

## **Rethinking Those Proud Titles**

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Ten years ago, if I wanted to draw a dog, I sat down and drew one either from life or from memory. If I was pressed for time and no particular dog came to mind, I'd look at my books or go to the library and look up a few pictures of dogs to get my brain going. Then I would draw the dog. And then people would say, "Great dog, Natalia." or "There's something odd about that paw." But it was my drawing. I drew it. If someone liked it, I might sell it. It might end up on someone else's wall, but I always knew whose wall, and where.

Ten years ago, if I wanted to design a poster, I'd think about the event at hand and design the poster from the metaphors that came into my mind. If I was pressed for time and nothing was coming to me, I'd take a look at books about the subject, or listen to music or walk around and look at life in the street until time and adrenaline and caffeine came together and produced a poster. I would make that poster and it would be my poster. And maybe I would take a picture of it for my portfolio, or maybe it would just go up for the event and then come down. And maybe I would give it to a couple of people or sell a couple, and it was my poster. I made it. People knew it was mine, and knew me and either liked it or disliked it. The project was complete within its own beginning, middle and end: Its lifecycle was its own.

Today, if I want to draw a dog, I Google "dog" and immediately have 147,000,000 images of dogs on my desktop. Of course, I would never think of actually Googling "dog" because the search would produce too many images. So from the very beginning of the design process, even before I know at all what I want to think about, I am editing down the idea so that I can control the results: I am reducing my metaphorical options in order to make the search small enough to be valuable. "Welsh Springer Spaniel" comes in at about 52,000 results in images, whereupon I decide enough is enough and just pick the sixth one I see. It's cute. It's serviceable. Enough. I have no idea whose dog it is, what the picture was taken for, when it was taken or why, but I use it as a starting place for my drawing.

Today, if I were asked to design a poster, say, for someone's CD release, I'd have millions and millions of images at my fingertips to use as starting places. In seconds, I could access everything about every concert poster ever made, everything about every musician ever touted, every image from every designer who ever did anything related to music. It's a lot to metabolize. It's impossible for me to metabolize images in the ways I used to. Design used to be about going deeply into a meaningful few. But designing is changing, from narrow and deep to wide and juxtaposed. From a skill based in invention to one based in relationship. And there's the rub.

A few months ago, a couple of students I know, both gung-ho AIGAers and both totally honorable people, took up the task of making posters about an upcoming AIGA chapter event. This event was being held to spotlight the work of Modern Dog, a studio here in Seattle of which we are all inordinately fond. The students' idea, simple and elegant, was to make a poster about each designer working at Modern Dog, using imagery that pointed to each designer's interests or influences. One of the Modern Dog designers said he had been influenced by Polish posters, so Sara, the lead designer on the AIGA project, found an image of a Polish poster that interested her, took it as a starting point, made a new drawing, added and subtracted, hand-drew type, finished the job, posted it on Facebook for her friends to see, and went to bed.

The next morning she awoke to find herself caught in the middle of a massive designer debate. Designers flailed away at each other, and had been in a fury most of the night, defending or attacking her. Posts of defense usually rested on the notion of the historical acceptability of "homage" in design, those offended generally assumed that she had "stolen" the idea and tried to pass it off as her own, not realizing the well-known nature of the image.

As this nine-day wonder shooting-match between designers continued with defriendings and name-calling matches breaking up a generally fairly decorous intellectual inquiry, Sara, a cheery sort of person, began to get a beaten-about look on her face, and it made me think of

the sort of beaten-about attitude so many designers have these days. And when the media got wind of the argument and started trying to interview her, I realized that the nerve she had touched was far more sensitive than it ought to have been, and I too began to look a bit closer at the continuing phenomenon.

What, I asked myself, were all these designers so upset about? And more importantly, why were they so upset? Certainly, accusations of plagiarism are not to be taken lightly, but this case was so obviously not plagiarism or anything to do with lying about one's work, and so clearly an effort to show work that had influenced a particular designer, that I could hardly believe the vitriol still pouring as the days went by.

That's when it began to occur to me that this was not just an argument about who-made-what. We were witnessing the past facing off with the present: We were witnessing Shakespeare's modern-thinking Prince Harry kill the old-school noble Hotspur in Henry IV, Part 1. When Harry stabs Hotspur, Hotspur, dying, says:

Oh, Harry, thou hast robbed me of my youth! I better brook the loss of brittle life Than those proud titles thou has won of me.

I thought of Hotspur when I was reading the Facebook entries. Designers are losing the ability to control what happens to what they put out there. We don't want to give up "those proud titles," lose our control over our own work. We don't want to let this happen, let any kid appropriate a Polish designer's best work, be separated from the things that give us honor, value, our sense of Self.

But we're going to have to get used to it. The value of recognized individual creative vision is fading in a design world that is increasingly more about the juxtaposition of images, the appropriation of images that are often stripped of their symbolism. Sara's Polish poster rang historical and symbolic bells for some people that it did not ring for Sara.

The fear is this: With 150,000,000 posters out there, ready to be redrawn by some wandering student in search of a theme, how can I defend my work? And if I lose the ability to defend what is mine, what is my work but just another image lost in a sea of millions of images? If I am not referenced when my work is bobbing about in that sea, what has my life meant? How can I defend the perimeter of Self, keep people from taking parts of me, unbidden?

Today, if I draw a dog and it gets posted anywhere, I cannot control what happens to it as soon as it hits the Web. It is not *my* drawing but a drawing among millions of drawings. And the reason it is not my drawing is not that I am not referenced when it is used, but that I am not known by the user. If others appropriate my dog, take my dog picture and extrude it through a screen of their own talent, where am I in the mix? Where is my hold upon creation? What is my value as a designer?

Did Sara know much about the original Polish poster? Did she know the historical importance of the designer who had drawn the original? Did she understand why his choices of imagery had been so important in Soviet-dominated Poland? Or was she up late trying to get her promised projects done, had an idea, executed the idea with the toolbox she had and went to bed. The hard part is this: It doesn't matter.

In the final analysis, it does not matter. With millions of images on the Web, it does not matter. And that's what flays designers. Their work is living a life without them, outside of its original project-life—alone and unprotected. For designers, the appropriation that comes with accessibility is terrifying.

We need to get used to it. Confronted by too much information, current designers reduce their metaphorical options in order to make the search small enough to be valuable.

When a designer can choose from millions of images, how important can historical or biographical information about a single image be? They cannot know everything. They cannot

ever be educated enough. They know that and so they just bull ahead and continue creating things out of images that don't mean as much as they once did. This is the weirdest tragedy and release: Designers today are released from knowing, and that is a release of burden. But not knowing what things signify, transforms designers into ignorant image-churning machines. And that can't be fulfilling.

Does that decontextualized thumbnail of a Polish poster mean the same thing it did when it was created? Does it mean the same things that it did when it was a poster printed on paper in 1964 and wheatpasted in a train station in Warsaw? Of course it doesn't. Its recontextualization has so altered it that it is no longer the property of one person or one era, no longer a marking of particular signification and particular ownership and authorship and meaning and relatedness. It now only signifies what can be seen in a browser by a person who was not alive in 1964, when it was created.

All of graphic design history is now scattered among the millions of fragmented images that surge through the Web. The images in a line-up of thumbnails on the browser of a student or working designer are mostly denotative, not connotative. They are so stripped of context and value and relatedness that they tell only the simplest of histories. Much is lost. We are losing "mine" in an age of "ours." Cries of "Plagiarism!" "You stole my drawing!" "I'm de-friending you!" are just echoes in a train station from which the train has long since gone.

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