

# type

*The* SECRET HISTORY  
*of* LETTERS

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## 18 | New gods: Neville Brody and the designer decade

The claim that the 1980s made for itself, of being the 'style' or 'designer' decade, may look extravagant now in the light of what was to follow. After a perfunctory, recession-induced stab at being the 'Caring Nineties', the next decade threw itself back into consumer hedonism with a vigour which, although far less ostentatious, dwarfed the material aspirations of its predecessor. Now that the 1980s have slipped far enough into history, some of the music has been repackaged and re-released, a reference point for a new generation of musicians, or used as an advertising lure. At the time of writing, even eighties fashions are responding to the twenty-year nostalgia cycle, returning with a new spin for the contemporary market.

But in the 1990s, the idea of eighties style was a joke – the shoulder pads, the terrible 'mullet' hairstyles and proliferation of 'big hair', the mobile phones the size of a house brick. But it is certainly a claim that bears examination in terms of graphic design.

For a student on an art foundation course in the late 1970s, graphics was regarded as a rather pedestrian choice among the disciplines on offer; fashion and fine art appeared more glamorous options, and the dry, restrained personalities who ran my degree course did little to alter this impression. But things were beginning to change, slowly gathering momentum until the trickle became a torrent; by the end of the decade graphic design would be 'sexy' in a way that would have been unbelievable ten years before, and was teetering on the point of an inevitable backlash, in which the tag 'designer' would become a derogatory one.

The graphics that most engaged my student attention were those on the covers of the music I bought. The vinyl disc still ruled, so consequently the packaging was larger, the visuals more striking. Jamie Reid's sleeve for the Sex Pistols' *God Save the Queen* was one of the earliest and most remarkable designs in a mushrooming design format, the seven-inch single picture sleeve. Its 'blackmail' lettering, characters taken from a variety of

faces and sources to produce the effect of an anonymous ransom note message, and the image of Queen Elizabeth II with eyes and mouth torn out, would still be shocking today if we were seeing them for the first time. (And if it were allowed, Buckingham Palace would surely exercise greater restrictions on the use of the monarch's image in today's more media-aware environment.) In 1978 the designer Malcolm Garrett began producing a highly attractive series of single and album sleeves for the Manchester-based band the Buzzcocks, creating a logo and applying it to a striking backdrop of simple but effective designs; it was a 'corporate identity' treatment he was to carry out for other bands during the following decade.

My design college had recommended ITC's *U&Ic* as an educational must, and a whole group of students, myself included, had photocopied a free subscription form and mailed it to America. I was one of the few who actually received some copies back, but I stared in gloomy bewilderment at the Lubalin-driven typography and layouts. There was little or nothing in the design of the magazine that I could identify with, or would have wished to emulate. But in 1980 Peter Saville began designing classically elegant record covers, most notably for Manchester's Factory Records, with restrained serif typography, and fearless use of white space. It may have looked a simple trick, but these covers opened my eyes to the beauty and potential of typography in a way that three years on a design course had not.

It is always dangerous to say of any decade that it has one particular characteristic; human life is too diverse and the flow of events too messy to make such black-and-white statements tenable. But in comparison with the two previous decades, the 1980s were an era of conservatism. Many of Western society's ills were considered to have stemmed from the misguided liberalism and social experiments of the 1960s, and the governments of both Britain and America constantly invoked the supposedly more solid, self-reliant values of an earlier time. The cadaverous British Home Secretary Norman Tebbit garnered either profound approval or shouts of derision with his recollection of his unemployed father, who, in the 1930s, rather than rely on state handouts, had climbed 'on his bike' to look for work. In the United

States Ronald Reagan, the most popular President since Dwight Eisenhower, held office from 1981 to 1989. His very existence, as a former Hollywood star from the 1940s, evoked a previous age, and his major contribution to US foreign policy was to revive the dormant 1950s cold war confrontation with the Soviet Union.

