



The Art of Planning—Paula Scher and Post-modernism Graphic Design

Shuo Yang

Shandong Xiandai University, Jinan 250104, Shandong, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Shuo Yang, Shandong Xiandai University, Jinan 250104, Shandong, China.

Abstract

Paula Scher is an American graphic designer and artist of the 20th century, recognized as one of the most influential women in graphic design. Her career as an art director coincided with the peak of postmodern graphic design. This paper primarily discusses Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk series classic typographic posters created by Paula Scher. Set against a specific historical backdrop, the posters utilize a sans-serif typeface and combine elements of constructivism, graphic photography, and unique expressive techniques to transcend the limitations of postmodern graphic design, achieving a harmonious unity of form and function. This paper examines the success of Paula Scher's works by analyzing the historical context, character identity, typesetting and printing concepts, and stylistic factors, while also highlighting the symbolic significance of her works in the history of post-modernism graphic design. Her creations can further enhance our understanding of typeface application in design, provide valuable insights into successful practices, and contribute to the advancement of graphic design.

Keywords

Paula Scher; the post-modernist movement; poster; Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk

1. Introduction

Post-modernism graphic design plays an important role in the design field. It first appeared in the 1960s and reached its peak in the 1980s. Throughout history, post-modernism design presents a diversified and open design style, emphasizes the personality and nationality of design, uses adopts metaphor, decoration, symbolization and other design techniques, and also draws on historical style (Fazhan Xiao, 2021). For example, Martin Sharp broke the reorganization of various elements, the final layout was experimental. These innovative designs can counter the mechanical nature of the international graphic design style and emphasize the individuality and creativity of the designer. However, designers pay attention to the innovation of style and less care about some problems in the innovation, some post-modernism graphic designs have not been completely unified in terms of form, function, aesthetics, and morality.

Paula Scher is one of the most influential graphic designers in the world. She began her career as an art director in the 1970s and early 80s, in the mid-1990s her landmark identity for The Public Theater fused high and low into a wholly new symbology for cultural institutions. Paula Scher believes that design is the art of planning, and graphic design requires planning and is associated with words or images (Xu Sui, 2017). She prefers to call herself a visual planner. Under the influence of Stanislaw Zagórski, Paula Scher began to develop a strong interest in typography, using the "text as image" approach to design, and her typography approach has become an exploration of the history of design. In the late 1980s, her use of constructivism was very influential (what postmodernism design known as a

reinvention of constructivism).

The Times and the market exert an influence on the advancement and development of design. The market serves as the criterion for testing the design (Kunyu Yang, 2021). In 1994, Paula Scher designed the New York public theatre's first poster, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*, revolutionizing the Public theater's poster culture and enhancing the theater's influence. Before that, not many people paid attention to the activities of the public theatre, and the influence of the public theater was not strong at that time, people preferred Broadway theater, and rarely regarded the cultural activities carried out in the public theater as part of their urban life. Her posters designed for New York public theatre plays not only retain the distinctive features of postmodernism, but also partially adjust the postmodern graphic design. By analyzing the characteristics of Paula Scher's posters and the use of Paula Scher's typefaces, as well as comparing them with Martin Sharp postmodernism graphic design works, it can be concluded that how Paula Scher's posters can create a new style, while also interpreting the drama as well as its themes and cultures. Because Paula Scher's poster connect with culture and create a kind of new style, as well as clearly expressed the theme of the theatre, it appears that Paula Scher's work is very representative.

2. The meaning of the theatre and the definition of “Postmodern” graphic design

The post-modernism movement has an important influence on the graphic design transformation. According to Julia, post-modernism is commonly related to unique visual style and creative method. Post-modernism graphic design relies on the traditional layout of internationalist graphic design, but it also increases interest. Typefaces are arranged horizontally and vertically, images are irregular, and collages are often used. Julia believed that postmodern graphic design is often refer to the term ‘new thinking’, which means an intellectual method to make some graphic design works which are full of experimental spirit (Moszkowicz, Julia, 2013). Designers should include their own understanding and experience of life, everything was broken up and restructured, with strong personal characteristics. Huyssen mentioned that postmodern artifacts build a bridge between tradition and innovation, where new possibilities are established and the abrupt transition is broken down. Postmodernism graphic design did not change the design as a starting point for visual communication function but found a breakthrough in the way of expression to adapt to the development of the new era and meet the aesthetic human needs. As a postmodern graphic designer, Paula Scher uses ‘new thinking’ to create typographic posters which is related to New York public theatre *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*.

Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk uses tap to express the meaning of the theatre. Tap is a hybrid dance form- a mixture of African rhythms, African American minstrelsy, and European step dancing. The stage uses a black background and different screens to build historical context and rarely uses the scenery. Four black male dancers stand in the center of the stage and use their dancing to tell their stories. The story talks about four different young black men who lose their homeland, family, and identity, which reflects that African slaves are forced to Integrate into American life. As Jonathan mentioned “Together, they dramatize the forced assimilation of African slaves into American life, contending that while blacks were systematically stripped of their native culture”. Four dancers use tap which should become considered national dance to spread African American culture. It is clear to see that in Paula Scher's theatre poster, a black man at the center of the poster, just like the black man stand at the center of the stage and uses their body language to tell a story (Jonathan Larson, 2008).

3. Paula Scher's typographic poster design

3.1 Typeface layout

In Paula Scher's theatre poster which is created for New York public theatre, she mainly uses typeface for layout. Due to the way which Paula Scher uses typeface, her design has both legibility and readability (Figure 1). Paula Scher creates a kind of visual communication. As Luca mentioned typography becomes a functional element interacting with the surrounding environment. The typeface in the poster can not only bring the audience emotional experience but also strengthen the function of typeface expression (Cui Wang & Xuexia Ma, 2020). Since Paula Scher uses a San-serif typeface, this type of character is usually legible. The typeface layout has a clear direction, the black man is surrounded by different sizes of the typeface. As a result, the eye movement behavior is recorded (Josephson, Sheree, 2008). Because Paula Scher uses eye-tracking skills, the information becomes clear and typeface legibility is enhanced.



Figure 1. Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk series.

3.2 Creative methodology

Paula Scher's typographic poster which is created for New York public theatre Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk has obvious postmodern characteristics. As Julia mentioned, "Postmodernism is frequently identified, for example, with a multi-layered and playful visual surface, which is characterized by a co-mingling of image and text". Paula Scher's New York Public Theater poster is arranged in different sizes of typeface, as well as significant personal appearance, Paula Scher surrounded the typeface around the black, making them a whole, breaking the rules of separation of text and images. Julia also mentioned that postmodernism is commonly associated with a distinct visual style and creative methodology. Paula Scher's poster breaks the role between tradition and innovation. She creates a unique postmodern visual identity.

3.3 The native culture

Paula Scher's typographic poster may have contributed to the history of Africa America culture due to the element which she used in her New York theatre poster series—Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk. The creative motivation of the poster or the image metaphor can be interpreted through observation and reflection. This demands triggering thinking of the audience. Such associations can be related to life experiences, or they can be associated with knowledge accumulation or direct connections (Zhiyun Wang, 2021). The theme of Paula Scher's poster is drama. Thus, she uses the performer's image as a basic feature of the poster. Jonathan states that the performers utilize verbal, vocal, and kinetic clues to establish a dialogue with the audience. In the Paula Scher series of posters, the audience can see that the four black dancers have facial expressions and exaggerated body movements. They seem to want to express that tap is totally African in origin. Glover proves tap to be an effective and various medium for artistic, emotional, and philosophic expression as any other dance. In addition, tap combines dance elements from Africa and America, and its characteristics have become very clear. Jonathan said that dance plays a most fundamental role in the development of dramatic culture in America. Hence, when people saw the poster, they were influenced by the poster, caused their own thinking, and further understood the native culture.

