ By using the cliché of “rule breaking,” Poynor effectively restricts postmodernism in design to its reactionary emergence and validates the popular misconception that postmodernism ended once its initial shock was absorbed. This reflects the current feeling in design that since there are no more rules, we have arrived at a post-postmodern, post-taste, poststyle, and postdesign free-for-all. In a somewhat nostalgic-sounding tone of resignation, Poynor says, “If fundamental systemic change feels unlikely, then this tends to suggest that the postmodern condition will be our reality for the foreseeable future, imposing operational constraints or ‘rules’ of its own, whether we like it or not.” But the ideas that designers started exploring in the eighties and nineties, like deconstruction, appropriation, technology, authorship, and opposition, which Poynor skillfully outlines in his book, seem more like an attempt to establish new rules, practices, and disciplinarity in place of the “received wisdom” of modernism. Not just rule breaking, or a discarding of rules, but an exploration, expansion, and redefinition of the boundaries of design as a dynamic self-organizing system of possibilities, instead of a top-down hierarchy of rules. It was a project that was “stampeded” by the dot-com “gold rush” and “branding round-up” that seem to have changed the design profession’s priorities.

Poynor concludes *No More Rules* by asking, “Given some of the problems of postmodern visual communication discussed in the book, what forms in terms of style might an oppositional graphic design assume at this point?” Setting aside the question of why style has to be “oppositional,” my answer is a style that continues to develop and deploy the critical, pluralistic, decentered, postmodern strategies outlined in his book. A style that celebrates the aesthetic pleasure of the unique, idiosyncratic individual through ornamentation, pattern, and decoration, as well as celebrating community and social responsibility through historical continuity. A style that resists easy codification and assimilation with strategic and formal complexity. Okay? But talk is cheap. Designers want to be shown, not told. And that is exactly the problem. Until designers get past their “monkey see, monkey do” approach to designing, they will just be going around in the same old circles, doing the same old “new” work. That is why designers need to think about some different (if not new) ideas about style that come from “outside” the usual discourse. Like Virginia Postrel, who says, “We can enjoy the age of look and feel, using surface to add pleasure and meaning to the substance of our lives.” And James Trilling, who says that designers should use “the transformative power of ornament” to “affirm a pervasive, age-old dissatisfaction with structural necessity as the sole determinant of artistic form. The primary function of ornament—and it is a function, make no mistake—is to remedy this dissatisfaction by introducing free choice and variation into even those parts of a work that appear most strictly shaped by structural or functional needs.” It’s time to “decriminalize” ornament because “communication need not be symbolic, any more than function need be mechanical. Before one even selects a pattern or motif, the decision to use ornament conveys a wealth of meaning, no less real or powerful for being inchoate.”²⁰ The problem is, most designers’ ideas about style and ornament have not advanced much since the beginning of the last century.

Unfortunately, the single-minded pursuit of structural meaning and authenticity, decorated only with irony in the aesthetics of the twentieth century, has left style, ornamentation, and beauty in the hands of amateurs. That is where we find an orgy of stylistic expression and exploitation (such as it is). Go to your local shopping mall and you will find Thomas Kinkadee, the “painter of light” whose mass-produced contemplations of the sublime represent beauty. And tattoo parlors where “degenerate aristocrats” indulge their “criminal” tastes—one of the few places you are likely to find any interest in ornamentation any more. Or look for a Restoration Hardware or a Design Within Reach, places for “those who measure everything by the past” and who “have no other means of expressing their full potential” except to decorate their homes in a “made for TV” historical style. This is all the proof we need that there is no more “running room” left in the shopping mall of contemporary culture, and we have no one to blame but ourselves. We are our own experts; we know what we like, and we like it like this.

Modernism made the issue of style much easier for designers to deal with, since it gave them a style that they could pretend was not a style. But technology,

multiculturalism, globalism, postmodernism, and the “democratization of taste” are demanding a more sophisticated response. Digital technology has made it clear that graphic design is not just about the technical production of objects and information. Now almost anyone with the right software can produce a newsletter, book, Web site, font, or animation. I would argue that a lot of what designers consider specialized knowledge is increasingly becoming part of basic literacy (and software). For example, I just had one of my typography essays reprinted in a very interesting anthology called *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook*.²¹ This book is not intended for designers but for writing or composition students who have “begun to engage the visual more seriously as part of the pedagogy.” And why wouldn’t they? In the information age won’t everyone have at least a basic literacy in design? But will everyone have good taste, talent, skill, and a sense of style?