In Britain, the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was the twentieth century's longest serving, and held the reins from 1979 to 1990. In reality her government was the most radical the United Kingdom had seen for decades, laying waste large sections of underperforming British industry while driving up unemployment to previously unthinkable levels. At the same time she succeeded in moving the mental goalposts of the British electorate with a direct appeal to self-interest at the expense of wider social responsibility, a legacy that any subsequent government still has to wrestle with. Mrs Thatcher famously stated, 'There is no such thing as society,' and sang the praises of 'Victorian values'. She was also given the opportunity to strike a Churchillian stance as a war leader as Britain embarked on its last imperial venture, to recapture the Falkland Islands from an Argentinian invasion.

In design terms it was the start of a period of ironic or affectionate retrospection, and unashamed lifting of previously created elements and illustrations from the fifties and sixties, now popular culture's perceived golden age. Peter Saville dug farther back and began producing designs closely modelled on pre-war Italian Futurist graphics. The writer and social commentator Jon Savage pointed out this growing trend in record cover design, tracing the source of much of Saville's typography to Jan Tschichold; not 'Neue Typographie'-era Tschichold, but his later work.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the example reproduced with Savage's feature, with considered, centred serif type, was a cover for a Valium brochure for the pharmaceutical company F. Hoffman-La Roche. Tschichold had worked for them on his return to Switzerland from England in the 1950s, when, according to Hans Schmoller, Tschichold 'squandered [his experience] on brochures and leaflets for tranquillisers and other ephemera for a doctor's wastepaper basket'.<sup>2</sup> For Peter Saville it was a case of unconsidered trifles.

Despite whatever artistic pilfering was going on, the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Age of Plunder', *The Face*, January 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Schmoller, *Two Titans: Mardersteig and Tschichold, a Study in Contrasts*, New York, 1990.

1980s had its own contribution to make. At the beginning of the decade a small nightclub and music scene had sprung up, strongest in London and, oddly, in the recession-hit northern industrial town of Sheffield. Those of its members who had read a little art history called themselves Futurists; others suggested 'The Cult with No Name'. But the press weren't going to let them get off that lightly; the tag New Romantics was coined, and stuck. Much of the music the New Romantics produced was poor, a lame fusion of 1970s glam rock and German electronics, saddled with pretentiousness and a fatal lack of humour. But there was an emphasis on clothes and dressing up – again, much of it derisory – which nevertheless made a contrast with what had gone immediately before, the charity-shop anti-style of the punk/new wave years. How you looked mattered as much if not more than the music you listened to, a change in emphasis that spawned new magazines to document and cater for it – *Viz* (a fashion magazine, not the comic spoof of the late eighties), *Blitz*, *ID*, *New Sounds*, *New Styles*, and *The Face*.

*The Face* had begun life in 1980, subtitled 'Rock's Final Frontier', an independent venture by ex-*New Musical Express* journalist Nick Logan. At first, beyond the logo, the design of the magazine was unremarkable. It looked stylish compared to the newsprint music papers because it had staples to hold it together, some colour printing, better paper and a strong cover image. But visually that was as far as it went. The first issue carried a small feature on ex-Sex Pistol Glen Matlock's latest band, written by Neville Brody. In 1981 his name started appearing on the staff list, but as a member of the design team. Under his influence and direction the typography gradually became more considered, more playful and adventurous, until by the middle of the decade Brody was designing his own typefaces for use in the magazine. With an editorial content that was now weighted towards fashion as much as music, and with photography as striking as the typography, *The Face* began to be tagged a 'style bible'. And Neville Brody was the person who set that style.

By luck or good judgement, Brody (born 1957) found himself in a designer's playground, the perfect medium for the expression of his graphic ideas. Although *The Face* was never visually inaccessible, Brody was allowed

80 Ghosts of princes in tower blocks: student days for Neville Brody (left), photographed in the subways outside the London College of Printing with course mate Julian Balme.



to have fun with his lettering in a way that would not have been tolerated on other publications. Words would start at the outer edge of one page and continue on to the next, necessitating a turn of page to read the entirety. In a sequence running over several issues, the letters of the contents page heading metamorphosed until they became purely abstract forms.