3.4 Compare with Martin Sharp's poster

Compared with Martin Sharp's work, Paula's poster involves function. Martin Sharp, who was famous for his 'post-modern' practice, used pop art to redesign a magazine which made the magazine successful. Julia claims that Martin Sharp has a deep understanding of the challenges of the contemporary marketplace, his works coincide with consumer taste. In addition, in music and publication design which is create by Martin Sharp, people can capture contemporary youth culture. Nevertheless, Sharp's handwriting is not regular, which leads to reduced font legibility. In addition, as

Julia mentioned, “The sad thing is that post-modern design has still not produced its own contemporary style or handwriting”. Most of post-modern graphic design would like to use handwriting to create distinct visual style, but it results a lack of graphic consistency. The typeface used for Paula Scher’s poster is a sans serif typeface, which is highly recognized. Because of the size of the typeface and the non-conflict between the typefaces, every word is clearly visible. In layout, through regular variations in typeface size, direction, position, and so forth, a sense of rhythm is created (Hanying Fang, 2023). Paula Scher said, “Once I started to see type as something with spirit and emotion, I could really manipulate it. I never drew very well, so my ability to communicate feeling through typography became really important”. The way she plays with typeface is both interesting and under control.

3.5 Compare with Wolfgang Weingart’s poster

Compared with the work of Wolfgang Weingart, Paula's posters deal with culture. In 1972, Weingart gave a speech at the famous American Design University, which brought very important insights to the American design community that was still exploring post-modernism graphic design. Aware of the rigidity of the internationalist graphic design style, and he still followed the basic composition and layout principles of internationalism, starting from functional visual communication, but carried out formalistic processing in design, which is no longer monotonous and stereotyped, and full of personal characteristics. In the poster, you can see that he uses sans-serif fonts to segment, break, decompose, and recombine the typefaces, to increase the interest of the image. The image part is abstract, and it is difficult for ordinary people to get the semantic information. Paula Scher believes that the best way to communicate with New Yorkers is to be straightforward, so she uses human figures in the poster to clearly convey the theme information, striking and appealing.

4. Form, function, aesthetics, and moral consistency

Due to the nature of post-modern design, designers less care about the unification of form and function. There is no doubt that post-modernism is a kind of visual practice. It has reformed and challenged the traditional design style and promoted the design process. As Julia reports that ‘Post-modern’ represents a new attitude of graphic design and it will experiments with forms to build closer relationship with audience as well as offers more chance for designers. However, due to designers pay attention to breaking the conventions, their works are mostly experimental. Although the postmodern design has basic visual communication features, typeface legibility, and readability and is reduced, their works are blindly satisfied consumer tastes. “Hughes-Stanton is concerned that ‘Post-Modern’ approaches to visual design give up on the idea of the consistency of form”. Post-modernism graphic design meets only to the immediate wants and needs of the market. Post-modernism design is subjective, and it can be used to express a kind of feeling rather than considering establishing any form of symbolism.

Paula Scher’s typographic poster not only derives a new style but also realizes the unification of form and function. As Scher says: “My goal is not to be so above my audience that they can't reach it”. The value of Paula Scher's poster is not only reflected in American African culture, but also realizes business demands. Paula Scher uses eye-movement and eye-tracking techniques to enhance legibility while maintaining the characteristics of post-modernism. The entire layout not only has a distinct visual style, but also can be considered as a tool for visual communication function. “Paula Scher’s work involves a visualization of inherent function and, in this sense, remains faithful to a Modern approach to design, one where form follows function” (Simeone, Luca, 467). Paula Scher’s posters make up and improve the inadequacies of post-modernism graphic design and achieve form, function, aesthetics, and moral consistency.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the visual characteristics of postmodernism and Paula Scher’s poster *design* style, we can see that Paula Scher’s posters are very representative of the historical period at that time. It needs to be looked at in combination with various factors. The layout is flexible and interesting, At the same time, it also creates the order, making the typeface readable and recognizable. Paula Scher’s design has a breakthrough in the expressive technique. Because her poster was designed for theater, it not only has market value, but also spreads American and African cultures, realizing the unity of form, function, aesthetics and morality. There is no doubt that Paula Scher’s design concept is worth learning and design method will be better applied and developed in the future. Designers should not forget the function of design while exploring new forms of expression.

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