Instead of marginalizing their relationship to style, designers should be capitalizing on their role in developing it. Although they are unlikely to admit it, designers are implicit stylists and tastemakers. If they don’t articulate this role explicitly, they won’t have much to offer in the age of aesthetics. Culture is expressed and understood through style, which is mostly created and evaluated by designers. In terms of aesthetics, art pretty much had the run of the twentieth century. Now in the twenty-first century, it’s design’s turn. We don’t need a new style or a clearly defined “period style.” Nor do we have to proclaim there are “no more rules” or that we should all go off on our own little “autonomous” way. There is no shortage of marginalized artistic geniuses in the world. But if there are going to be design experts in the twenty-first century, what will they be experts in? Graphic designers claim that their expertise is in problem solving, communicating, organizing information, and branding. So to whom should people go for style and taste? Isn’t style too important to be left in the hands of amateurs?

Notes

1. Charles Eames, 1972 “Q&A,” in *Eames Design*, edited by Charles Miers (Abrams Inc., 1989).
2. Adolf Loos, in *Adolf Loos, 1870–1933 Architect, Cultural Critic, Dandy*, edited by Peter Gossel, English translation by Latido, Bremen (Taschen, 2003).
3. John Seabrook, the blending of highbrow and lowbrow tastes into a new sensibility he calls, “nobrow” from *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (Vintage Books, 2001).
4. Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Crime and Ornament: The Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Adolf Loos*, edited by Bernie Miller and Melony Ward (Toronto: YYY Books, 2002).
5. “Truth, Beauty, and Power” was Christopher Dresser’s motto that he promoted in his book, *Principles of Decorative Design* (London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1873).
6. James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (University of Washington Press, 2003).
7. *Ibid.* p.139.
8. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (Verso, 2002).
9. “Functionality was the basis of designing for ages. I was brought up with the slogan ‘form follows function,’ and later it changed into ‘form follows concept.’ Droog Design had a major influence there, of course. Until the last years of the twentieth century, there was considerable strictness about what you could and especially what you couldn’t do in ‘good design.’” *Hella Jongerius* (Phaidon Press, 2003).
10. Addison Whitcomb: “When you resort to attacking the messenger and not the message, you have lost the debate.”
11. Vladimir Tatlin is credited with coining the slogan “Art into Life.” In 1927 he wrote, “As the founder of the idea ‘art into life,’ I worked in the woodworking industry on the development of new models for furniture,

- and also worked in sewing trusts on the development of a clothing norm." It was a rallying cry for the Russian constructivists to get their art out of the museums and into the world.
12. Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture and Consciousness* (HarperCollins, 2003).
 13. The phrase "conspicuous consumption" was coined by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (The Macmillan Company, 1899).
 14. Virginia Postrel, from "The Joy of Style," an interview in *Atlantic Unbound*, August 27, 2003.
 15. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Money, Marketing, and the Growing Anti-Corporate Movement* (Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).
 16. Virginia Postrel, from "Pricing Beauty: Reflections on Aesthetics and Value, An Interview," *GAIN*, American Institute of Graphic Arts, March 6, 2003.
 17. Christopher Dresser thought that "the attainment of repose is the highest aim of art," from "On the Means by which Repose is Attainable in Decoration," Chapter VI, in *Studies In Design*, by Chr. Dresser, Ph.D.F.L.S. (Gibbs Smith, 1875).
 18. H. L. Mencken.
 19. Rick Poyner, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (Yale, 2003).
 20. James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, p. 75.
 21. Carolyn Handa, *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook* (Bedford: St. Martin's, 2004).

NOT YOUR GRANDPARENT'S CLENCHED FIST

Phil Patton

“Let freedom ring—and let it be rung by a stripper,” bellows a billboard advertising Howard Stern’s new radio show on SIRIUS satellite radio, which started Monday, beneath the silhouetted stencil-like fist that is Howard’s new logo. The fist is familiar: it recalls the ones on T-shirts and building walls from the 1960s protest days. But the fist of popular protest, the imagery of the *Atelier Populaire* in Paris and the grad students at Harvard in 1969, now serves the cause of making the airwaves safe for adolescent jokes about female breasts and human flatulence. It is a long fall from the ideals and ideology of which the fist was previously made the symbol.

As so often, graphic symbols mark a wider change. Yes, we see the little *H* made of the two fingers in the fist, as glib a graphic as the assertion that what Stern is about is powerful political expression. Freedom of speech is Howard Stern’s cry. He argues that the new satellite radio offers him freedom from the restrictions of the Federal Communications Commission. That and some, well, serious cash.

The first time as tragedy, the second as farce—Karl Marx long since gave way to Groucho in our expectations of the fate of revolutionary images and routines.