This flouting of the accepted rules on magazine typography was possible because *The Face's* readership was perceived to be at the leading edge of those interested in music, fashion and design. The editor was unlikely to complain: 'But the readers won't understand that.' The subliminal message to the readers was, 'If you don't understand, then you're just not hip enough.' And who wants to admit that?

Neville Brody became the first, and so far only, typographical star in Britain – gauged not just by the quality of his work, but by the fact that his name was known to





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81 Where type is king: Neville Brody layouts for *The Face*, 1984 and 1985, striking and profoundly influential in their dominant, custom-designed headlines, and playful, inventive section headings.



people outside the design disciplines. When the first book on his work was published in 1988, it merited prominent display in bookshop windows – this for a book about graphics and type design. Eric Gill may have experienced fame, but his public profile came from his sculpture, not his typefaces. Brody's came because he was inextricably linked with a magazine that had a high media profile, and which looked very different to other 'youth culture' publications. A newsprint music paper such as the *New Musical Express*, highly popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, looked by comparison as though it were designed and laid out by the printers.

Brody's work was studied and imitated – he was to have a massive impact on the way people looked at typography, and design in general, and arguably kick-started the 'designer decade' almost single handed. It didn't hurt that he was highly quotable, with strong opinions





about typefaces and design, frequently uncomplimentary: 'I hated type ... I thought typography was a boring field to work in, overladen with tradition that would repel change ... The traditions of typography are not fun: communication should be entertaining.'<sup>3</sup>

This was the typical self-deprecatory talk of the era. In today's culture, the plan is to have established a life goal while still in primary school and then single-mindedly gone all out to realize it. But it was customary in the 1970s and 1980s for a successful person to nonchalantly claim that they had arrived in their field only by accident, and that really they had wanted to do something else entirely. It didn't do to look as though you were trying too hard. But in a period of extreme polarity of political opinion in Britain, where the right wing now held an overwhelming ascendancy with near-blanket support from the national press, where the dictates of the marketplace were deemed the only ones worth considering, Brody also had things to say about the responsibility and the effect of graphics and advertising that made arresting copy:

The Midland Bank in Oxford Street is the new church of the new design for the new religion. It's the perfect mix of signified design with money: 'We share your language'. But Midland Bank is going to have to redesign within the next four or five years.<sup>4</sup>

I think the way major design groups tackle the 'problem' is by coming up with something that signifies 'this is a big job'. Contemporary design is no more than a cover-up job.<sup>5</sup>

Brody's sympathies were decidedly left leaning; he carried out redesigns for *New Socialist* magazine, Red Wedge, an ill-fated musicians-for-socialism initiative, and *City Limits*, a London culture and entertainment listings magazine which had broken away from the market leader *Time Out* after the latter's abandonment of its 1968 equal-pay-for-all structure. In a period when the left in British politics looked a complete lame duck, swept aside by Margaret Thatcher's strident single-mindedness and her appeal to the most selfish instincts of the British electorate, Brody was at least trying to give alternative political messages some visual credibility.

Although Brody's opinions were liberally offered, he came across as a somewhat humourless individual, given

<sup>3</sup> Neville Brody, *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody*, Vol. 1, London, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> This particular branch was a style flagship for new-look banking; no classical pillars or reassuringly solid architecture. It was very postmodern, with graphics, bright colours and marbled effects. The Midland itself was redesigned in the 1990s, absorbed by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, *Blueprint*, April 1988.

to making gnomonic pronouncements on the nature of content, style and communication that laid him open to accusations of pretentiousness. In Britain this sort of stuff has to be leavened with a dash of levity if the message is to be effectively delivered. I wondered what he had been like in his formative design years, and whether his potential was obvious when he was at college. He had studied design at the London College of Printing, a dour tower block in the Elephant and Castle, an area of south London high on traffic and underground walkways, and extremely low on visual charm. Fellow student Julian Balme, himself subsequently a successful graphic designer and journalist, recalled: 'It was 1976, the end of that hot summer. Neville had arrived with a friend from his foundation course at Hornsey, and they lived for a while in one of the prefabs<sup>6</sup> behind the LCP. But after the first term the other guy dropped out, and then Neville and I gradually became something of a double act. He had long hair at first, *really* long. When he had it cut, no one recognized at first who it was!'

Personality-wise they were opposites; Julian outgoing, entertaining, Brody always the quiet one. Their arrival at the LCP had coincided with the explosion of punk rock on to the London music scene, and Brody and Julian began collaborating on self-written and designed fanzines: 'I just saw it as an excuse to approach record companies and get free records! For me the music was the important thing, but for Neville it was always the graphics.'

Brody subsequently made much in print about his disaffection with the LCP course. This is fairly standard student stuff, but was the course really so bad?

It was real Swiss corporate typography – it would actually be very popular today, but back then we were saying, 'I don't want this! I want blackmail lettering!' I used to enjoy confrontation, arguing with the tutors, but Neville would just withdraw – if they didn't like what he was doing, they just didn't understand, that kind of attitude. But for all that stuff about him not being understood at the college, we made damn sure that Neville got to do the poster for the final degree show. His work was really good, though, all the way through. And he knew his art and design history too, which the rest of us had little time for.

<sup>6</sup> 'Prefab' was short for prefabricated housing – temporary, one-storey structures built after the war as an immediate solution to the shortage of housing caused by bombing. They were supposed to last only five years, but some were still in existence fifty years later.

Through the fanzine, Julian and Brody had met Barney Bubbles, the designer of the record covers for the independent label Stiff, and later Radar Records. Both were to work for Stiff after leaving college in 1979:

For a while Neville lived in a squat in Long Acre in Covent Garden. It's hard to believe now, but before they redeveloped it, Covent Garden was little better than the slum it had been in the nineteenth century. In the evenings, when everyone else just wanted to go out and have a good time, Neville would be drawing, painting, designing. It was simply what he liked doing best. When people employed Neville, they knew they'd got their money's worth. He would have done three, four, five possibilities for a design. He was constantly reappraising his work, trying to see how he could improve it. He wasn't the kind of person you'd go out and get rolling drunk with, although he did have a nice, self-deprecatory sense of humour.

Julian was soon to pick up well-paid major label record company work, but Brody was designing for small labels and then on the fledgling *Face*:

He could hardly have been making any money at all. But where Neville was canny is that he always picked people to work for who didn't have the budget to argue with him. He had great talent, and they needed him. We saw the first issue of *The Face* and said, 'What's he working on this for? It'll last three issues, and Logan can't be paying him anything!' It struck me, on looking at his first book [*The Graphic Language of Neville Brody*, vol. 1], that he'd done extremely well on basically small-budget work. *The Face* later became highly successful, but it started as a shoestring operation, and remained so for quite a while.

The early Brody lettering was angular, heavy sans serif; he was to claim that this was a 1930s influence that was itself a comment on and a response to the political climate of the 1980s. Equally, though, for someone who professed himself unable to draw a face such as Baskerville, and when the only tools he would have had to create his letters would have been a pen and brush, this geometric style, while being extremely effective for bold magazine spreads, would also have been much easier to execute.

As Julian Balme recollected, Brody was always aware of what had gone before, and Joost Schmidt's masthead lettering for the Bauhaus journal, designed in 1929, could easily be a Brody design. But Brody was never a plagiarist. It is perfectly acceptable to be influenced by someone else's work – the trick is to take what you like from it and make it your own. When Brody and Julian once visited Barney Bubbles's studio, Bubbles said, 'Wait a minute!' and scurried around concealing things. When asked what he was doing, he replied, 'No one gets to see *my* library books!'

Often a Brody face would start life simply as the letters required for a magazine headline, and be later developed into a full set, starkly titled Alphabet no. 1, Alphabet no. 2 and so on. As his typographic skills developed further, he created one of his most attractive faces, Arcadia, the condensed modern-style serif lettering he designed for *Arena* magazine – a truly beautiful, striking and timeless piece of work.

In 1988, at the tender age of thirty-one, Brody was honoured by a retrospective exhibition at London's V&A Museum, and the publication of a book, *The Graphic Language of Neville Brody*, later to be followed by a second volume. Yet as the decade neared its end, it seemed that disillusionment had set in. Nick Logan's new launch, *Arena*, was the first men's magazine (of the non-pornographic variety) in Britain for two decades, an area of publishing long considered commercial suicide. With the economy now on the upturn following the recession at the start of the decade, consumer spending was on the increase. With its pages of clothes, accessories and 'designer' objects, *Arena* prospered, but Brody abandoned much of his previous typographical style:

[The advertising agencies] wanted the so-called 'youth culture' look, and advertising appeared very old-fashioned ... the only way they could match it was by trying to be ahead of, or lift ideas from, the editorial. Advertising always kidnaps modes of language to use as its own ... The wider public probably saw no difference. With the struggle to look ever more modern, an air of desperation set in. So when it came to *Arena*, I said, 'Stop, sit down, see what's happened'. In fact I went back to ranged-left Helvetica, the norm when I was at college.<sup>7</sup>



82 Arcadia, Brody's striking lettering for the first issue of *Arena*, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> *Blueprint*, op. cit.



83 High-water mark: Brody featured on the cover of *Blueprint* magazine in 1988, the year of the V&A exhibition and his first book.

The materialism of *Arena*, a 'lifestyle' magazine, sat ever more uncomfortably with Brody's principles. In 1986 he left, but illogically only to join *The Tatler*, a 'toffs and titled folk having fun' magazine which gained a new lease of life in the 1980s amid the growing atmosphere of conspicuous consumption. It was a pointless appointment. Brody, frustrated at not being allowed to design things the way he wanted, quit in the middle of his second issue. His only front cover was memorable for having (apart from the magazine title, the price and a facetious dateline) no type on it at all. Again, called in by Condé Nast in America to redesign *Mademoiselle*, Brody fell out with the worldwide editorial director. For whatever reasons – money, the seduction of his own celebrity or an attempt to subvert the Establishment from within – it was clear that Brody's relations with the mainstream would always be problematic. Yet he had liberated typography from the

moneyed hand of the 'Madison Mafia', the soulless grip of ITC, and proved it was possible for anyone, given the necessary ability, to create their own typefaces, providing the inspiration through his work.

The V&A exhibition and Brody's high media profile proved a double-edged sword. His own work became over-exposed, and many potential clients, rather than commissioning him, would seek the cheaper route of Brody pastiches – *hommages* would be too complimentary a term. Every design group and advertising agency in possession of his book now had the opportunity to study the Brody approach in close detail, and turn out their own 'knock-off' versions.

The immediate aftermath of the exhibition saw a dearth of new commissions for the Brody studio. Fortunately, the show had travelled abroad, where new clients were eventually to be found. Since then, the majority of Neville Brody's work has been for non-British clients, from America, Japan, Holland and Germany. Internationally, he remains a successful designer, but he seems largely forgotten in his homeland. A temporary critical backlash after his period of intense popularity and ubiquity was to be expected; a Brody design had such a strong persona it was always apparent who had designed it, and people will always eventually tire of a style and want something different. But his career trajectory does seem symptomatic of the British inability to take a living practitioner of the visual arts seriously for their work alone. If, like Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin, they can provide good copy, then fine as long as that lasts. But there seems little desire for any widespread and lasting intelligent analysis of their work and its implications. Britain loves its 'national treasures', but it is doubtful whether an artist or designer would ever reach this status in the public affections. Neville Brody's work has developed and evolved, but his subsequent neglect in Britain is not as mystifying as it may first appear.



84 Industria, a commercially available Brody font.